

Today, we're in one of the most intriguing dimensions of the Abraham story, a dimension with a real challenge or two that defies easy lessons or misleading takeaways—even when we're tempted to do so. So let's look at yoking, and yeah, Abraham yoked with Sarah in marriage, then some key events followed.

But we will take a bit of an unusual path of discovery in order to try to unpack the entire story as clearly as possible. Of course, since virtually every one of us is yoked closely with another person...or maybe on our way to doing so...well, then, yoking and its implications and outworkings is a topic of vital importance to us all. That's true for multiple yokings of varying intensities....and we live in an era of deteriorating and weak yokings between two parties—from marriages to churches to employers to political alliances to patriotism...all the way to faith in God Himself. So, again, what about the yoking of Abraham and Sarah?

So, let's start with a God's-eye view of Abraham and Sarah to ultimately frame the story best—and that's found in Hebrews 11, that "hall of faith" list recounting the faith of key Old Testament followers of God.

And guess what? Abraham and Sarah are two of the very few mentioned by name for their faith in that passage written to the Hebrew Christians. That's not particularly surprising about Abraham...but it might seem so for Sarah! Remember a key part of her story when Sarah was reported older and barren—that is, not able to produce offspring? After a long season living with that and, accordingly, her marriage to Abraham not fulfilling the promise of God for a son...well, then, she embraced a prevalent cultural custom and steered her husband to conceiving a child with Hagar, the household servant.

Of course, we don't know what was in Sarah's heart and mind. But let's recap some facts. Abraham was promised offspring by God. Sarah was barren. The two of them had waited for a long time for God's promise to be fulfilled. And, yes, having children by servants of the household was a custom of their time.

So, for Sarah, was her predicament actually standing in the way of the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham? Was the promise to Abraham real...but not to include her as the mother? Was she perceiving her barrenness as possibly her fault...her sin...a sin that was perhaps blocking God's promise? And what about Abraham's response—his actual agreement to the arrangement of bearing a child with Hagar?

There were other key events to their story. In her early years before her name changed to Sarah, her name was Sarai. She was a half-sister to Abram (later Abraham) and she was also married to him...in those days, intermarriage wasn't detrimental to the offspring of marriages between relatives. And a couple of times, when Abraham was traveling with his beautiful wife Sarah they encountered powerful rulers...and a fearful Abraham deceived the rulers by simply identifying Sarah as his sister, a truth meant to deceive. The rulers took Sarah into their houses...but God revealed the truth to the rulers, protecting Sarah.

But all that raises questions, of course. Abraham clearly did this regarding the woman he was yoked to in marriage, Sarah. And he was jeopardizing her in a very real way. But was the alternative worse...perhaps his death that might make Sarah's situation even more precarious? Was Abraham's connection to God so deep and his faith so strong that he acted in the expectation that God would protect and rescue Sarah?

Oh, that can't be, you might say...God would never cover for deception. Well, how about Rahab, the harlot who deceived her own fellow Canaanites as to the presence of Israelite spies? Well, in Hebrews 11:31, the Hall of Faith again, the passage says, "By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies." Apparently, Rahab was yoked with God in faith in the Israelites' endeavor of occupying Canaan. And so, she yoked with the spies.

Now, as careful Bible readers, we know that works alone are useless before God. But what about works that are truly anchored in faith and in God's purposes? To that end, we turn to an amazing Bible passage where we find specific actions of Abraham and Rahab tied together by the Apostle James (James 2:20-26).

"Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active

along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead."

Well, that truth has been argued about hugely for many centuries...but the fact remains faith alone is the true, anchoring measure in God's economy and the works that truly justify are grounded in faith in God.

And it's extremely interesting that the very specific observation by James about Abraham was about his offering up of his son Isaac on the altar. Now this was a specific instance of works that Abraham was completely ready to fulfill...*but it indeed was clearly based on his faith in God*. Here a key report about that very specific faith, again found in the letter to the Hebrew Christians faith passage at 11:17-19.

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." There you have it! Abraham was so fully yoked with God that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac...yet it was by faith, too, that he "considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead."

That's amazing faith! After Abraham heard from God to offer up Isaac, he rose early in the morning. But I have a question: did Abraham discuss this trip with Sarah? The Bible is silent about that. But can you imagine having *that* conversation with the spouse you are yoked to, for better and for worse? Even more so, can you imagine *not* having that conversation with the spouse you are yoked to? And here Abraham was...traipsing off to literally sacrifice their son!

Bible authorities like to label Abraham's unique arrangement with God as the Abrahamic Covenant. And that's pretty much the ultimate in yoking with God. But wasn't Sarah herself part and parcel of that covenant, her being the mother of Isaac? And yet, it was first and foremost between God and Abraham.

This entire set of interrelated stories points to the trickiness of multiple yokings. And it really indicates the discernment, the wisdom, the flexibility, the support, the grace, and the forgiveness required of human-yoking relationships like marriage. Like the yoking of Abraham and Sarah in marriage...forever recorded for our wonderment. Like the yoking of Jonathan and King David in friendship...amazing us with loyalty that tested other competing family yokings. Like the yoking of John the Baptist to two of his direct disciples being subsumed at John's own instruction to leave him...and to yoke instead with Jesus! Wow.

Here's the deal. Serious, effective yoking requires real work...yes, godly works, *but only those grounded totally in faith*. That's our yoking in Christ in God's new, better covenant that makes the old one obsolete. (Hebrews 8:6). And sometimes, like Sarah, our marriage vows can be gravely tested even by our spouse's *right* connection to God, yes, in *their earnest following hard after God!* And our commitments in other life relationships can include vows prompted by God, too, in order to see things through to the proper ends.

Some might teach that Sarah's urging to Abraham to father through Hagar was a sinful mistake, even a very great mistake unto this very day manifested in international family fights and wars. Some might argue that Abraham shouldn't have ever tried to deceive rulers. And some might say that, if Abraham really understood yoking, he surely would have discussed the sacrifice of Isaac with Sarah before departing. And maybe Abraham did exactly that...but that's not vouched for in Scripture. But, for sure, God has left it to us to consider this: that yoking first with Him and then with others can be a really tricky business requiring a Spirit-led mix of discernment, wisdom, flexibility, support, grace, and forgiveness.

But first and foremost—like Abraham—we absolutely must be yoking with God! *That's the New Covenant in Christ Jesus!*

A&A: Application & Action

1. Surely one of the most famous marriages ever was the yoking of Abraham and Sarah. But the truth is, their marriage was strongly tested by the faith necessarily inherent in the unfolding of events in the Abrahamic Covenant. Like Sarah, has your marriage or that of someone you know been tested by a spouse who was working dutifully to rightly follow God in the events of their life (like Abraham was)? Discuss.
2. Have you found yourself rather wearily supporting someone you are yoked with in family or workplace or church...and doing that for a very long season? What insight can you give in doing that faithfully?
3. How about you personally...have you been very tempted to give up the costs of and continuing investment in a long-standing promise God has given you? And especially that inclination when you can see the burden that is incessantly putting on others yoked with you? Discuss.