

"Never Too Old"

Big Buts in the Bible – part #4

Genesis 15:1-18

Welcome. Prayer.

[Slide 1] 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.

[Slide 2] 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.

[Slide 3] I notice that in each case, God's answer always surprises. God says, "You can do this. Do not be afraid. I will be with you." I have good news for you: if you're afraid of what God is calling you to do, you really are hearing God's voice. God's call is always accompanied by a surprising sign or a miracle. And God never calls his people to work alone. Moses had Aaron. Gideon had his army. Peter had James and John. It's like the Bible is telling us, God knows what he's doing. Amazing!

[Slide 4] 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.

[Slide 5] 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 from Houghton to Detroit! 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.

[Slide 6] At the beginning of chapter 15, God is once again announcing his promise to Abraham. And Abraham responds with a question, his basic excuse: "But God, I'm seventy-five years old and have no children. How can you make me into a great nation?" Personally, I think that's a pretty good excuse. It's one thing for God to overcome our fear and stuttering, but how can a 75-year old man start a family?

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 begged to be old enough to ride the rollercoasters? Ironically, when we finally do grow up, we wish we were younger. When I was appointed to my first church, I was 38. A lot of people said to me,

"Wow, you're so young!" After I left, the pastor who replaced me was 31. Who's old now? Age is relative!

[Slide 7] Abraham is surprised because, not only does he think, at 75, he is too old; he also 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."

[Slide 8] God responds by again promising, Abraham will have a son. God tells Abraham, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (Genesis 15:5)

Have you been outside and looked at the stars? On a clear night, 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 Abraham still had doubts and questions.

Abraham asks God again, "How will this all happen? Where is the proof?" I'll bet you've asked God that question before: "How do I know, God?" In each of these stories, God has an answer. In every story we've read, God verifies the call with a sign: a burning bush, a special staff, a fire, a fleece, a great catch of fish. In Abraham's case, there is a special sacrifice.

[Slide 9] Abraham has had a hard day, talking to God and setting up the sacrifice. He even had to fend off vultures. I think the birds symbolize 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 to 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. I suppose, I would also be afraid if I was told, at 75 years old, I was going to have so many children, I couldn't count them all.

[Slide 10] Do you know what happens when you reach the end of yourself? God shows up, in surprising ways. While Abraham is completely asleep, God reiterates his promise, and something amazing happens: "When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces." (Genesis 15:17, NIV)

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."

Yet, where is Abraham during this? Sound 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 comatose. 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 all the risk.

[Slide 11] Abraham's faith is well known in the rest of the Bible. In Hebrews 11:8-12, we read: "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."

[Slide 12] "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."

Aren't you glad that Abraham trusted God? In spite of his excuses? I am. None of us should ever use age as an excuse not to serve God. I guess Abraham was older than most of us here. How, then, can we say we're too old? Have we been through more than Abraham?

[Slide 13] We all have days when we are exhausted, tired, worn out, and feel that we can do nothing. That's true. We can do nothing, on our own. But if we believe and trust in God, we can do anything. The story of Abraham tells us, God can do anything with anyone, because God is God, and we are not.

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. 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.

[Slide 14] 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 we are the "children of the promise." (4:28) 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. No grace.

These are the amazing blessings we have inherited through no doing of our own. It is a gift of God, and the direct result of Abraham getting past his excuses and believing God.

[Slide 15] What about you? Are you willing to drop your excuses, to stop saying that you're too old for God? If you are still breathing, God has a plan for you! And if you've never trusted God, never risked anything for the sake of the gospel before, you are living off of someone else's credit. When Abraham looked up at those stars, one of them was you. What would Abraham think if he saw you today?

Trusting God is not easy, or everyone would do it. Yet, God is speaking to us today, now, saying, "I took all the risk. My son died to save you. Will you trust me? Will you follow where I lead you?"

We are heirs of righteousness. We have been given grace beyond measure. Let us follow our Lord, proving that we are the children of Abraham by the risks we take for the kingdom of heaven.

Memory Verse: Galatians 3:29

"And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

Questions for Reflection:

1. When has age (especially old age) been a barrier for you or someone you know?
2. When has someone made a prediction that seemed impossible, yet came true?
3. Have you ever moved to a new community? How did God provide for you in the transition?
4. Why do you think God chooses common, unknown, and even unlikely people like Abraham?
5. Are you willing to let God work through you?