

"Never Too Old"

Big Buts in the Bible – part #4

Genesis 15:1-21

Today is the fourth message in our series, "Big Buts in the Bible." It's all about challenging each other to say "Yes!" to God, instead of making excuses.

We hear a lot of excuses in our world today. "I'm too tired." "I'm too busy." "I forgot." We even say, "I'm sorry, but..." as if our excuses will somehow make the situation better. But God does not accept our excuses. God wants our hearts, and God goes to great lengths to answer our objections, if we will take the time to listen.

So far, we've examined at three stories: Moses, Gideon, and Peter. Moses' best excuse was, he didn't think he was qualified. But God still brought the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. Gideon's excuse was, he was too small and too scared. But God still saved them from the Midianites. Peter's excuse was, his life was a mess, as sinful and smelly as week-old fish. But Jesus still taught Peter to fish for people.

I notice that in each case, God's answer always surprises. God says, "can do this. Do not be afraid. I will be with you." Every call is accompanied by a surprising sign or a miracle. And God never calls his people to work alone. Moses had Aaron. Peter had James and John. Gideon had his army of 300. It's almost like the Bible is telling us, God knows what he's doing. Amazing!

God has been surprising us and overcoming our excuses since the beginning. Consider Abraham (known as Abram before God changed his name.) The father of nations. The founder of three great world religions. The patriarch of patriarchs. God threw Abraham the original surprise party.

God called Abraham from his home, Ur, into a new land, Canaan, over 600 miles away. God told Abraham, "Leave your family and the only life you've ever known." (Genesis 12) At that time, people probably traveled less than 20 miles from their birthplace. Imagine walking to St. Louis! Today you could drive there in about 9 hours, but it would take weeks to get there by foot. And Abraham wasn't traveling light. He had his tents, his flocks, and his wife with him.

God surprised Abraham by promising to make him into a great nation and give him an amazing inheritance. (Genesis 12 and 13) Even though Abraham obeyed God, but there was still a problem.

Read Genesis 15:1-3

This, then, is Abraham's excuse to God. "But God, I'm seventy-five years old and have no children. How can you make me into a great nation?" I think that's a pretty good excuse; better than some others we've heard. I can understand God overcoming fear and stuttering, but a 75-year old man starting a family? That's a bit much, even for God, don't you think?

Age is a barrier beyond our control. When we are young, we seem to be in a hurry to grow up. What kid hasn't frantically asked how old they have to be to ride the rollercoasters? Ironically, when we finally are grown up, we wish we were younger. When I came to Bellaire, I was 38. A lot of people said to me, "Wow, you're so young!" Now, I'm leaving in a month, and the pastor replacing me is 31. Now I really feel old. My point is, age is relative! But is it really a valid excuse for not trusting God?

Abraham is surprised because, not only does he think he is too old; he has no children! Fun fact: it's hard to start a family without, you know, a family. Remember, packing up and moving to Canaan was God's idea, not Abraham's. At

the moment, God's promise is unfulfilled. Abraham starts to wonder, "Do I have to give my inheritance to a servant from my household? I heard your promise, Lord, and there's still no baby."

Let's read God's answer:

Genesis 15:4-6

God reiterates his promise. Have you been outside and looked at the stars lately? On a clear night in the Middle East, you can see more than 8,000 stars with the naked eye. Abraham had to be thinking, "Woah, that's a lot of kids!" To Abraham's credit, he believed God, but he still had doubts and questions. Look at the next exchange between God and Abraham.

Genesis 15:7-12

I'll bet you've asked God this question before: "How will I know?" How can we know God's will? There is a pattern here. Every time God calls someone, there is a sign, something that proves that it really is God talking. A burning bush, a staff that turns into a snake, fire, a fleece, or a great catch of fish. In Abraham's case, there is a special sacrifice.

Now, surprises can wear you out. Abraham has had a hard day, talking to God and setting up the sacrifice. He even had to fend off vultures. I think that's highly symbolic. The birds represent Abraham's spiritual struggle. He has doubts. He is growing impatient. Maybe he wonders, "Have I missed something? Has God stopped listening to me? God said, set up the sacrifice. Now nothing is happening!" Exhausted, physically and emotionally, Abraham falls into a deep and terrifying sleep. Basically, he has a nightmare.

What always happens when you reach the end of yourself? God shows up, in surprising ways. While Abraham is completely asleep, God reiterates his promise, and then we read this:

Genesis 15:17

This is a huge deal. To know why, you have to understand what this sacrifice means. Normally, two parties making an agreement would walk together through the aisle of dead animals. What each is saying is, "May I be split in two like these animals if I don't fulfill my part of the bargain."

Where is Abraham during this? Asleep. God alone walks through the pieces. God is saying, "Abraham, this promise will be fulfilled to you, no matter what." God does all the talking and all the acting while Abraham is asleep. In other words, God takes full responsibility for God's promises. God assumes the liability. The only thing Abraham has to do is believe.

God walks through the sacrifice. God takes the risk. That is surprising.

Hebrews 11:8-12 say this about Abraham: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, without knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the promised land as a stranger in a foreign country. He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

"And so from one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore."

Too many of us use age as an excuse not to serve God. We say we're too old. We've been through too much. We are exhausted, tired, worn out. We can do nothing.

Listen, in a way, you're right. You can do nothing, on your own. But if you believe and trust in God, you can do anything. The story of Abraham tells us, God can do anything with anyone, because God is God, and we are not. God is in the business of surprises.

When you use the excuse that "you're too old," what you are really saying is that God is limited. And that's not true. God can do anything with anyone. A lot of people live thinking they are too old to make a difference. I even hear it in the church. The same voices that say, "I'm too old to teach Sunday School" will also go on and on about how much they love to spend time with their own grandchildren. It makes me wonder. Do we really know God's promises to us? Maybe we need to read Abraham's story again.

You are never too old to serve God. You are never too poor to give to God. You are never too shy to share what God has done in your life. There simply is no excuse you can ever give, because God takes all the risk and takes full responsibility. God made you for a purpose, to love and serve him and to show the world his grace.

By faith, Abraham was changing diapers at 100 years old. Why? Because God took a chance. God took a great risk, surprising an old man who, even though he struggled to believe the promise, went along with it. Abraham took God at God's word.

I, for one, am so glad that Abraham's excuse was declared invalid. Abraham was not too old. This is great news for us. Listen to Galatians 3:6-9:
"Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."
Understand, then, that those who have faith are the [children] of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and

foretold the gospel to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you."
So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith."

According to Galatians (4:28) we are the "children of the promise." We are blessed. Because a 75 year-old man allowed himself to be surprised by God, we can have a life-saving relationship with our Lord, Jesus Christ. Without Abraham, there would have been no Israel. No Bethlehem. No Jerusalem. No cross. No salvation.

Are you willing to drop your excuses, to stop saying that you're too old for God? Let's listen to this song as we reflect.

"He'll Catch You By Surprise" by The Color.