

Amazing Encounters With God

On Sunday we continued to explore ways to deepen our prayer life by studying a famous encounter between Abram and God.

1. Warm-up Question: Jeff began Sunday's sermon by showing two photos. The first was Pastor David's water-starved, drooping basil plants. The second was Pastor Jeff's well-watered Miracle Grow dahlias. Over the past week, have you felt more like David's basil plants or Jeff's dahlias? (Explain your answer.)
2. Read Genesis 15:1-20. The story we just read happened at a confusing time in Abram's life. Things weren't going the way he expected. Abram had long believed that God's plan was to make a great nation of his offspring that would bless all the earth. But he and his wife were aging fast and had no children – not one. So Abram brings his confusion to God, and God speaks into his life.

On Sunday, we identified four key lessons from Abram's encounter with God. The first when Abram prayed, God actually showed up and responded to him with a vision! **Lesson 1: When you enter sacred spaces in your life, do so with an expectation that says, "God is going to meet me here and who knows what may happen!"**

- a. Have you ever experienced a prayer where it felt like God was there in a special and profound way? What happened?
 - b. Generally speaking, how does it feel when you pray? Do you usually feel a strong sense of the presence of God or does it feel like you're talking to a wall? If you experience a strong sense of God's presence when you pray, how would you explain that to someone else? What tips would you offer for feeling God's presence in prayer?
 - c. Hebrews 11:6 says, "Whoever approaches God must believe that God exists and that God rewards those who seek." What do you think that verse means?
 - d. Jeff said, "The mystical presence of God is all around us, just waiting to be tapped into." What's the most mystical experience you've ever had?
3. When God says, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be very great," Abram responds by boldly questioning God. He says, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless." In essence, Abram was saying, "Stop telling me you're going to do something great through me because I don't see anything happening!" From this we drew **Lesson 2: Dare to make your prayers real and raw. Our conversation with God has to be real enough to give voice to our doubts, questions, and concerns.**
- a. What happens when we keep our doubts hidden inside us, refusing to express them?

- b. Why are we so reluctant to express our doubts and questions to God?
 - c. In your own life right now, where do you feel doubts, questions, or concerns? Share with the group the question or concern you would like to express to God. Have you dared to share that question or concern with God? If not, why? If so, what do you hear God saying back to you?
4. After expressing his questions and doubts, Abram listened for God's response. He sensed God telling him to slaughter several animals in preparation for a covenant ceremony. Then Abram fell into a deep sleep and "terrifying darkness." In the vision that followed, God explained the difficult path that would ultimately lead Abram's offspring to become a powerful nation in the land of promise – a powerful reminder to us that the path to God's place of promise and destiny in our life often leads through periods of "terrifying darkness." So instead spending all our prayer time trying to ask our way out of the darkness, we should spend quality time trying to understand the purpose of the darkness and how God wants us to navigate through it. In other words, **Lesson 3: Stop spending all your prayer time telling God what to do and start asking God important questions and listening with your heart.**
- a. The Israelites spent 400 years in "terrifying darkness" in slavery in Egypt. But looking back we can now see that those years in slavery served an important purpose. They gave the Israelites time to grow numerous without being destroyed by surrounding enemy nations. Once they were numerous enough, God released them to move into the land of promise. What period in your life equates to the Israelite's time of "terrifying darkness"?
 - b. Rarely in life do we get to live our Plan A; almost everyone ends up living Plan B. We continually ask God to fulfill our Plan A aspirations, but usually God has a Plan B that turns out better. Tell us about a Plan A aspiration you once had that God replaced with a better Plan B.
 - c. What's the benefit of asking God to help us understand where we find ourselves in life, instead of asking God to give us an easy way out of it? Is that a better way to pray? Why or why not?
5. By listening to God in prayer, rather than monopolizing the conversation with all his demands, Abram ended up experiencing the warm, flaming presence of God in his prayer. Verse 17 says, "When the sun had gone down, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces of the [sacrificial animals]." **That's Lesson 4: When we do more listening than talking, we begin to experience the presence (and power) of God like never before.** Let's try to imagine together ways to pray that feel less like us giving God instructions and more like us discovering God's insight and wisdom. On a practical level, what might that kind of praying look like?