

SESSION 5

Confidence After We Fail



QUESTION 1:

When have you seen failure lead to something positive?

THE POINT

Trust God to redeem your failures.

THE PASSAGES

Genesis 16:1-5; 17:1-9

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Our team was up 6-2. It was the bottom of the last inning, and the other team had the bases loaded. The pitcher launched a ball straight down the middle and—crack!—the ball was headed straight for the fence. It was a grand slam homer that ended the game with a tie.

I felt the pain of the pitcher as he walked off the mound holding his head low. I was not just his assistant coach; I was his dad. My son had actually had a good day on the field, but it didn't matter. In his mind he had failed, and his confidence was shattered.

We all fail at times. When we make mistakes, it's so easy for us to beat ourselves up. Whether our tongue gets the best of us, we drop the ball at work, or we run back to an old addiction, our sins and failures can completely crush our confidence. When that happens, how do we pull ourselves out of the dugout and get our heads back into the game of life? Let's take some coaching tips from the life of Abram.

Genesis 16:1-5

1 Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar.

2 And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.

3 And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife.

4 And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes.

5 And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the LORD judge between me and thee.

This account out of Abram's life is one of failure and of getting ahead of God. Abram's failure in this account involved three individuals:

I Sarai. It had been ten years since God had promised that Sarai would bear Abram a son. It would surely not be surprising to know she had been becoming increasingly embarrassed and frustrated by her barrenness. Little did she know, however, that she would have to hold out for another fifteen years until God would deliver on His promise with the birth of her son Isaac. But at this point, her patience had run out.

Sarai took matters into her own hands. Our twenty-first century Western mind-set might be shocked by Sarai's proposal. We see her suggestion as outright disobedience and the encouragement of adultery. But her heart was truly in the right place—she wanted to assist God with His plan—and the

surrounding culture would not have thought twice about it. It was common in the ancient Near East for men to sire children through other wives or female servants.

God had said Abram would be the father of a great nation, but He had not yet specified who the mother would be. So, Sarai reasoned she would "step out of the way," so the promise could be fulfilled. Besides, since Hagar was Sarai's servant, Hagar's children could be considered Sarai's children.

- ▶ **Abram.** Even if we think Sarai made a poor judgment call, let's not lay all the blame on her. After all, Abram went along with the plan. He could've said no, but Sarai's reasoning apparently made perfect sense to Abram.
- ▶ **Hagar.** Hagar was an Egyptian maidservant likely acquired during Abram and Sarai's brief sojourn in Egypt (Gen. 12:10-20). Sarai used Hagar for her benefit almost like a modern-day surrogate. Because of her position as a servant, Hagar had no choice but to go along with the plan. As a result, she got pregnant.

Sarai's plan seemed to be working, but then the situation got ugly. As Hagar's stomach grew with her baby, her confidence also increased as she interacted with Sarai. In Mesopotamian culture, a **maidservant or a second wife who provided an heir could be** deemed equal with the first wife. She could be given her freedom, gain an inheritance, or both. The passage only refers to Hagar's contempt for Sarai, but Hagar could have been using this situation as an opportunity to advance.

Sarai took Hagar's behavior as both disrespectful and threatening. The tension and animosity between the two women escalated to the point that Sarai flew off the handle—at Abram. "My wrong be upon thee." It's as if Sarai forgot her own role in all this, and she called on God to judge between the two of them.

Abram again complied with Sarai and left the matter in her hands to correct. His statement: "Behold, thy maid is in thine hand" (v. 6), was to remind Sarai that she was still the wife and

had the primary role. Abram added, "Do to her as it pleaseth thee." Unfortunately, Sarai abused her position and treated Hagar so horribly she fled.

QUESTION 2:

Why do we often want to take matters into our own hands when things go wrong?

Genesis 17:1-3

1 And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.

2 And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.

3 And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying,

Thirteen years passed between Genesis 16 and 17; now God came to Abram again with a word of reassurance. God had not forgotten His promise. At this point in Abram's life, he may have assumed Ishmael, the son born to him through Hagar thirteen years earlier, was the child of God's promise. Frankly, we don't know, but we do know God was about to make it clear that Abram would have another son—the son of the promise (Gen. 17:19-21).

But before God revealed this, He reminded Abram, "I am the Almighty God." He is El Shaddai, the all-powerful God. God was about to tell Abram what He would do through Sarai, and this would be at the hand and will of El-Shaddai, the all-powerful and all-sufficient God. Nothing is beyond His ability, including enabling a ninety-nine-year-old man to father a child.

God had earlier called Abram to "go" (Gen. 12:1) and he obediently went; now God called Abram to obedience again: "walk before me, and be thou perfect." Abram had gone, and now he was to continue going—to walk with God and live a life that honored Him. We should embrace that call too.

Abram had gotten ahead of God's plan when he sought a child through Hagar. He probably was not aware of that at that time, but now he was about to learn of God's greater plan. Abram didn't hear a rebuke from God, but he did hear a call to live in God's presence and move forward in obedience.

We don't need to wallow in past defeats or keep reminding ourselves of our past sins. Giving up in defeat doesn't resolve anything. Instead, in those moments when we sin or get ahead of God, we need to run to Him in repentance. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Resting confidently in God's forgiveness, we then move forward in obedience. As the apostle Paul wrote, "Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14).

Note Abram's response to God's call to obedience and His reminder of the covenant: "Abram fell on his face." This is the position of respect a person in that culture showed to one who was superior. It was in this position of humility that Abram acknowledged God Almighty truly is almighty and expressed his willingness to obey. Abram was willing to do whatever the Lord required.

QUESTION 3:

How would you describe what it means to live in God's presence?

Genesis 17:4-9

4 As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations.

5 Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.

6 And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.

7 And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.

8 And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

9 And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations.

God previously had made promises to Abram related to the land and his descendants, but now He formalized it with a covenant. Many covenants are found in Scripture, which are promises connect by an oath between two parties. The concept of covenant is important in Scripture since it both defined and established God's relationship with His people. Abram would, from this point on, carry a sign and remembrance of this covenant: a new name.

Major league baseball team have names that have a meaning behind them. For example, the Detroit Tigers got their name from Michigan's oldest military unit, the 425th National Guard infantry, who were nicknamed the Tigers.

Names in the Old Testament carried meaning behind them. For all of his 99 years, Abram's name meant "exalted father," but now God changed his name to reflect the covenant and what God was doing in Abram's life. He could still be considered an exalted father,

but even more so, he would now be seen as Abraham: "father of many." At the same time, Sarai's name also would be changed to Sarah (v. 15). This change was subtle since both names have their root in the word "Princess." Sarah would be even more of a princess as the wife of the one who was a father of nations.

QUESTION 4:

What has God made new in your life as you've walked with him?

Within this covenant, God made several commitments to Abraham.

- ▶ God would make Abraham into the father of many nations.
- ▶ God would give Abraham many offspring.
- ▶ God would give Abraham the land as a permanent possession.

What catches our attention is the fact this covenant does not have an expiration date. It would be "an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee." This truly is a permanent covenant, but God never intended it to be exclusive to Abraham's physical descendants, the Jews. We understand this as we see the significance of the word *seed* in this passage. We might think it is a reference to Abraham's son Isaac, but it refers to Jesus. As Paul wrote: "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Gal. 3:16).

Within just a few generations, Abraham's descendants were many, but one of his offspring carries a greater importance—a significant role—that far outshines the others. Jesus was a direct descendant of Abraham, but He is also the Son of God. Even though God had established another covenant with the children of Abraham that included His law and commands for them (Ex. 19-20), the people were not able to keep their part of the covenant. Jesus died the death our disobedience deserved, and through His death He established a whole new covenant. As He

shared the Passover meal one last time with His disciples before His arrest and crucifixion, He said, "This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:20).

The promise first given to Abraham extends to all who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29). The new covenant we have in Christ includes the promise of land because those who follow Him, those who are citizens of His kingdom, will inherit the earth and the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:1-10).

God sought a covenant relationship with Abraham, and He desires a covenant relationship with us also. Even as He told Abram, "Walk before me, and be thou perfect" (Gen. 17:1), He calls us to do the same. We can live in His presence because of Christ, and we can be blameless because Christ has forgiven us and made us blameless.

QUESTION 5:

What do these verses teach us about the grace of God?

ENGAGE

Only God can turn our mistakes into blessings. List five common areas in which people fail.

Choose one in which you've seen God work to turn something bad into good. Explain how God's blessing gives you confidence that He can use you even if you fail:

LIVE IT OUT

We should trust God to redeem our failures. Choose one of the following applications:

I Own it. Take some time and ask God to search out your heart. Identify any mistakes or failures that rise to the surface. Stop pretending. Stop playing the game. Stop hiding and take responsibility. Now is the time to own up to it.

► **Confess it.** Don't delay; remember every moment counts. Literally change your position right now if you are physically able and get on your knees. Go before the holy living God and seek His forgiveness. Let Him know how much you hate that specific sin in your life.

I Believe it. Remember His forgiveness is instant; it is not a journey. Trust in the power of His forgiveness. Don't doubt it. Stand up. Suit up. The dirt is gone. You are clean. Then tell someone else about the victory He has given you.

