

The Vow: Part One

Genesis 12:1-2; Hebrews 11:8

1. We give in to fear.

- *Genesis 12:11-13*

2. We get ahead of God.

- *Genesis 16:1-2*

3. We don't believe God will do it for us.

- *Genesis 17:17; 18:12; 18:14; Romans 4:19-21;
Proverbs 19:21*

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One time in my life I stood in a very large room, filled with a bunch of my family, my friends, and some strangers (at least they were up until that point in my life). And as I stood in front of them, I very boldly and naively said something that changed my life forever: two words were, in fact, and those two words were “I do.” I said those words to Shelly, in case you are wondering. And I had *no idea* what they meant or what I was getting myself into. Thankfully, neither did Shelly, or else she probably wouldn't have said them to me! That will be 37 years ago this May. And we are still figuring out the implications of those two words. I'm thankful that when Shelly makes a commitment, she sticks to it. That's what she said and what she meant, and so did I. A vow is a vow.

Today we are beginning a four-Sunday series called, “The Vow.” We'll be learning about marriage from stories and instructions in Scripture. Now right away, I can FEEL the eye rolls from those of you who are single. But before you decide to stop listening, please hear me say this: this is *not* intended to communicate that the goal for your life should be to get married. Actually, if you think about it, you are more like Jesus than those of us who are married, because Jesus was single! But I will tell you this: if you stay with me, you will learn faith and relational principles that apply to your life. And, if you do get married, well, this series will be helpful to you at that point, too.

For those of us who are married, I want to encourage you not only to take good notes, but also to consider attending our marriage conference at the end of next month. As you heard in the announcements, it will be here at the church on Friday night and Saturday the last weekend of February. I will be taking you through an extremely insightful and practical process that will give you a picture of your marriage as it currently stands and tools to make it even stronger. You'll get dinner Friday night and lunch on Saturday, and we will be done before dinner. You'll get all that for \$60/couple. Please sign up at the Ministry Center, and you'll need to give us an email address for each of you, so we can send you the links to the assessment that you'll need to take individually.

Okay? Great. I'd like us to start by looking at one of the earlier marriages in the Bible from Genesis chapter twelve. We're going to let that marriage speak into our lives.

Today, we are going to look at a guy named Abram who God later changed his name to Abraham and his wife Sarai; who later became Sarah.

As you are turning there in your Bibles, for those of you that are not yet married, I want to ask you, if you do get married one day, what do you want out of your marriage?

Or for those of you that are married, if you just kind of rewind all the way back to your pre-marriage days, as you were looking ahead to your marriage, what did you think that it would be like? Chances are pretty good that your story went something like this:

¹ Outline and content from a sermon by Craig Groeschel, *Once Upon a Marriage*

You were massively in love with this other person, and you had a serious case of twitterpation. As you were in love, you assumed you would get married and the twitterpations would follow you through your blissful marriage for the rest of your life! One day, you would have the perfect little home, maybe with a white picket fence: a dog (and not a cat). Maybe you hoped to have a couple of kids, maybe a boy first and then a girl. You'd have a great career; you might travel some. You would grow older together; again, with the twitterpations following you all of the way through your marriage.

If you fast forwarded maybe five years into your marriage, eight years in, fifteen years, thirty years in; if someone would ask you at that point, what do you want out of your marriage? If you are like many people, you might say, "We are just trying to pay the bills! We're just trying to get to bed before 11. We are just trying to keep the kids motivated for school!" Or maybe for some of you, "We are just trying to stay married!" You know, it's interesting how your expectations don't always line up with reality. Sometimes midway into a marriage or relationship you end up saying, "This isn't anything like I thought it would be!" Sometimes it's better, sometimes it's worse, but rarely is like you expected.

I think back over 40 years ago when I first met Shelly. It was the beginning of the first semester of our freshman year. A bunch of guys and girls were hanging out in the lobby of the freshman guys' dorm, and I looked across the room, and there was Shelly. I didn't know who this girl was, but I thought to myself, "I've got to go on a date with that girl before I graduate!" For her part, she didn't even know I was there. Here we were in those early days of college. Just kids! And yes, that is my real hair.

Well it took us till our sophomore year before we even spoke to each other. Shelly was from Denver, and over Christmas break I went to Denver with a friend of mine to go skiing because I'd never skied in Colorado. Shelly needed a ride home for break, and I was more than happy to oblige. Back then it was like a 15-hour drive. That was the first time we got to know each other. My friend had a girlfriend in Denver, so we double dated – went out to dinner at a Mexican restaurant and then went to the movies to see *The Raiders of the Lost Ark*. I was smitten with her!

But it wasn't until our Junior year that we started dating. By our senior year it began to get rocky, and when we graduated, we had broken up. There's a BUNCH of details I'm leaving out that maybe I'll share with you at the marriage conference! But we graduated, and I took a job as a youth pastor at a church near Los Angeles, and Shelly took a job as a nanny in New York for Joan Lunden, who was the co-host of Good Morning America. Back then there was no email and no cell phone. Phone calls were long distance and very expensive. Neither of us knew anyone in LA or New York, so we stayed in communication with each other. We couldn't afford phone bills, so I'd record one side of a cassette tape telling her what I was doing, and then mail it to her. She'd listen and then record the other side and return it.

By December of that year, I surprised her in Denver when she came home for Christmas and proposed to her. I used a poem that I had written – maybe I'll share that at the conference, too. But she said yes, and the next day I flew back to LA and then she went back to New York. Four months later I took a youth pastor job outside of Denver, and four months after that she returned to her mom's house in Denver. Ten months after that, we

were married. Here we are at our wedding in May of 1986, at the old Denver First Church of the Nazarene. Look at those shoulders on her dress! I, of course, was wearing a tuxedo called the “Miami Vice Collection.” And speaking of that, here we are at the limo headed out from the church to our honeymoon!

We had planned to be married a couple years and then start a family, but we found out we weren’t able to have kids – at least not without medical help. Finally, six years after getting married, we had our first child, and then in four years had two more. What a picture perfect family, right? You have no idea the hardship we endured, especially as our youngest was near death with a mysterious disease for three of the first four years of his life. That, too, is another story to tell. As I look back, some things are much better, but *everything is much different than we had planned.*

Many of you right now, you look at your life and say, “This is nothing like I had planned.” Some of you are going to think, “By this time I thought I would be married.” Some of you are going to say, “I am married, and I thought my marriage would be much different.” If you look at your life and you are thinking, “This is much, much different than I had planned,” I believe that this story about Abraham and Sarah will speak to you in a really profound way.

We’re going to start looking at the story in Genesis 12:1-2, when God speaks to Abram and says this:

The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you....” *And then God makes this phenomenal promise to Abram, He says: “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.”* (Genesis 12:1-2, niv)

God tells Abe that you are going to have to leave everything that makes you comfortable and you are going to have to go into another place. I believe that God will speak to many of you in one way or another, and God is going to say that you are going to have to by faith follow him when he calls you into the unknown. You are going to have to leave the things that are most comfortable to you and follow him by faith, into the life he has for you. In fact, if you look into the New Testament, you are going to see in Hebrews, Chapter 11:8, that Abraham was characterized by faith. Here’s what the Bible says:

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. (Hebrews 11:8, niv)

By faith he followed the voice of God. Imagine what that was like; Abram came home to his wife and said, “Hey honey, guess what? I’ve been talking to God and God told us to move! I just have no idea where we’re going.” She probably thought, “Maybe I don’t want to move!” But she did because she believed that he was a man of faith.

Now, moving is very difficult, isn’t it? Especially if you are moving by camel. Think about it – it’s not like he could call ahead and say, “Could you get me a realtor and find us a nice three bedroom, two bath house?” Abram and Sarah literally left everything they knew, packed up what they could, and by faith just ventured out.

God will often call you into the life of blessing and the only road there is the faith road. But if you’re like me, you will be tempted to say; “God before I go, please give me some details.”

God will rarely give you details; one, because you may not be able to handle the details. Because if you knew everything that was going to happen, you may choose not to obey. Secondly, God may say, I am not going to give you the details because if you have the details, then it wouldn't take faith. Without faith, it is impossible to please God. So, Abram and Sarai get this promise, you are going to be a great nation. In other words, you are going to have lots of kids, and lots of grandkids. You are going to be massively blessed with children and descendants. But first, you have to go.

Now, what is interesting about their story, if you look at their marriage as it's described in the New Testament: they are characterized by being a couple of faith. But, if you look at their life story in the Old Testament, you are going to find that they didn't always have faith. Which encourages me, because sometimes I waver in my faith too, and I find comfort that I can still be characterized as a man of faith if I keep following God. In fact, if you watch, we are going to first see Abram mess up and falter in his faith. Then we are going to see his wife mess up and falter in her faith. Then we are going to watch, as they both together mess up and falter in their faith. But the good news is, that even when they were faithless, God was always faithful; and the same will be true in our lives as we get to know the goodness and faithfulness of God. What typically happens when life doesn't go as planned? Rather than being strengthened in our faith, many of us falter in our faith. That is what they did and that is what we can do if we are not careful. Let's look at three things in their marriage that happened when life didn't go as planned.

First...

1. We give in to *fear*.

That's what Abram did when there was a famine in the land. Basically, the economy tanked and so he moved his family to Egypt, but he ran into some fear and made some sinful decisions based out of fear. Verses 11-13 say this:

As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. *(So, basically in verse 13, he says, I want you to tell a lie.)* "Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you." (Genesis 12:11-13, niv)

Now you may be thinking, what is that? Well during this time, when you entered into enemy territory, if the enemies liked the wife, they could kill the husband to get to the wife. Think about this, though: God had promised them that they would have kids, which according to my biology class takes a *living* man and a *living* woman. All of a sudden he is afraid he is going to die, which tells us that at that moment, he was doubting the promise of God. By fear, he made a sinful decision and said let's lie, because I really don't trust God to do what He said He was going to do.

Sadly, we see this happening all of the time in lives today. So many people are afraid and taken off the track of the blessings of God by fear. Rather than living by faith, suddenly we are living by fear. We see it in marriages all of the time. God is calling us to tithe, but what if we struggle financially, so we don't obey. God is calling us to be generous, but what if we

lose our job? Or we feel like God is calling us to be foster parents, but what if we bring this child in and our kids don't do as well? Or God is calling one of us to stay at home to raise our kids, but what if we can't make it financially? Or God is calling us to start a new business, or a new ministry, or to join a small group, but what if...what if...what if; and instead of building one another up in our marriages with mutual and increasing faith, so often we tear each other down with mutual and increasing fear. What if? What if...what if? We talk ourselves out of being obedient to God.

Let me give you an example. In 1991, I was a very low paid youth pastor and Shelly was working at a great job at Hewlett Packard. She was making way more money than me, by a long shot. And because of that, we purchased a house. A little 1050 square foot house with three bedrooms crammed into it, for the *huge* price of \$64,000. We were able to get that loan because of Shelly's job. When we were finally able to get pregnant with our first child, Shelly knew that God had told her that when our child was born, she needed to quit her job and stay at home. I told Shelly, "Are you sure that's God? You could work for two years, and your salary would pay off our house. How will we make the payments if you're not working?" But she had faith, and I in my small faith couldn't talk her out of it. HP even offered to let her work from home, which was unheard of back then because there wasn't even public internet yet. But she said, "No, if I take that job, I won't be acting on faith."

So, we started out by faith. But I am telling you, as soon as we took one step, it was fearful! So we had our son, and she left her job, and then that next month's mortgage payment came in. Somehow, we made it. And the next month. And the next. We never missed a payment. And, by the way, we tithed every week, too. So we changed our language to the language of faith, rather than fear. I can tell you today that it is one of the most strategic decisions. We sold that house three years later for more than twice what we bought it for. And we moved and bought another house, and then again, and then the house we live in now. And with each house, we gained equity. We've *never* lost money on a house. More importantly, our boys grew up knowing they were loved by God and their parents.

I am convinced that there are many people that God has spoken to, God has prompted you, but out of fear you are not obeying the direction of God. In marriages, there is so much fear talk; what if...what if...and what if...what if...what if – and we tear ourselves down rather than instead saying, "God has spoken, God is leading us," – faith talk that leads us to obey the promptings of God.

Abram panicked, God had already given him a promise, I am going to give you kids. But all he could think of was, "They are going to kill me!" He stopped believing the promise and gave in to fear.

The second thing, and I bet you might see yourself here like I can see myself, is that...

2. We *get ahead* of God.

When life isn't going as we planned, we often get ahead of God. God, you told us we are going to have kids, but we don't have kids. You are taking way too long, God. Don't you know I'm tired of waiting on you, so I am going to make this happen. I am going to force it; I'm going to manipulate it. I'm going to bring some action God, because I don't like your

timing. That is what Sarai did. Abram messed up and then his wife messed up. Genesis 16:1-2, the Bible says:

"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children." You're supposed to have kids, you've got no kids, big problem. The Bible says: "But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, 'The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave...'" Pause there. Some guys will be thinking, Wow! She just told me to go sleep with her maid, that might be kind of cool. This is not cool. If you think about it, her name was Hagar! That just couldn't be good! With a name like Hagar, I'm picturing a female Russian weightlifter on steroids... Anyway, So Sarai says, "Go, sleep with my slave;" And then notice what she says, "perhaps I can build a family through her." (Genesis 16:1-2, niv)

What did she *not* say? She didn't say, God can do this, God can bring about his promises. Instead she said, "I can take control and make this happen. God is not doing it, therefore I will get ahead of God and force it." If you read the whole story, Abraham gave in, and he was with Hagar, and she gave him a son. Then it got nasty, I mean like cat-fight jealousy, and years and years of trouble that still plays out today on a global stage, all because they tried to force something before it was God's will. This happens all of the time. You see it in so many different ways in marriages. Young couples want the financial and material blessings of God, and they are in their 20's, their parents are in their 50's and they think, we want to live like Mom and Dad. So, instead of waiting and managing money wisely like God's Word says, they go out and put a financial noose around their neck getting into debt trying to accumulate all of these blessings before the right time and spend the next 20 years strangling themselves because they got ahead of God. Or you might see a woman who is married to a non-Christian guy, and she wants so desperately to share her Savior with her husband. So, instead of winning him with godliness and humility and gentleness and patience, she decides to nag and try to guilt him into church and pointing out how he's not measuring up and shoves religion down his throat and pushes him away from God, rather than waiting on God. I mean, the list could go on and on. Someone doesn't like their job, or their boss, and they panic. So, instead of waiting on God to provide a job, they quit and nine months later they are unemployed, wondering why they can't pay the bills, because they forced it. They panicked, they got ahead of God, which is so common and so dangerous.

Here's what we have to remember: God is rarely early, but He is never late. He's always right on time. God is rarely early, but I'm telling you, His timing is perfect! He is the God of the perfect timing. So, a lot of times we panic – "This isn't happening and where is he? God what are you doing?" We feel like we've got to do something to force it. Well, waiting on God is not passive living. Waiting on God can be the most active, faith-filled living ever. As we are waiting on God, we are actively, aggressively serving God. Serving Him, believing that what He said will come to pass.

Sarai panics, it's not coming down the way she wants, so she gets ahead of God. When things don't go as we planned, it's so easy to start making decisions based on fear. It's so easy to get ahead of God.

Then third...

3. We don't believe God will do it for us.

He may do it for someone else, he may answer *your* prayers, he may do a miracle in *your* life, but I just don't think he's going to do it in *my* life. And quite honestly, I can understand why Abram and Sarai would feel this way. Because the verses we are going to look at are about 30 years *after* the promise and *still* no kids. Think about this; God says, "You guys are going to have kids." So they go out and start decorating the nursery. A year later – oh, thought it would be by now, but it's not. Six months later: maybe we should go to the doctor and maybe get checked out. Why is this not happening? Two years later, four years later, eight years later: God, did you remember? Twelve years later, twenty years later, and all of a sudden you can start to realize, this would be easy ground to lose faith, which is what so many of us do.

It's interesting what Abraham and Sarah both did. Genesis 17:17, when God comes to them again some 30 years later and says now, very specifically, "I am going to give you a son." Abraham is *99 years old*! The Bible says:

Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?"
(Genesis 17:17, niv)

This is centuries before there were little blue pills, if you know what I mean. Abraham must've been thinking, "Are you kidding me? I would have believed this awhile back, but God I'm just not seeing in now!" Interestingly, Sarah responded the exact same way. She overheard God talking, verse 12 of Genesis 18, the Bible says:

"So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?" (Genesis 18:12, niv)

She's being very sarcastic because the Lord asked this question:

Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son." (Genesis 18:14, niv)

Say that first sentence with me: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

I don't know for sure, but I wonder if at that moment there was something that shifted in their faith. Is anything too hard for the Lord? Oh yeah, you are the God who says all things are possible! They finally take God at His word.

Listen, I know a lot of people that want children and haven't been able to conceive. I just want to acknowledge, that's a very painful thing. I told you, we lived there for four years. But I also know a lot of people who are giving up faith. I would just say to you, do you really think anything is too hard for God? Those of you that say, "We could never be blessed with children. We couldn't afford to adopt; we can't pull it off." Do you really think there is anything too hard for the Lord? "We are in a financial mess, and we could never climb out of this, we are always going to hurt, we are always going to struggle." Do you really think that anything is too hard for the Lord? "Well, you just don't know, Pastor Mike, how bad our marriage is. My husband will never be a godly man – he is so far from God!" Do you really not believe that in a moment, the power of God could not come upon him and drop him to his knees to a point of full surrender to the Lord, the God of the universe? "Well, you don't

know my wife, she's just...." Do you not really think that the Holy Spirit could arrest her heart, and bring her into submission and surrender under Christ and His union of marriage? "Our kids, they're so far off from the Lord." Do you really not think that God's grace could not pursue the one you love and bring them into a point of total submission to God? "But our marriage, there is just no way, it's just not going to work!" Do you really not think that God could do a miracle? "We are always going to be miserable. I mean, we might stay together for the sake of the kids, but we will never have that something special." Is that how big your faith is in the God of the universe? Have you really stopped believing that it is possible? I'm not talking about abusive or domestic violence situations; in those cases you need faith to *get out* of that situation. But you can do it! Is anything too hard for the Lord?

Let me just pause for a moment and for those of you who are married, if you were to be really honest, it is not where it should be? If there's one piece of common advice woven through this whole series, it is this: Invite God into the center of your marriage. That's the whole deal summarized in one sentence. Just invite Him in. Do not dare play the little church thing. Don't just go to church to check the box and go on with your life. Do not insult God in that way. Don't play Christian. Invite God in. Just join hands and pray, "God we've been distracted or disobedient, but we invite you to be the Lord of our marriage." Then you buckle your seat belts, and you start watching for God to do what only God can do! When life doesn't turn out as you plan, *especially* when life doesn't turn out as you plan, you embrace Him! You don't need all of the things you want...you need Him, and He alone can be enough. And whenever your faith starts faltering, as it's so easy to do, you hang on to Him. The good news is, even if you're faithless right now, Abraham and Sarah were faithless, I've been faithless at times, but in the last season of your life, you can still be characterized as being faithful just like Abraham and Sarah. Even though they messed up, here's how the New Testament describes Abraham. Romans 4:19-21, the Bible says:

Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. (Romans 4:19-21, niv)

Do not waver in your faith! Be strengthened in your faith. Is anything too hard for the Lord? If life does not go as you planned, don't give in to fear and don't get ahead of God. Don't fall into the notion that God won't come through for you on what he's promised. The Bible tells us:

Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails. (Proverbs 19:21, niv)

Don't waiver in your faith. Why embrace anyone or anything else but the faithfulness of God? Invite Him to be the Lord of every area of your life. Especially your covenant union of marriage and watch as He leads you out of the comfort zone, into the place of blessings, as only He can do. It may not be in your timing, but He is never ever late.

Prayer:

God, thank you for what you are saying to us. I ask God, that you would do a miraculous work. First, in the hurting marriages, and then God, in the lives of everyone who has got

a faltering faith, which is so easy to have in this painful and sin-filled world.

As you are praying today, are you growing in faith or do you find yourself talking in fear and getting ahead of God and maybe not even believing God would do it for you. Look at your marriage, is your marriage truly characterized by faith? For those of you that would say I really want to be strengthened in my faith, I want my marriage to be strengthened in faith. I want to have an unwavering faith in the faithfulness of God, would you lift up your hands right now so I can pray for you?

God, thank you for a group of people that are truly hungry to be in an intimate relationship with you.

God, for those who are not married and facing maybe some fears. God, I pray that their faith would not be in a future spouse, but their whole faith would be in you. God, that right now you would be enough, you would be everything they need.

God, for those who have a marriage that is not what it should be, (and that is so many of us, God), we ask that you would be in the center of our marriages, that they would be built around you. That Christ would be the head, and that we would line up under His authority and we would seek Him first, and then God, as we seek Him first, you would add everything that matters in our lives. May we come under the authority of your Son, Jesus, and seek Him. Even when, and especially when life doesn't go as we planned, we commit to seek you God and to trust you no matter what.

As you keep praying today, please listen very, very carefully, not just to what I would say, but to what the Spirit of God would say to you. There are some of you, that you don't really know where you stand with God right now. You wonder, have I been good enough? Have I done too many bad things? Am I really right with God? If that is you, I want you to pay very careful attention, because God wants to speak to you. If you wonder where you stand with God, chances are you might not be in good standing. If you think, well I've got to do good works and be more religious and try harder, let me just tell you right now, you will never succeed. The Bible says in Ephesians, Chapter 2, that it's only by the grace of God that you are saved, and it is not by your works, but it is only by faith and the perfect work of God through His son, Jesus; because God loved us as sinners so much that He sent His sinless son, to become sin for us on the cross as the perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus died and He rose again, and now anyone, and that includes you, who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Today, call on the name of Jesus and by faith you will be saved. By faith you will be forgiven, by faith you will be filled with the Spirit of God. You are here today, because God ordained for you to be here to be saved by grace through faith.

Pray aloud, everybody together after me:

Heavenly Father, save me from my sins, make me brand new. My life is no longer my own, I give it to you. As you sent Jesus for me, I give my whole life to you. Fill me with your Holy Spirit, so I could serve you. Give me faith to follow you always. Thank you for new life, now I give you all of mine. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.