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The Story, Chapter 2: God Builds a Nation
Genesis 15

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“Honey, how’s it look?” he asked as he knocked at the door. There was no response. Just silence. Then, the faint sound of sobbing. “Honey, are you okay?” he asked again, now very concerned. A minute later the door opened, and she came out. Her cheeks were streaked with tears. Her eyes red and puffy. Her body drooping from exhaustion. As she walked past, she placed something in his hand.

It felt familiar and as he looked down he confirmed that it was just what he thought—a testing device. He’d seen these before, but *those* were the kind where one line means negative and two lines means positive. This was the first time he’d seen one of the ones with a plus sign for pregnant and a minus for *not* pregnant. His eyes narrowed and focused as he too saw what his wife had just seen moments before. It was a minus sign, staring back at him big and bold, and suddenly he also felt his own body go limp as the tears began to flow.

Abram and Sarai had been through a lot already, but this was too much. Ever since they’d been married they’d hoped to have a family together. But as the months turned into years, and the years turned into decades, their hopes of not just having *many* children but having even *any* children at all had grown dim. And this, now, was one of their last chances. Sarai would soon be beyond her childbearing years. And that sad reality was really sinking in more than ever before. Now, with that last test in hand, Abram despaired and gave up on his dream of ever being a father—EVER.

The couple sat together, side by side, in total quiet. Their eyes just staring down at the floor. One hand wiping away tears, while they held hands with the other. What else was there to say now? All hope was lost. The dream was shattered. What now, they wondered.

Fast forward about twenty years—Abram and Sarai were now at a point in their lives when they felt closer to the end than the beginning. So, naturally they got to thinking about final arrangements and making sure everything was taken care of before they left this earth. Sitting in their attorney’s office, they were setting up their wills with him. But when it got to the part about leaving what to whom, the reminder that Abram had no children to inherit his estate hit him out of nowhere like a ton of bricks. Abram quickly scooted out his chair and stood up—“Excuse me, I need a moment to myself.” He headed down the hall to find the men’s room. As he went in, he locked the door behind him, hunched over the sink, and just lost it. After a few moments of that, he started to compose himself, blew his nose and dabbed his eyes.

But when he splashed some water on his cheeks, trying to get it together, He felt a strangely comforting presence. What was it? He felt an arm wrap around him, “Abram, I will make you into a great nation.”

“What . . . Lord, is that you? It’s just me and Sarai—a nation? Wh-what are you talking about?”

“There’s this place I want you to go;” said God, “I want you to pack up your things and move there. Don’t worry about where; I will be your GPS. But when you arrive, you’ll understand why.”

Abram’s mind started racing. He was confused, so many questions. But, for the first time since he could remember, he felt hopeful again, ready to move forward and take a leap of faith—what have I got to lose anyway, he thought. Maybe a new beginning is just what I need. So, straightening up, he walked back into the attorney’s office, finished his meeting, and later that evening he and Sarai talked it all through over dinner.

Fast forward again now—Abram and Sarai are road-weary and ready to finally get to their destination. Their spirits are revived though when they see a sign that says, “Welcome to Canaan: ‘The Land of Milk and Honey.’” As they drive a little further on, they see a rest stop with an overlook, so they pull in and park their moving truck. They want to get a good view of their new home. But when Abram gets out stretching his legs and taking it all in, he gets another shock. As he

drops in the quarter and looks through the viewfinder, he sees people—lots and lots of people. They're all there, already living in his new home—now what? Would there be a place for him and Sarai even, let alone this “great nation” God has in mind for him?

Just then, that familiar voice that told him in the first place to load up his truck and move was back. “Don't worry, Abram; to your offspring I will give this land.”

What, Abram wondered again, now he was even more confused. A great nation, the land of Canaan, and now *offspring*? I'm seventy-five, he thought, and Sarai's sixty-five and has always been barren—*offspring*? But before Abram could open his mouth and ask any questions, God was gone again. What was he to do now? He had no choice but to trust God. So, he kept on keeping on.

Now, fast forward again. Much time had passed since God made those promises to Abram, and a lot had happened in between. Abram watched the days come and go without getting his promised heir. He wanted to believe that God would make good on His Word, but it was getting more and more difficult with each passing day.

As Abram's head was swirling with questions, God came to him again. Having missed his other chances to ask God before, Abram didn't want to miss another one. So, he jumped at his chance and blurted out, “O Lord God, what do you really have for me? I mean, I am yet childless, and at this point, Eliezer's still the only beneficiary in my will!”

“Ah,” said the Lord. He opened up the sliding glass door to the back patio and motioned Abram to follow Him. Together, they stepped out underneath the big blanket of stars stretched out overhead. God said, “Relax; Eliezer won't be your heir, but look up. See all those stars? Just try to count them all! So, shall your offspring be.” And that was just the boost Abram needed. That would get him through—at least for a while.

Now, fast forward once more, just over four thousand years later, to another part of the world. We find ourselves here in the city of Atlanta in the year AD 2015. As our stories continue to unfold for us today, they sound a lot like the old one we just heard. There might not be any promises of great nations, or great lands, or great heirs, but there are still definitely promises. God makes promises to each one of us—to me and to all of you.

He promises, “Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.”

He promises, “I will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.”

He promises, “I have come so that you may have life, and have it more abundantly.”

He promises, “Your sins are forgiven.”

He promises, “I will give you rest.”

He promises, “Your faith has healed you.”

He promises, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you.”

He promises, “My joy will abide with you and your joy will be made full.”

He promises, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”

He promises, “Blessed are you.”

Is there a particular promise that you're holding out for right now? I mean, every day we're kind of like Abram, aren't we? Watching. Trusting. Praying. Just waiting for that promise to be fulfilled in our own lives. But, maybe hour after

hour, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, we begin scratching our heads and wondering just like Abram did, God, do you need my help? Sometimes, just like Abram took Hagar to get the promised son for himself, we also try to take God's promises by force. Have you ever done that? Y'know, you *really* wanted something, you really wanted something *really, really* bad, so much so that you gave up on God and took matters into your own hands? Well, how'd that turn out? Was it like trying to get a square peg through a round hole? Did it end up a mess like it did for Abram and Sarai and Hagar and Ishmael?

Promises and faith, impatience and mistakes; our stories really do sound a lot like Abram's. But there's something else about our lives that go a lot like his. God works *despite* us. Even though we throw off His plans, God's never thrown off. He stays on track and follows through for us. For Abram, it took twenty-five years, and even though he got his son Ishmael by force, Abram finally got his promised son, Isaac. God was faithful. And for you and me, God *is* faithful. We can't screw it up. No matter what kind of wrenches we've thrown into God's plans, God still keeps His promises for us. God has always, and God *will* always, *always* keep His promises.

But, y'know, sometimes when we're in the middle of the holes we've dug for ourselves, it's easy to think that if we didn't have the long, long wait to begin with, we never would've gotten ourselves into such trouble. After all, it can feel harsh and cruel and unkind for God to make us wait. But, let's keep this all in perspective—there's somebody else who knows a thing or two about waiting. Someone who's waited. And waited. And waited. *And* waited. He's watched the years turn into decades, the decades become centuries, and the centuries add up to millennia. He, of course, is God. Ever since Adam and Eve, His heart's ached to rescue us from our sins, to save us from our mortality, to mend fences with us and get us back. But, for some reason—perhaps one only God knows—He patiently held off, even though every second His heart was breaking, He waited until it was just the right time to send His Son, to enter into our tragic stories and write into them His own story of salvation. For so much time, God wanted to get His promise of a Messiah fulfilled, but in His infinite wisdom He waited for the perfect moment so that He didn't botch His plan and pull an Abram and Hagar. So, God knows all too well what it's like to wait, and so we have a God who empathizes with us.

So, to make it a little bit easier, He gives us hints, reminders, signs that the promise *is* coming true. God knows how helpful that was for Him, after all, having His Son Jesus Christ beside Him all that time. Whenever He looked over at His right hand, He saw His Messiah of promise and remembered that the wait to win us back for Himself was almost done. God does something similar for Abram through the covenant of circumcision. God gives Abram a sign of the promise He made to him that will go with him wherever he goes, that he can see whenever he looks down, that will remind him of the promised offspring every time he and Sarai turn out the light. And it's to be a reminder not just in Abram's flesh, but all his descendants on down the line, who together, will form that great nation God promised. It was God's covenant to them marked on their bodies from generation to generation.

St. Paul says that you and I have a sign as well—all of us, not just the boys. He calls Baptism the new circumcision, one made without hands (cf. Colossians 2:11-15). It's a sign that you are God's people too, people of promise, sons and daughters of a heavenly Father who would rather die than break a promise to His children. It's a sneak preview of God's promises. It gives you, now, already, His presence, forgiveness, eternal life, healing, rest, peace, love, joy, heaven, anything and everything He's ever promised to you. You get it already now through Baptism. And that can make the wait just a little bit easier.

But, even when the wait still feels impossible, and you don't know how much longer you can go, remember this. For Abram, who was told he'd become Father Abraham, he had quite the wait too. Maybe he spent long, sleepless nights for years and years looking out his window up at that starry sky, wondering, "How long, O Lord?" But I can just imagine that

if he were here today, he wouldn't be looking up. No, he'd be looking out, out at all of you. All of you stars from that night sky so many thousands of years ago, who have finally fallen down to earth and have landed in these very pews today. He'd see his descendents, you, the fulfillment of God's promise in flesh and blood. And, with a tear in his eye, and a smile on his lips, he'd turn to Sarah and say, "Well, honey, what d'ya know, God really does keep His promises after all. Every. Single. One."