

# **LifeWay Bible Studies for Life Series for October 14: From failure to direction**

October 2, 2012

The paternal great-grandparents of my children, my grandparents whom my children never knew, lived their faith differently than do I.

Of course, some of the fundamentals are very much the same. They believed in missions, daily Bible study and family prayer as the core virtues of personal discipleship, evangelism and even tithing no matter what. However, they came to young adulthood during the Great Depression. That cultural experience did as much to shape their faith as did their understanding of the Bible. Somehow or another, their faith in God and God's promises won the day, and that is what they passed along to me, even though strategies for faith's implementation have changed radically.

When we go back centuries in time to the days of Abraham and Sarah, we also cross centuries of history, oceans, continents, linguistic barriers and religious traditions that simply boggle the mind. When reading from the book of Genesis, though we cannot comprehend much less understand all of those, it is critical we keep them in mind. It is a dangerous thing to read about Abraham's faith through 21st century lenses without at least acknowledging the distinctions.

Which leads us to ask one fundamental question: What is it that we can learn from Abraham and Sarah about faith in God's promises that transcends time, oceans, continents, culture, linguistics and religious tradition?

I cannot think of one pastor who would preach a sermon recommending the

childless mothers in the congregation encourage their husbands to sleep with another woman in order to conceive a child. We have to look through the cultural differences of Abraham's community, place and time in order to see the faith story in the way Abraham and Sarah lived out their faith.

Abraham and Sarah were childless. It was something of great concern to both Abraham and Sarah, especially to Abraham. As the man, ensuring the family heritage was his primary responsibility. To his credit, Abraham worried out loud to God.

Right there, we have a faith principle worth putting into place. How many times do we worry aloud to God about our true concerns? How many times do we go to church, assuring others we are OK when, in fact, our souls are imploding from the weight of unresolved fear over our families or the fear of the future for our families? If you really want to know "how someone is doing," ask a specific question about their children. That almost certainly will strike the rawest nerve in their soul.

Abraham worried aloud to God. When God promised Abraham his worries were unfounded, that the number of stars in the night sky were more descriptive of his future hope than his wife's barren womb, Abraham simply trusted God. In the process, Abraham, as strange as his cultural differences might seem to us, gave us one of the very first examples in all Scripture of the nature of true faith.

"Abraham believed God" and God credited his simple faith as the nature of what it is that provides the salvation of the soul. In other words, we have no record Abraham ever prayed what we call "the sinner's prayer." Of course, Jesus' birth, burial and resurrection were centuries yet to come. Nonetheless, pre-Jesus or post-Jesus, the nature of true soul-saving faith is simple trust in the promise of God. The promise that God will provide all that is needed for now and for eternity.

Abraham's behavior, and Sarah's, so profoundly expressed their true character that God gave them new names.

This is a remarkable story. If we think about it, the way we live often changes the name by which others call us. This is not to minimize the significance of what happened when God changed the names of our faith forebears. Beyond the specific Hebraic linguistic distinctive, the meaning in all of this is that the character both Abraham and Sarah expressed was so distinctive, God no longer thought they should be remembered by what their names had meant but by what their names would come to mean in the future. We now remember Abraham and Sarah because of what God promised would become of them and named them accordingly.

Sometimes, people's names become associated with shameful failures in their lives. No one would ever want to name their child after the infamous assassin of a president, for example. Their names are "retired," in a sense, from the public venue because they are synonymous with shame.

On the other hand, how many people do we know who have been named, for example, "Sarah?" It is a beautiful name that bespeaks honor, courage, love of God and faith beyond measure.

God gave Abraham and Sarah new names but only once their faith expressed the character of those names. In Christ, we are all called children of God. It is a name that expresses God's promise for our future and God's confidence that God's future will become reality. We should strive to live up to the new name God has given us, despite our past shame.

Look beyond the cultural, historical, linguistic and even religious tradition differences in this beautiful story to the faith the story expresses. In that story, we all find courage to trust God for what we cannot yet see but that in which we fully believe and God has promised.