



A FAMILY BORN: GOD'S HEROES

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Paul Taylor
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One hero can save the world.

We like this idea. It's an idea that you can find all over our culture. I recently watched the movie *Battleship* which was about as silly as I expected it to be. The plot is a familiar one. Aliens invade earth with vastly superior technology, but one man—a lone cowboy type of man—is able to outsmart the aliens and save the planet.

One hero can save the world.

You see this idea in modern day sports: the superstar quarterback or the elite pitcher. You see this idea in politics: as much as we deny it, we expect our president to save the country. You see this idea in companies: this is why Steve Jobs is worshipped—he is credited with saving a dying company and changing the world.

One hero can save the world.

This is a popular idea, but where does it come from? Is it simply an American legend? Is it naïve? Is it narcissistic? Can one person really save the world?

We are in the first few weeks of a church-wide series at PBC called *EPIC: The astonishing story of God and the world*. Our goal during this series is to understand the big story that the Bible tells. Last week we looked at the first eleven chapters of Genesis. That section formed the first of ten eras that we are using to mark off this story as we explore it together. It was the era of creation. We called it "A World Made."

Today we start the second era, what we're calling "A Family Born." Last week the main idea that we came away with was that God created a world with good intentions. He created people that would experience vibrant life, intimate relationships, and connected community. But things fell apart. Genesis chapter 3 through 11 records the tragedy of God's original purposes and how they fell apart. Sin began with a single act of disobedience and then spread to infect everything that God intended for his people. Every story has a problem that must be solved. Last week we saw the problem of the Bible: God's creation doesn't experience what they were meant to experience.

This week we start to see the answer. It's an answer that will unfold through many twists and turns but will eventually lead to an astonishing solution to the problem.

So how does God do it? Surprisingly enough, he starts with a hero. God's plan begins when he picks an individual person and gives him a task to ... save the world. But the way God goes about doing this is different than the way we expect. His hero isn't what we might expect. And his involvement in the story is different as well. God's hero isn't like the lone cowboy of *Battleship* or the superstar quarterback. As usual, our version of what it means to be a hero is different than God's.

As we move through this section, we're going to keep switching back and forth between two perspectives. First, we're going to see this big picture of how God works in the world. We're going to be struck by how he has chosen to solve the devastating problems that we saw last week. We're going to marvel at how different the ways of God are than what we'd expected.

But we'll also be moved to consider our own role in this story. If this is how God works in the big story, what does this mean for my life? How should I expect God to interact with me? What is my role in God's grand plan?

Looking at God's heroes will make us grateful for them, but also long to be like them.

The section we are covering today begins in Genesis chapter 12 and runs through the end of chapter 36. Those chapters of the Bible tell the story of three men: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These men are commonly referred to as the Patriarchs of the Bible. Patriarch is a word that essentially means father or the founder of some line of people. They were the founders of God's people in Genesis: the nation of Israel.

Each of these men have amazing stories. But for our purposes this morning, we're only going to focus on one of them: Abraham. That's his new name that God gave him. At the beginning of the story, he was Abram, then God renamed him Abraham. He's the patriarch and the others follow in his pattern to some extent. To get a feel for what kind of hero Abraham is, we're going to look at

three different scenes from his life. These scenes are going to help us understand how God's plan has unfolded in history and how it continues to unfold today.

So let's look and see what kind of heroes God uses to save the world.

God's Heroes Start Small

The first passage we are going to look at this morning is one of the most theologically significant passages in the Old Testament. Genesis 3 describes the problem that drives the whole biblical story. Genesis 12 reveals God's plan for the solution. Scholars call this the Abrahamic Covenant. It sets the stage for everything that follows in the Old Testament.

Genesis 12:1-4.

¹The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

²"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.

³I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

⁴So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran.

Abraham is a funny choice for a hero. A seventy-five year old pagan whose father was a quitter. In the final verses of chapter 11, we learn about Abraham's dad, named Terah. He tried to leave his home country and go to Canaan. But he stopped. We don't know why he started. We don't know why he stopped. All we know is that God starts something new with his son. God wants to save the world through Abraham.

God's idea of saving the world is to bring it back to what it was meant to be. The final statement of Abraham's instruction, "all peoples on earth will be blessed" brings us back to the first thing God said in Genesis 1:28 to his first created couple whose responsibility it was to bring God's blessing to, "every living thing that moves on the earth."

So God chooses a man to restore the world to the way it was originally created. Do you see the contrast? That's a big goal. A seventy-five year old pagan is a small solution.

There was a TV show on a few years ago called *Heroes* which was all about these particular people with superhuman abilities. One of the main characters was a teenaged cheerleader who couldn't get hurt. In the first several episodes, there was a recurring phrase that was used repeatedly: "Save the cheerleader, save the world." This is a brilliant phrase because of the contrast built into it. Cheerleaders provide entertainment, they energize a crowd, they enhance sports competitions. But they aren't usually world-changers, much less world-savers. But here was this phrase, "Save the cheerleader, save the world." Could a teenaged cheerleader actually be the key to saving the world?

This is the kind of tension that you see in Genesis 12. And this is the first way that God's heroes are different from our heroes. The heroes of our cultures do great things. But God's heroes start small.

God chooses a man to have a family that becomes a nation to save the world. God's purposes start small and they grow. A pebble is dropped into the water and ripples spread out from there. They aren't about big organizations or massive accomplishments. They are about growth, expansion, and development.

We often think of heroes in military terms. They are soldiers who go out into the world and conquer some great enemy. Fighting against poverty or materialism or prejudice. Or fighting for the sake of someone who can't fight for themselves. But God uses the image of a seed in the New Testament to describe his kingdom. Seeds are tiny and they don't do much. But they grow and expand and lead to something more. That's the kind of hero that Abraham is.

Listen to how God speaks to Abraham. He tells him to do one thing: "go." That's the only instruction in this passage. Abraham does one thing. All the other action belongs to God. God says, "I will make you into a great nation," "I will bless you," "I will make your name great," "I will bless those who bless you," "whoever curses you I will curse." He concludes by saying "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." But who does the blessing? Abraham? No. He carries the blessing, but he isn't responsible for it. God is the one who blesses all people.

So God has chosen himself a hero. But Abraham isn't actually the hero of the story. God is going to fix the world. God is going to bless this man. God is going to give him a family. God is going to make that family into a nation. God is going to make that family bless the world. Once again, God is the main character of this story. This is the story of Abraham, but Abraham isn't even the main

character. God is the one who saves the world.

This is helpful to us because most of the time the needs before us seem so huge and insurmountable. That is often what keeps us from getting involved. Where do we begin? How can we start? We know that we can't possibly save the world, so we just give up even trying.

If you want to become part of God's plan, seeing how God calls Abraham is good news. Being a hero in God's plan doesn't mean doing great things. It means doing small things that God asks you to do which have a ripple effect because he is really the one at work.

God asked Abraham to go. What is he asking of you? I'll give you a hint. It might be something small. Some little act of obedience that God will use to do great things. You might not even see those great things, in fact, you probably won't. You aren't going to save the world. God is already in the middle of that. But he just might use something small that you do as part of his huge plan.

God's Heroes Make Mistakes

So God wants to save the world. He picks Abraham to be a hero. How's he going to do that? Well, God's plan is to work through the family of Abraham. But families start with a baby and Abraham is having trouble getting one. He tries a creative solution of having a baby with his wife's maid, hoping that this boy could start his family. He begs God to use that son, named Ishmael, to start his family. But God says no.

Genesis 17:19:

¹⁹Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.

So now we know a bit more about how God's plan is going to play out. It's not going to happen through a half-son. Abraham and Sarah are going to have a baby together. His name will be Isaac. The covenant—the promise that God gave Abraham in Genesis 12—will continue through him. He's the next piece of the man-family-nation-world puzzle.

After some confusion, things are starting to get clearer for God's plan. But just when things are starting to make sense, Abraham does something stupid. We're talking a major mistake—not just a little slipup, but an epic failure. That's the next scene we're going to look at. Here's what

Abraham does.

Genesis 20:1-2:

¹Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, ²and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her.

This is incredibly stupid on so many levels. We find out later that he and his wife had made a deal that anytime they went into a new area, she would claim to be his sister in order that the king wouldn't kill Abraham and steal her as another wife. So they move to a place named Gerar. Sarah claims to be Abraham's sister. So the king in the area, a guy named Abimelech, takes Sarah and puts her in his harem.

How stupid is this? Let us count the ways. First of all, Abraham has been told by God that he is going to be the hero through whom God will bless the nations. So what does he do? He lies to the nations so that they steal his wife. In that culture, it was a terrible offense to sleep with a woman who was married to someone else. So instead of blessing the nations, he is helping one of their kings commit what would be a terrible act even by their cultural standards. This was a stupid thing to do.

Second, this isn't the first time he has done this. Abraham did exactly the same thing a few chapters earlier. God got mad at him, saved his hide, and told him to shape up. So now what does he do? He does it again. This was a stupid thing to do.

Third, what about Sarah, his loving and beautiful wife who followed him from Ur to a whole new land? Hasn't she been through enough? She lies for him to protect his life and then is taken into a foreign king's harem because of it. If I were preaching marriage, this would be a great example of how not to treat your wife. This was a stupid thing to do.

But lastly and most importantly, remember the promise Abraham had received? He and Sarah would have a baby together. He had already tried to go around God's plan by having a baby with another woman. Now he is putting the whole plan at risk. If Abimelech sleeps with Sarah and she gets pregnant, what then? What about God's plan for Isaac? The baby already has a name and Abraham does something to threaten its very existence. This was an incredibly stupid thing to do.

Abraham doesn't seem like a hero. He sounds like a

cowardly guy who can't trust that God will protect him because his wife is too beautiful.

Why would the authors of the Bible include stories like this? It's really counterproductive. But it is actually one of the things that makes the Bible so believable. If you read other religious texts, they rarely describe their hero's failings. The Bible, on the other hand, is full of them. It's one of the things that makes it so convincing. If you were making up a father of the nation of Israel, you wouldn't have him do things that are this stupid.

The narrator describes this in a way that invites us to criticize Abraham. We are meant to see what a huge mistake this is. But I think we're also meant to identify with Abraham. The truth is that I know about doing stupid things. I know about making a mistake, learning my lesson and then finding myself doing the exact same thing not much later. I know about hurting the people who I'm supposed to protect. I know about putting God's plans at risk. Walking away from God. Tuning him out. Pretending that I forgot about him because I just don't want to be bothered.

Sometimes, as Christians, we want to do the right thing so badly that we get terribly afraid of making mistakes. I can't teach children because what if I tell them something wrong. I can't talk to my coworker about God because what if I turn them off? We can't do that risky thing because what if it's a huge mistake?

Here's the great thing about God's heroes. They make mistakes. Lots of them. God's heroes make mistakes.

The reason this is a great thing is because of what happens next in Abraham's story. He does something that risks the whole covenant to save the world. But everything doesn't fall apart. Why not? Because God steps in.

Genesis 20:3-6:

³But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman."

⁴Now Abimelech had not gone near her, so he said, "Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? ⁵Did he not say to me, 'She is my sister,' and didn't she also say, 'He is my brother'? I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands."

⁶Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That

is why I did not let you touch her.

Remember when I said that God is the real hero. This is where we see it confirmed. Abraham, our gallant hero of the story, does something incredibly stupid. So God steps in. God somehow prevents Abimelech from sleeping with Sarah. The text emphasizes that repeatedly. God appears to Abimelech in a dream and explains the situation. Abimelech is horrified by what Abraham has done and returns Sarah to him, along with a bunch of property and money.

God won't let Abraham mess things up. He is faithful even when Abraham is unfaithful. Even the unfaithfulness of his hero can't ruin the faithfulness of God. God persists despite Abraham's unfaithfulness.

This is how Paul puts it in 2 Timothy 2:13, "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself." God is faithful even when we make mistakes.

This is such a relief to me. I'm so thankful to know that I can't ruin God's plans. Sometimes Christians talk this way. It's one of my biggest pet peeves. When people talk this way, they are trying to be motivational, but a lot of times they end up having the opposite effect. They will say things like, "You might be the only Christian this person ever meets." The implication is that if you don't do something, you will singlehandedly ruin the carefully laid plans of the Creator of the universe. But that's not true. God persists despite our unfaithfulness. His purposes continue.

I don't think I could be a pastor if I didn't believe this. I'm sure I do harm as a pastor. I'm sure that I say things up here that aren't helpful. I'm sure that I give bad advice. I'm sure I treat people in ways that turn them away from God instead of opening them up to God. But I believe in a God who steps in and who persists in his purposes. I pray "Your will be done" and I know he answers. That gives me the freedom to jump in and do what I can. I can be a hero as long as I can know that God steps in when I make mistakes.

God's Heroes Have Faith

We've seen two ways that God's heroes are unique. God's heroes don't do big things. They do small things and God does big things. God's heroes make mistakes. Sometimes even spectacular mistakes.

In this last scene, we'll see one last thing about God's heroes which ends up being the single most important thing about them. This is what sets them apart. This story begins in Genesis 22:1-3.

Genesis 22:1-3:

¹Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

²Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”

³Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.

This is crazy. In the last scene we saw Abraham do something stupid that threatened the fulfillment of the promise that God gave to him. Now we're many years later. Isaac has been born: the child of promise. And now we see God doing something really odd. He asks Abraham to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering. First, Abraham's actions did something against God that threatened the promise. Now God is asking him to do something that will destroy the possibility of the promise coming true. It is unbelievable.

The narrator lets us in on the secret right away. He tells us that God is testing Abraham. But we're still surprised by the extremity of the request. Kill the child that is going to save the world. You know the one: your only son, the one you love, just so we're clear about which son we're talking about.

We're surprised by the request, but we're even more surprised by the response. Abraham gets up, saddles his donkey and starts on the journey. This is the same guy that let his wife be put into a harem to save his own hide. And now he simply obeys God. He gets up and does it. In fact, the request is so extreme and the obedience so complete that we can actually be tempted to question Abraham. How was he so sure it was God asking him? Was he really willing to do this?

This is one of the most infuriating stories in the Scriptures. We want to know what Abraham is thinking. But we don't get that information. We get lots of detail about chopping the wood, setting up the fire, all the little details. Except the one detail that we really care about: what was going on in Abraham's head? We found out a lot about what he was thinking when he made his previous decisions and the narrator explained his whole thought process to us. But now we get almost nothing.

I think the story is told this way on purpose. We want to know how Abraham obeyed, why he obeyed, and what led him to such an extreme obedience. The narrator wants us to stop asking all those questions. Our attention is focused on the simple fact that Abraham obeyed God. Even when the request seemed completely crazy, he obeyed.

We'll see what makes that so important in a minute. First, the end of the story.

Genesis 22:9-14:

⁹When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

¹²“Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

¹³Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”

It was a test indeed. God didn't mean for Abraham to go through with it. He certainly waited until the last possible moment though. The knife was literally at Isaac's throat and then God said to stop. The test was over. Abraham had passed the test.

God says to Abraham, “Now I know that you fear God.” He's come a long way from lying to King Abimelech. Before, his unfaithfulness threatened the promise. Now his faithfulness threatened the promise. God asked him to do something that he could not possibly understand. It was confusing; it seemed counter-productive; it seemed like the last thing that could possibly carry forward the purposes of God. And yet, Abraham obeyed.

This week I heard about a story that was published in the “Journal of Experimental Social Psychology.” They showed men pictures of superheroes and then evaluated their self-esteem. It turns out that looking at superheroes inspires you to act like one. Watching Abraham in this

scene can inspire us to great obedience.

But it takes more than inspiration to do something like what Abraham did. We need to have what Abraham had that enabled him to obey like this. At the end of the story, God evaluated Abraham, but Abraham evaluated God as well. He named the place where all this happened, “The Lord Will Provide.” Literally in Hebrew, “The Lord sees” which is sometimes transliterated “Jehovah Jireh.”

In between the parts of the story we read, while Abraham and Isaac were walking up to the mountain, Isaac notices that they don’t have an animal with them to sacrifice. He asks his dad what’s going on. Abraham replies, “God will provide.” Abraham knew this before this test. The test confirmed it and so he named the place “The Lord Will Provide.”

So what enabled Abraham to obey God? It wasn’t his strength. It wasn’t his intelligence. It wasn’t anything that most of our heroes have. Abraham knew what God was like. He knew that God provides. We call that faith. Abraham had faith. God’s heroes have faith.

Abraham wasn’t much of a hero. He didn’t do all that much. But he learned to have faith in God. He learned faith because he saw God step in and redeem his mistakes. He learned faith because he walked with God for years and saw him provide over and over again. Abraham’s faith is what really makes him a hero.

His great contribution was to believe. He believed that his God is a god who provides. That’s why he is the father of the nation of Israel. In Galatians 3:9, the apostle Paul calls him the “man of faith.” He also says that we are blessed like Abraham when we have faith like him.

This is how God’s heroes are really different from our heroes. Sometimes even heroes in our culture start small. Sometimes they even make mistakes. But we look up to our heroes because they are something special. God’s heroes are special because they look up to someone else.

This isn’t really Abraham’s story. It’s God’s story. Abraham plays a role, but the story is about God and what he is doing. Abraham just has faith that God is behind the scenes. Even when God asks him to do something that makes no sense. Even when God asks him to do something that seems like it’s going to ruin everything. Abraham simply keeps having faith.

You might say that you can’t possibly have a faith like Abraham. But that’s missing the point. The power of faith is not how much you have, but who you have faith in.

You can have a faith like Abraham because you can have faith in the same God. This is the God that we are here to worship: the one who provides. We have faith in him just like Abraham. This is our God.

Yesterday, the pastors and elders here at PBC spent a day together praying, sharing, and being with each other. One of the themes that kept coming up was gratitude that God is in charge and that the story of this church is God’s story, not a story that the pastors or elders are writing. I’m really thankful to serve with a team of people who have faith in someone else rather than faith in ourselves.

What you see in Abraham is that his faith enabled him to be faithful. Believing that God provides helped him to act like it, even when circumstances seemed to contradict it. Faith leads to faithfulness.

So what kind of hero was Abraham? He was a hero who started small. He made mistakes. But most of all, he had faith. I pray that God makes us into people of faith.

Conclusion

From this point, the promise moves forward. Isaac becomes the bearer of the new promise. God’s choice of heroes continues to surprise us. When Isaac has children, it is the younger of the two children who inherits the promise. Jacob becomes God’s new hero. God renames him “Israel” and he becomes the father of God’s people. Isaac and Jacob each have plenty of adventures, but the theme of their lives is the same as Abraham’s. They grow to become men of faith.

As I was preparing this message this week, CNN posted a news story entitled, “CNN Heroes 2012.” They highlighted 10 heroes and asked people to vote for the “CNN Hero of the Year.” These are people who are helping teenaged mothers, army veterans, and victims of sexual violence. They have started girls schools, children’s centers, and youth programs. They are doing incredible things.

Our culture wants to look up to heroes. But it turns out that God’s heroes have God as their hero. It is faith, not skill, drive, determination, or anything else that makes it possible for God to use us. Some of you may do great things in the world, but all of us can have faith.

After everything that went wrong in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, now we have a plan. Apparently, it’s not that crazy to think that one hero can save the world. God picks a man to have a family that becomes a nation to save the world. This is his strategy. As the story continues,

we'll see how it plays out.

Next week we'll meet another hero who shows us the surprising way that God will choose to defeat his greatest enemy. Today was the who of the solution. Next week will be the how.

And so we are amazed at the ways of God. One hero really can save the world. When we have faith in God, when he is our hero, we are part of that process. We, too, can be heroes.