

God's Plan in the Reality Gap

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[0:00] Genesis chapter 11, beginning at verse 27 and reading to the end of the chapter.! Now Sarah was barren. She had no children.

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram. And together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan.

But when they came to Haran, they settled there. Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran. One of the most, I guess, surprising, almost amusing, I'm not sure exactly the right word for it, videos that I saw was of a 10 or 11-year-old girl going down a muddy lane.

And it had really been raining, and so this grassy, muddy lane that she was walking on was covered with mud puddles. And she was hopping from one little mud puddle to the next, making a big splash, as you can imagine.

So here she is, hopping, splashing, hopping, splashing, hopping, splashing. And then she hops and... She completely disappeared into the mud puddle.

[2:01] I don't know what happened, but she just really totally disappeared into this mud puddle. It went completely over her head.

I'm sure it wasn't funny for her at the time, but as you're watching it, it's just so shocking. You can't help but... And unbelievable, you just can't help but laugh a little bit.

Sometimes, though, that happens to us spiritually. We're going through life. We're hopping along, and we fall into a hole.

We disappear in what Ian Dugood calls the reality gap. And when it happens to us, it's not funny. It's not funny, really, at all, when it happens to us spiritually.

So how do you feel when there seems to be a huge gap between what you're experiencing on the one hand and what it seems like the Bible and God has promised, on the other hand?

[3:15] God promises new life. And as you sort of live your life, it doesn't seem all that new sometimes. And it seems like you're struggling with the same problems and the same sins that you did in your old life.

Or you had a vision, a plan for what your life was going to be like. And it wasn't a worldly plan at all. It was a God-honoring plan.

But now it's just falling apart in your hands. Elizabeth Elliott, before she was married to Jim Elliott, worked for a year and a half or so in the jungles of Ecuador, translating or trying to become familiar enough with an unwritten tribal language in order to hopefully eventually translate the Bible into that language.

It was hot. People were sick. Food spoiled. So it was just not a very good time. But she and her little team persevered until the end.

And as they finished up their year and a half, two-year project, they carefully organized all their handwritten notes. They put it into a suitcase. And they're going to start making their way out of the jungle back to the United States.

[4:38] And somewhere along the trip, someone saw the suitcase, thought, hmm, I like that suitcase. That's a good-looking suitcase. And they stole it.

They never saw it again. All their, all of Elizabeth Elliott's work, all the vocabulary, all the vocalization, all the, everything that she had been working on for the past year or so was gone. And there was no way to recover it. That's a good example of what I mean by when we fall into the reality gap.

How could God mean this for good? If God was good and loving, why would he let that happen? It seems so pointless for it to happen.

They were doing something good and they were suffering and they were striving and sacrificing in order to extend God's kingdom, to spread the gospel. And why would this happen?

[5:41] It doesn't make a lot of sense. Now, sometimes the Christian life is like Palm Sunday. Everything's looking up.

The crowds are shouting Hosanna. And they're throwing their clothes and they're waving the palm branches. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. It's success. It's sunshine.

And it's good. It's a lot harder, though, to be a Christian a week later on the road to Emmaus.

So here these two disciples come. No crowds now. There's no cheering now. And they're trudging along the dusty road to Emmaus.

And they're talking to each other in quiet words. And if you were to get close to them, you would hear definite sadness, disappointment, frustration, confusion.

[6:38] They're almost sick with sorrow. Well, we all get there. We all get there at some point. We all get stretched out on this rack.

And we don't understand why we're going through what we're going through. And we all find ourselves eventually on the road to Emmaus. And some of you live a lot of your life there.

Maybe it's sickness. Maybe it's some long, deep sadness, depression. Maybe it's family. Maybe it's something here.

You're frustrated with something here. You're just hopping all along. And all of a sudden, whoosh, down into the mud puddle you go. You're like Job, confused and angry and afraid.

And you say, this isn't what the Christian life is supposed to be, is it? If this was all true, then why would it be like this?

[7:37] Why wouldn't it be different? I just don't see how it can be true. Now, for me personally, sometimes this happens when I'm reading the scriptures.

And I come along something like Psalm 66 for all the earth bows down to you. They sing praise to you. Those are those verses are some of the hardest for me to believe.

Because right now that isn't happening, is it? The whole earth bowing down and singing praise to God. And if it is, I don't see that, at least with my eyes.

How can that be when there's so much evil? And when governments persecute Christians, when there's just outright injustice and terrible things happening, how can the Bible say then that God rules over the nations?

If this is happening. And the point is not for me to put my doubts on you or to sow confusion in your own head. I'm just saying we all get there. And sometimes it happens even from reading God's word.

[8:49] We all disappear into the mud. Well, what do we need to hear then? What do we need to hear then? What do we need to think about? What do we need to consider?

Maybe a lot of things, but I want to think about what Jesus told his disciples. So you're in Genesis. I want you to stay there. But let me read to you what Jesus said.

So he came alongside those two disciples as they were on the road to Emmaus. And Jesus, the biblical counselor, is in session. And listen to what he says. How foolish you are and how slow to heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken.

Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself. So what did those two disciples need? When what God had promised seemed so far away from what was real. What did they need to remember?

[9:53] Well, they needed to remember their Old Testament. They needed to remember. They needed a history lesson. And so Jesus said, look here, friends. Look here. And look here.

These passages are talking about the Christ. And it's here. And it's here. And it's here. And it's over here. He had to suffer. And then enter his glory.

So Jesus' life was stretched out over the same loom as our life. Suffering and then glory. All the promises didn't come true at the beginning.

But by the end, they had all come true. Not one of them was left undone. And Jesus showed them. It says, beginning with Moses.

And that means the Pentateuch. That means Genesis. And it would be hard to imagine Jesus talking about all that the Bible said of him without talking about Abraham.

[10:51] And so that's who we're going to look at for a little bit for some weeks to follow. Abraham's story is about Christ. Isn't that interesting?

Jesus said, all these things talk about me. And so Abraham's story is about Christ. And it teaches us how to live while we are stretched out on this loom of suffering.

And then we're waiting for glory. God, and I guess what we're going to see tonight is that God was at work in Abraham's life.

God was at work in Abraham's life. And he's at work in your life too. When you don't understand, when life is painful, when you're in the suffering and the glory doesn't seem to be there at all, God is at work.

Now, the Olympics are going to be starting pretty soon. And the best athletes in the world are going to be lining up to run, to jump, to swim their way into Olympic glory.

[11:54] And it's funny in a certain way. But few of them, very few of them, are really well known. They sort of become famous for two weeks at a time.

So when was the last time that you watched a professional track race on TV where you said, I want to see who's going to win this professional 100-meter dash?

You know, out there, there's these professional events. And these athletes train and participate in them. And so it's kind of amusing. For the Olympics, for a few moments, we care.

We cheer. We, you know, we're very excited. And then we go right back to not caring about the pole vaulter competitions and not cheering and not knowing.

Meanwhile, what are those Olympians doing? They're training. They're preparing. Only those who have been spending the four years in between the moments of glory are going to be ready to shine when the Olympics come.

[13:01] Only after they've spent hour after hour of getting ready will they be ready to perform. Remember having Sam Rotman here, the pianist?

Do you remember what, how long he practiced every day? Nine hours he practiced when he was younger. Nine hours every day so that he could play all around the world.

The same thing is true in God's service. Like a track coach, like a teacher at Juilliard's, God prepares his saints for what he's appointed them to.

He's always preparing. He's always training them. And in this passage that I had read for you, we see Abraham's preparation and Sarah's preparation.

A lot of times we don't pay very much attention to this little section. Instead, we start at Abraham at chapter 12 and verse 1, the call of Abram.

[14:07] But there's some stuff that went before that. And it's written down. And that's what we want to look at today. And so we're going to first look at Sarah's preparation. And then we're going to look at Abraham's preparation.

I'm not going to go with Abraham and Sarah because if I do, I'm just going to say one thing or the other. And I'm going to get confused. And so I'm just going to say Abraham and Sarah. You know eventually they get there and God gives them a new name.

So we're moving ahead in time. So first, Sarah's preparation. Look at it. You see it in verse 30. Now Sarah was barren. She had no children.

Sarah couldn't have children. And she didn't have children. Why? Sarah didn't know at the time. But the answer is that God had a big, big plan for her.

It wasn't sin. He wasn't punishing her. He had a great work for her. She was going to be the wife of Abraham, the father of the faithful, the paradigm of what it means to be a believer.

[15:19] She was going to be his wife. And she was going to be the mother of this long line of mothers who would eventually one day give birth to the savior of the world.

That's a big plan. And so God has these big plans for her, what he's going to do with her life. And so it took some deep, deep digging in order to prepare her and long waiting for her to be ready.

She was barren. She had no children. And it's almost impossible for us, I think, for us to imagine the ramifications of that, what came of that.

So childbearing in that culture and in most historical cultures was central to who and what a woman was.

It answered those kinds of questions like, who am I? What am I here for? Am I worthwhile? Am I valuable? Do I matter?

[16:27] Being a mother answered those questions in that culture. So to be a mother was the center of a woman's identity. It was almost hardwired into everyone's thought. And so it would have naturally been hardwired into Sarah's thought that.

The what the purpose, the identity of a woman was to be the mother of children. And that centered her identity very much. And it gave her a purpose.

What were women primarily for? Well, it was to give birth to children. It was to have an heir, to raise children.

That was part of where the woman fit into the social setup. This was obviously before feminism and egalitarianism had ever entered into people's minds.

And it's even before a Christian view of women saying they're equal before God. That wasn't there. And so to be a mother gave a woman identity, purpose.

[17:31] It gave her status. Who you were was very much decided on who your children were if you were a mother. Did you have many sons?

Did you have great sons? How many did you have? And so on. So motherhood, it went a long way to answer those basic questions of who am I?

What am I here for? Do I matter? And Sarah had none of that. She had none of that. Year after year passed.

And still no child. And year after year, she got the looks. The smiles. The patronizing smiles.

The feeling sorry for you smiles. Her husband, no doubt, was a great man. And Sarah, though, she was beautiful.

[18:31] But broken. And so it was an extraordinary trial. It was an extraordinary pain. It cut right to the core of who Sarah was.

And it lasted a long time. Now, I want us to see a lesson here. That extraordinary difficulties, extraordinary trials in our lives is God's way of preparing us for his purpose.

We don't see how that is. Sarah couldn't understand as year after year went by what God had planned. But God had planned something huge for her, something great for her.

And so extraordinary pain, extraordinary sorrow, extraordinary trials is a great sign for the Christian that God is at work.

It's like a sign posted at a construction site. And it's posted over our hearts and over our lives that says, God is at work here. Too often we think it's the other way around.

[19:38] He's left me. He won't use me. I'm too broken. God doesn't care. But it's actually just the opposite. So imagine a sword maker.

So imagine you're a sword maker. So your job is to make swords. Now, if you are assigned to make just any old sword, you know, just for some commoner, just for common use, you're not going to agonize over it.

You're not going to go the extra mile. You're not going to take it out again and again and beat on it and put it into the fire and fold it over and over again until it's just perfect.

You'll the sword maker will do just the bare minimum to get the job done. But a sword for a king.

You're going to go the extra mile, aren't you?

A sword for a king is going to take extra work. And brothers and sisters, you are a sword for the hand of the king of kings.

[20:45] And so should you be surprised if he takes you down and he puts you into the fire again and folds you until it makes you until you're soft and then folds you over and over again and takes you out and hammers you and hammers you and then purifies you again and again and again.

So you don't suffer like your neighbors. So your trials are worse and you can objectively look at other people and say, you know what?

My life is harder than theirs. So you don't suffer like your friends. You have the worst of it. Rejoice. Rejoice. God has a purpose in it. God has a plan in it. He's preparing you as a weapon in his hand. And at the right time, he's going to use you.

So Sarah was put into the fire of barrenness. And she was there for a long time. And every look was a hammer blow to her heart. But she became an example for women everywhere.

[21:59] She eventually became the great, great grandmother of the savior of the world. So who can understand God's plans? They're past finding out.

God was at work. He was preparing Sarah in her barrenness. Now let's talk about Abraham. Most of this passage is about the family of Tara.

Tara was Abraham, Abram's father. And although Abram is listed first of Tara's children, if I think if we do some math based on this text and when he moves and then in Acts 7, Stephen talks about us and talks about Abram.

And when he moved, if you do the math on that, it's probable but not absolutely certain that Abraham was the youngest son of Tara. He's listed first because he's the most important one. But he's probably just a little bit older than Lot, who was his nephew. And so they grew up together and Abram was the youngest son of Tara. And you can read Matthew Henry on this to get the gist of the argument.

[23:04] I don't want to go into all the math. But just to say, Abram was probably the youngest son of Tara. He's listed first because he's the most important person. So now Tara is down in Ur of the Chaldeans.

That's like present day about Kuwait. So if you know where Kuwait is, it's on the Persian Gulf. Ur of the Chaldeans was about there. And for whatever reason, it doesn't say.

He decides that he is going to go to Canaan. So present day Israel. Now, a lot of people were moving at that time. I mean, migrations were always going on.

And this was a particularly heavy time for that. And so it wouldn't have been strange for someone in Ur to say, you know what? I'm going. The grass looks greener over in Canaan. So I'm going to go over there.

So Tara takes Lot, his grandson, because Lot's dad has already died. And he takes Abram, his son. And they get all packed up.

[24:00] And they set off from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But they don't make it. They only make it up to about.

So if this is the shape of it, they only make it up to about right here. But they stopped. Again, it doesn't say why. It doesn't tell us anything about it.

Maybe they got tired. Maybe what they were looking for in Canaan, they found in Haran. Maybe they got to Haran and said, Tara said, hey, my son's name was Haran. I'll live here. You know, it doesn't say.

Who really knows? Now, it was apparently, though, nothing extraordinary. It was nothing peculiar. One time my family went on a vacation to Maine. Maine is a long way in a van with all your stuff packed in it.

[24:59] And so we stopped in Vermont. And we stayed in Vermont. Because what we were looking for in Maine, we found in Vermont. It was beautiful there.

There's mountains and there's trees. And so we stopped. Now, there's nothing special about that. There's no extraordinary reason. But you know what? We set out to go to Maine.

And someday I would really like to get there. Because I never have been there. And so the idea is up here. All this time. And someday it's like I kind of want to finish that vacation and get to Maine. That was God's way of preparing Abraham. You see that? You'll see it. They had a failed move. They were going to go to Canaan.

They only made it to Haran. But that put the idea of Canaan in Abram's head. Put it up there. And God was preparing Abram to hear his call.

[26:05] So after some time, God was going to call Abraham to follow him and to go to the place where he was going to show him. But God, at this point, is tuning Abraham's hearing aid, so to speak.

Tuning his ears so that when God called, that thought was already sort of put into his heart. It was already up there in his head. It was a very gentle, subtle, unseen way that God was preparing Abraham for future service.

Now, that's going on all the time in our lives. Some things are extraordinary. Like Sarah's barrenness.

And some things, though, and a lot of things are ordinary. Like Abraham's unfulfilled desire and plan to go to Canaan.

But in the ordinary and in the extraordinary, we see that God is at work. And the big things, the hard things, and the little things that, you know what?

[27:17] We could read through that 20 times and not even think about God at work. It was so subtle. Well, we don't understand everything.

So we're talking about what happens when we fall into that reality gap, when we fall through into the mud puddle. And life is hard. But life is hard, and God is good, and he's at work in our life in those things.

And he's at work preparing us for the future. That's what we see today. God was preparing Abraham and Sarah for the future.

And he's doing the same thing to us. In the big things, and then in the little things. So turn over to Ephesians chapter 2, in verse 10. Ephesians chapter 2, in verse 10.

Now, hopefully you know where this passage fits in. Paul has just been explaining that salvation is all of grace.

[28 : 22] It's all of grace. The only reason that we are rescued from the power and the penalty of sin is because God freely, sovereignly, graciously does it.

And he does it through faith. And that faith is not from ourselves. That, too, is the gift of God. So that it's completely not by works. So that no one can boast.

And then look at verse 10. For we are God's workmanship. His poem. That's where the word poem comes from.

His careful, thoughtful creation. So the sword maker, his workmanship is that fine sword. Well, we are God's fine sword.

His workmanship. Created in Christ Jesus to do good works. Which God prepared in advance for us to do. So God is preparing us.

[29 : 20] That's one thing that we need to keep in mind when we fall into that gap. When things don't make sense. When we don't understand God. We don't understand all the ins and outs of God's ways.

Well, here's some solid ground to walk on. When we are in the dark, God is still at work in our lives. He's still preparing us for service now. And he's preparing you for service for eternity.

I mean, God has a lot bigger plans and ideas in the works than just that tiny sliver of 70 years that we talked about this morning.

His perspective, his planning, his preparation of us is not just for this lifetime. It's for a million, billion years from now. He has eternity in mind.

And so should we be surprised when it gets tough now? He wants us to win forever. So the training, the preparation, the hammering, it's going to be going on all the time in this life.

[30 : 31] And sometimes it's going to be hard. But if we need to keep this in mind that this time of suffering before glory, this time of not understanding all of God's ways and where we're called to live by faith.

It's a time of preparation for now and forever. So. How do you stay strong? How do you stay strong when you're living in that gap?

When what can we learn from this passage? I just want to have three points of application and then we're done. The first is get some perspective.

Get some perspective. What are those disciples on the road to Emmaus need? Well, they needed a biblical perspective of what was going on.

They needed to remember the Old Testament. See, they were caught by surprise because they weren't thinking from the right perspective. They didn't have the Bible in their brains like they should.

[31 : 37] They weren't taking to heart God's words in the Old Testament. And so this is a call when you're in that situation. This is a call for you to get some perspective.

And we begin. I want to do this by by looking at Sarah and Abraham. They have things to show us in their faith and in their failures.

They have some things to teach us. So God is in the really hard trials. We see that today. And God is in the small details of our life. There's not an inch of our life that God doesn't make use of.

That God doesn't change and transform. All things work together for our good. And that means God has the million strands of our life. And he's weaving it all together for our good.

And we need to have that perspective. We don't need to understand how the weaver is doing it. But we do need to understand that he is doing it. So put that into your mind.

[32 : 34] And don't lose it when you fall into the hole. Into the mud puddle. That's first. Second. Stop complaining.

Stop complaining. Philippians 2.14. Do everything without arguing and complaining. It's not just a verse for children. It's a verse for every one of us.

Because it's so easy to start feeling sorry for yourself. And to start complaining. When life seems upside down. And God doesn't seem to notice. God doesn't seem to care.

And we saw that this morning. Isn't that what Israel was doing? Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel? My way is hidden from God. When you don't understand.

And you are confused. And you're reading. Or you're just looking at life. And it doesn't make sense. Be careful that you don't complain.

[33 : 39] Complaining dishonors God. And complaining is unbelief. And I'm not saying this. Just. I'm just not saying.

Just don't do it. I'm saying. Think about what you're doing. When you complain. It's unbelief. It's unbelief in God's love. It comes from thinking.

That Jesus isn't enough. It comes from not. Believing. The gospel. It's not believing the gospel about yourself. Or applying it to you.

So. If we believe. That. What the gospel said. Then we wouldn't complain. Because. The gospel tells us clearly. That we are all sinners.

We are all sinners. Under the wrath. And condemnation of God. We didn't deserve anything. We don't deserve anything. God doesn't owe us an answer.

[34 : 38] He owed us. Wrath. He owed us. Never ending sorrow. Never ending pain. But he loves sinners. And so. He sent. Jesus Christ.

His son. The God man. To take the place. To take our place. Of our. Complaining. Fault finding. Unbelieving. Rebellious. Ways.

He took that. All upon himself. He bore that shame. He bore that transgression. To set us free from it. To forgive us. To wash us. And purify us. From all that unrighteousness. So how.

Christian brothers. Or sister. Can you complain? You're a sinner. You have no right. To complain against God. God has loved you. And sent his own son.

To care for you. And die for you. And love you. So how can you complain? And so when you feel that. Coming on you. The complaining.

[35 : 33] The griping. Stop. It's a signal on the dashboard. Of your life. That says. You're not believing the gospel. You're not believing. What Jesus has done.

It's not. Precious to you anymore. So stop. Repent. And believe. Again. And rest. Your heart. Rest. Throw your anxieties on him.

Throw your sin upon him. And believe in Jesus again. Number three. Thirdly. Cling to God's promises. And cling.

To the God of the promises. Cling to God's promises. And then cling to God. Of the promises. The God who makes these promises.

We've been seeing that in Isaiah 40. They didn't need to know all the explanations. They needed to see how great God was. Didn't they? So when Job fell down the rabbit hole.

[36 : 58] When he fell into the mud puddle. He didn't need an answer either. He just needed to see. The God. Who buckles Orion's belt.

And who puts gigantic blue whales. Into his aquarium. Those are his pets. He needed to have. His view of God stretched again. And so that's your view.

And so what we're going to see. From the life of Abraham. And Sarah. Is that God is big enough. That he's strong enough. That he's good enough. That he keeps those promises.

He's trustworthy enough. So life is hard. And it calls for faith. But God is making it. As easy as can be.

For us to believe. Because he's saying. Look at me. Look at me. Look how big I am. Look what I did. Don't do the things that Abraham did. Believe. When Abraham sinned.

[37 : 52] Believe instead. He's big enough for us to trust him. Even when life is hard. And if you want to get really practical. Can I suggest something?

How about memorizing Isaiah 40? That's your God. That was Abraham's God. That's your God. And we come to know him.

And we learn to live on him. When that word is in our hearts. Cycling through. And the spirit brings it back. Again and again. But if it's not up here.

It's. Going to have a very hard time. Being down here. We're going to have a hard time. Applying it. So. Just a suggestion. Memorize Isaiah 40.

31 verses. July has 31 days. Just thought of that today. So. Let's pray. Our heavenly father.

[38:56] We. We. Confess ourselves to be so small. So ignorant. And yet so. Proud. Sometimes. About what we know.

And about what we think. And about our understanding. And yet. Your ways. Are past finding out. I pray that you would give us faith. As we.

Learn to rest in those things. In your greatness. And I pray that you would help us. As.

You are working on us. It is hard sometimes. To understand. And it's hard to not understand. What you're doing. But I pray that we would cling.

To this promise. That. We are your workmanship. You have created us. In Christ Jesus. And you.

Mean. For us to. To do good works. And you.

[39:52] You've had them planned out for us. Our life isn't. By chance. But it's all under your care. And your. Watchful eye.

Pray that you would. This week. Give us a. Big view of you. Help us to take the things. That we've seen today. And. Begin to live it out. This evening.

And Monday. And Tuesday. And Wednesday. And all the rest of the week. That we wouldn't just be hearers. But then we would be. Doers. And believers. Of your word. And out of that faith.

In Jesus Christ. Out of that hope. We. Would live lives. That are pleasing to you. Strengthen our hearts. We are so weak.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. That you have compassion on us. Like a father has compassion. On his children. And. We are. Weak and needy. Will you please. Have mercy on us.

[40:49] I pray for. Those who. Know much about you. But don't know you. Please. Open their eyes.

They've heard. And they've seen in their mind. But they haven't. Felt the reality. Of sin. And of righteousness. And of the glory of Christ. In their hearts. And so I pray.

That you would make Jesus real. To sinners. This evening. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen.