

God with us: A covenant-keeping God

A Scripture study from *Caring*, part one of four.

Life is not always predictable, but the recent events surrounding COVID-19 have demonstrated that reality in very tangible, sometimes tragic, sometimes comedic ways.

The weekend before my husband and I left on vacation, we were shopping at Costco. We came to the toilet paper aisle, did a rough estimate of how many rolls we had at home and decided that we could wait until our next shopping trip to buy more—same with laundry detergent. Little did we know then that within the two weeks of our vacation and the unexpected quarantine that followed, that the world would go just a little bit crazy—and toilet paper would become a high-value commodity.

In recent days, as I have watched the news and scrolled Facebook, one thought comes back to me over and over again: The overarching response to the coronavirus pandemic is fear.

Fear is a funny thing. In dangerous circumstances, it ignites our instinctual “fight or flight” response, adrenaline flushes through our system, heightens our senses and makes us ready to protect ourselves from harm. But, fear can also become an enemy in itself.

In Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first inaugural address he said, “This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

Roosevelt came to office in the depths of the Great Depression, and he continued to lead the nation through World War II. He understood that there is healthy fear that alerts us and arms us for safety and preservation and there is unhealthy fear that sucks the life out of us and paralyzes us.

Fear can lead us to make unwise decisions, with consequences that we have not considered.

Fear can cause us to forget or doubt the promises of God and leave us vulnerable to the lies of the enemy.



Behind the scenes

Read what Scripture says in Genesis 12:1-3. God made a covenant with Abram when he called him out of Ur.

- What did God ask of Abram?
- What did God promise Abram?

Abram responds in obedience and takes his wife and servants and flocks and possessions on the road. When we get to Genesis 15, Abram is growing concerned that God is not keeping God's end of the deal.

Read what Scripture says in Genesis 15:1-6.

- What is Abram's charge against God (15:2-3)?
- What is God's response (15:4-5)?
- What is Abram's response (15:6)?

The remainder of Chapter 15 points us to a covenant-keeping God. God commands Abram to prepare a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove and a pigeon for sacrifice, with instruction to lay each half of the animals side by side. In the culture of the day, when two men entered into a covenant with one another they would prepare such a sacrifice, and both would walk through the offerings together. In this instance, it is God alone who passes through the offering (15:17). God made a covenant with Abram, a one-sided covenant.

Enter fear.

Read what Scripture says in Genesis 16:1-6.

This is about 10 years after God made his promise to Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars (16:3). Sarai has an idea, rooted in fear and her own logic.

- What is Sarai's plan?
- What is the outcome?
- What is the unexpected consequence? (16:4)

Sarai's fear that she had grown too old and that God wouldn't keep his promise led her to make a decision that introduced chaos and dissension into her household. And, in truth, it is a decision that has brought chaos and dissension into our world ever since.

- Looking at your own life, when have you allowed fear to rule you and your decision making?
- What were the consequences, positive or negative, that resulted?

God is a covenant-keeping God. Despite Abram and Sarai acting in fear and taking matters into their own hands, trying to fulfill God's promise of abundant descendants themselves, using their own

dysfunctional thinking, God still has a plan. God gives Abram and Sarai new names. Abram becomes Abraham, meaning ancestor of a multitude, and Sarai becomes Sarah, meaning noblewoman. At 100 and 90 respectively, Sarah gives birth to the child of promise, Isaac.

Our fear does not change the character and nature of God, though it does make it difficult for us to see how and where God is at work.

Our fear does not negate God's promises, though it may keep us from experiencing the full blessing God intends.

Beyond the surface

We live in an age when we are saturated with information, some of it reliable from accurate sources, some of it not so reliable from sources that may have an ulterior motive. A brilliant meme that makes the rounds captures the reality: "The problem with quotes found on the internet is that they are often not true (Abraham Lincoln)." Misinformation and wrong focus can easily drive us to be fearful.

So, how do we, as Christ followers, maintain the right focus in uncertain days?

First, remember who we follow. We follow Jesus, the exemplar of hope. We are quickly approaching Resurrection Sunday. Christ who was crucified, dead and buried, lives! And those who are his possess that same resurrection life and power.

Second, think of others. Matthew 22:37-39 says, *"He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'"* (NRSV).

If we become self-obsessed, we become self-protective and we allow a place for fear to set up camp in our heads. If we look outward and find ways to share the love of God with others, in practical and encouraging ways, it helps us to keep our eyes fixed on kingdom values.

This week, consider: What is one thing you can do to share the love of God with another?

Third, we pray and allow God to take away the anxiety and fear. Read what Scripture says in Philippians 4:4-6.

- There are several words that indicate actions that we can take. List them here:
- And, what will God do in response?

Between the lines

Take time to memorize Philippians 4:4-6 this week. In the process, put the words into action in your own life and share their truth with others around you who may not know the God of peace. We live in uncertain days, but we serve a God on whom we can rely absolutely.

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