



SPIRITUAL MATURITY IN OUR WALK WITH GOD

PRELUDE TO OUR
BIBLE STUDY OF GENESIS 12 - 14

FAITH AND OBEDIENCE

Those of us who remember the television show M*A*S*H know that there were some profound insights on the human condition and questions about morality and faith interspersed in the weekly comedy and dramas. Of all the episodes and memorable quotes, there was one line from Father Mulcahy that really caused me to give deeper thought to my own Christian faith. It happens in a moment where a war-weary soldier is seeking sanctuary from the priest. Mulcahy eventually (astutely) tells the soldier: *A faith of convenience is a hollow faith.*

There are many people who seek God and call themselves believers, but when their feet are put to the fires of this world, they expect God to conform to their demands, their timing, their desires, hopes, prayers, and wishes. If God does not respond in obedience, their faith falters or falls away completely.

God is not here to obey our orders; He is not obliged to fulfill our demands. To say that God is only good if He does good for us (or to question His goodness when we are faced with violence, hardship, even mortality) is not faith. To confess with our mouths that God is real without being transformed by our belief is intellectual acceptance. Jesus warns in Matthew 7:21: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."*

Let's begin studying what it means to have faith that saves, faith that leads to righteousness. First, we'll look at the stages of maturing in faith. Then, we'll look at the life of one of the great models of faith, Abraham.

- Pray for the strength, guidance, protection, and enlightenment of God the Holy Spirit, who intercedes not only to help us know what to pray but to learn to recognize God's response to our prayers. Remember that prayer doesn't have to be long, eloquent, speeches or memorized, repeated verses. Pray from the heart with anything that weighs on your heart. Do not neglect prayer for your family, friends, neighbors, or anyone else (even random strangers you encounter in the day) whom the Holy Spirit draws to your attention. Do not be afraid to be honest with God. He already knows what is in your heart. Trust God with your burdens, fears, and worries because He cares for you. Share your joys with God. Praise Him for all that he does for you. Seek His comfort when you sorrow.

HOW DO WE GROW AND MATURE IN OUR REALTIONSHIP WITH GOD?

Though people are called to walk in intimacy with God, many aren't willing to accept the commitment that the relationship requires.

Relationship with God is not "one and done"—it is a conscientious change of heart and lifestyle, a decision that we make anew every day. It means making God's purposes our first priority.

- ⁵ “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.
- ⁹ “This, then, is how you should pray:
- “Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation,^[a]
but deliver us from the evil one.^[b]’ (Matthew 6:5-13)

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Though people are called to walk in intimacy with God, many aren’t willing to accept the commitment that the relationship requires. Relationship with God is not “one and done”—it is a conscientious change of heart and lifestyle, a decision that we make anew every day. It means making God’s purposes our first priority.

- Study the Word of God, the Bible. God has two primary methods of revealing Himself so that we can come to know Him: General Revelation is what we can learn about God by examining creation (which we briefly covered in our lessons on creation). Special Revelation is what we can learn about God from His Words and His miraculous acts (like the Great Flood, the plagues of Egypt, and many, many other acts that we will study as we walk through Scripture).
- The bottom line is this: You cannot be in an intimate relationship with any person if you do not know that person. This applies on a much greater scale to our relationship with God: How can we obey Him if we do not know His requirements? How can we worship Him if we do not appreciate why He is worthy of worship? How can we recognize His work in our lives if we do not know His ways and acts? How can we trust in His provision if we have not examined how He's provided for His children in the past? How can we understand our identity as Christians if we do not know Jesus Christ, the meaning of His life, the purpose of His death, and what it means for our salvation? How can we understand our need for God to save us from our sinful condition if we do not understand the nature and origins of sins? What we learn from the study of God's Word gives us identity and purpose, but it helps us come to know God as our personal, righteous, just, holy, and loving Sovereign Lord and Father who is worthy of our love and faithfulness?

HOW DO WE GROW AND MATURE IN OUR REALTIONSHIP WITH GOD?

Studying the Word of God is essential to growing in relationship with God and allowing the Holy Spirit to transform our hearts and our lives.

- *“Later that same day Jesus left the house and sat beside the lake. ² A large crowd soon gathered around him, so he got into a boat. Then he sat there and taught as the people stood on the shore. ³ He told many stories in the form of parables, such as this one:*
- *“Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seeds. ⁴ As he scattered them across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them. ⁵ Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But the plants soon wilted under the hot sun, and since they didn’t have deep roots, they died. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants. ⁸ Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted! ⁹ Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.”*
(Matthew 13:1-9)
- This parable of Christ illustrates how different people respond to the Word of God, the Bible. Some reject it. Some accept it intellectually as truth, but it does not penetrate their hearts or change their lives. Some embrace it temporarily, but when the pressures of life, culture, personal relationships, personal desires, etc. make them fully understand the true requirements of faith, God gets crowded out of their hearts and lives. Still others receive God’s Word and allow it to penetrate their hearts and transform their behaviors and lives so that they not only receive God but want to share the hope of salvation through Christ by sharing God’s Word with others.

HOW DO WE GROW AND MATURE IN OUR REALTIONSHIP WITH GOD?

Once we have come to know God as our Sovereign Lord through study and prayer and received Jesus Christ as our Savior through faith and trust, what comes next?

The work of the Holy Spirit begins as our lives are slowly and surely transformed as we begin to walk with God.

As we study the life of Abram, we are going to see a man who grows in spiritual maturity and walked in close relationship with God after obeying God's call to come to know Him. We can recognize stages of growing spiritual maturity in our own lives.

Stage 1: Young Faith/Spiritual Immaturity

- *"Although by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to reteach you the basic principles of God's word. You need milk, not solid food! For everyone who lives on milk is still an infant, inexperienced in the message of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained their senses to distinguish good from evil."* (Hebrews 5:12-14)
- "Milk" means the basics teachings of Christianity. Young faith is the "getting to know God" phase, working with more mature Christians to learn and understand the Scriptures. It is the phase where we begin to know God and learn to trust His character so that we follow and obey Him.

Stage 2: Maturing Faith

- *"These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world."* (1 Peter 1:7)
- As we'll see with Abram, triumphs of faith are almost always followed by tests of faith. God tempers our faith through tests, which become more intense as we become more spiritually mature. If we fail when God tests our faith, we need to "reset" (go back to the point where we diverged from trust in God and try again). Some of these tests are also traps set by Satan, who will attack to make us question our faith and God. Knowing the Scripture helps us recognize such attacks; trusting God's goodness helps us triumph over such attacks.

Stage 3: Spiritual Fidelity

- These are spiritual tests that will not come until God truly knows that you are ready. It comes at the point where you can say that you love God more than anything and anyone else. It comes at the point where we obey God no matter our feelings, circumstances, or the consequences of our faith. It means that our burdens may be heavy but we still know with certainty that God's purposes will prevail and that His purposes are for our good. It means that we follow and believe God and accept His judgements rather than expecting Him to conform to our demands. We are waiting on God's timing not grudgingly but expectantly, hopefully, and even joyfully.
- This is no small task but rather an attitude of deepest faith that survives when we understand that we live in a fallen world of sinful behavior, wickedness, or outright evil.
- It is a world of disease and death, of injustice and violence. It is a world of hedonism, rebellion against God, and attacks on God's family of believers. It is a world that encourages self-determination before submission to the Lord, and prioritizing self before others.
- The heroes of the faith in the Bible faced pressures, temptations, circumstances where it would have been easier and more comfortable to deny God (indeed, in some cases it would have saved their lives). They chose God. Remember: The things of this world are temporary—and that includes the suffering, wickedness, and death. We have hope because we know that God transcends time and Jesus has overcome the world. That means we can be confident of God's promise to bring us into His eternal kingdom of peace under Christ when the temporary trials of this world have passed away.

Stage 4: Spiritual Elder

- *To be a spiritual elder means to hold a place of hope and perspective. It means to be able to remind people that there is something larger and deeper than the various identities we've had throughout life. –Joan Borysenko*
- Eventually, we move from spiritual discipleship to being the spiritual mentor and leader who guides others into discipleship. These are the people who have reached a stage where they become church leaders and overseers.
- Let us not become complacent in our faith when we reach this point but rather hold even more closely to the Bible. The Bible warns us that death is preferable than being the reason anyone turns from faith in Christ and sin (Matthew 18:6). Take care to teach His Word wisely and well.
- An elder has reached the point where God is his or her first priority each day. This means making a habit of prayer, meditating on the Word of God, actively seeking His will and obediently heeding the leading of the Holy Spirit. This is done entirely for the glory of God and the Kingdom of Christ that others might know Him and be saved. A transformed life shows God's work in your heart and does good works for Him
- Elders and leaders in the modern church go by many titles: Priest, pastor, bishop, cardinal, reverend, minister, deacon, deaconess, etc. Regardless of whether we are spiritual gifted to lead a congregation, at some point EVERY believer will be called upon to model a faithful walk and teach the Word to those of young or uncertain faith. What does God expect of us as elders? Let's look:
- *An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. (Titus 1:6-9)*
- *Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. (1 Timothy 3:2-7)*

We've seen that faith can go wrong; next we'll look at what happened when faith went right.

Be honest (it's just you, me, and Jesus here): When I speak of sacrificial love for Christ and making God your first priority, is your initial response to add a qualifier to that statement: *"I always put Jesus first, except..."*, *"I want to make Jesus my first priority, but..."*, *"I would make God my first priority if only/if He would/if not for..."*. Sacrificial love, trust, and obedience of God is scary. It runs contradictory to every message of modern culture, which emphasizes self-determination and self-reliance. Yet, this kind of deep relationship with God need not be frightening. Though we have seen that there will be storms in life (literal or metaphorical), we have seen that God is able and ready to come alongside us as friend and Sovereign Lord to carry us through these times.

The stories of Genesis 1-11 showed us all the ways that men could fail in their relationship with God: Disobedience, idolatry, rebellion, wickedness. We saw in the Table of Nations entire people groups that fell out of relationship with God and went to the grave in eternal separation from the Lord. We also saw throughout this brief history that God responded to man's wickedness with grace again and again and again. Where He could have wiped men from existence and started anew with a different image, He instead promised to bring a Redeemer who would save men from their condition of spiritual death and hopelessness due to sin. God loves us. He desires personal relationship with us. His desire for our obedience is motivated by His great desire to send mercy, love, and blessings upon us and protect us from sin that leads to death.

This brings us to the story of Abram, who would become Abraham. This man may have stumbled on his walk with the Lord, but ultimately His story is one of solid faith and obedience to the Lord and right relationship with God. Abraham's faithfulness is a model for believers to follow today. His obedience opened the door for God's grace to transform biblical history.

References for this lesson:

- **REFERENCES FOR THIS LESSON:**

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- *"Thy Kingdom Come"*, J. Dwight Pentecost; Kregel Publications; 1995

- USEFUL INFORMATION, READ THEM!