

HOW TO OVERCOME THE ENEMIES OF OUR FAITH (Genesis 12:10-20; 15:1-6; 16:1-4)

Through the years, there have been a few blockbuster movies released on my birthday. It was *Caddyshack* in 1980. In 1997, *Airforce One* came out on my birthday. Let me tell you about a movie that was released 20 years ago on my birthday—July 25, 2003. It was nominated for 7 Academy Awards including Best Picture, but it had the misfortune of being released the same year as the last installment of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy which won all 11 Academy Award nominations it received, including Best Picture. The movie that lost again and again to *The Return of the King* in the 2004 Academy Awards was *Seabiscuit*.

You might have seen it, but it's been 20 years. I can barely remember movies I watched 20 days ago. Let me refresh your memory. The movie was set in 1938. Our nation was still in the throes of the Great Depression. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was in the second year of his second term. Hitler was making waves in Europe. World War II would begin the next year. The most famous news story of that year, however, had nothing to do with President Roosevelt or Adolph Hitler. The story that gripped the heart and imagination of a nation was about a racehorse named Seabiscuit.

Although champion racehorses had sired Seabiscuit, he was thought to be too small to be a winner. He was abused by his trainers and subsequently sold by his original owner.

Charles Howard, a self-made millionaire car salesman and new to horse racing, decided to take a chance on the colt. He also took a chance when he hired Tom Smith to be his trainer. Smith was an out of work cowboy, but Howard saw within him a man who had a special way with horses. Howard went even further out on a limb when he hired Red Pollard to be his jockey. At 5'7" Pollard was thought by many to be too tall to be a jockey. He was an odd match for a horse that was considered too small.

Nevertheless, under Smith's watchful eye and Pollard's determined efforts, Seabiscuit became a winner. After winning numerous races on the West Coast, Howard wanted to race Seabiscuit against War Admiral who had recently won the Triple Crown. Eventually, the race was set to be run on War Admiral's home track—Pimlico in Maryland. The legendary Man O' War had sired War Admiral, and he was considered unbeatable. He towered over the diminutive Seabiscuit, and his greater stride length alone should have made him the uncontested winner. But Seabiscuit surprised the critics by winning with a four-length lead before a sell-out crowd and while 40 million Americans were listening to the race on the radio.

Seabiscuit became a symbol of hope for millions of people in our nation who saw themselves as "the little guy." The movie likened the struggle of Seabiscuit and his team of outcasts to the struggle of ordinary Americans who were seeking to overcome the hunger and joblessness that characterized life during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

In two poignant scenes of the movie the same line is repeated. Early in the movie, Howard asked Smith why he bothered rescuing a lame horse that would have been destroyed because of a broken leg. Smith answered, "You don't throw a whole life away just 'cause it's banged up a bit."

Later in the movie, Pollard, the jockey, loses a race he should have won. He confessed that he lost the race because he is blind in one eye making him unable to see the horse that passed him on his blind side. He concealed his blindness because he was afraid that the track officials wouldn't allow him to race.

Smith urged Howard to fire Pollard. When Howard refused to do so, Smith demanded to know why. Howard calmly replied with the same words that Smith had previously spoken to him, "You don't throw away a whole life just because it's banged up a bit."

Have you been banged up by life? Don't throw in the towel; don't throw away your future just because your life bears the bruises and scars of previous falls.

The good news is that God made you to be an overcomer. In 1 John 5:4 we read, "For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith." The secret to overcoming is your faith in God.

I want you to know then when you overcome, like Seabiscuit, you will be an inspiration to others. When others see you emerge on top, they will say to themselves, "If he can overcome his failures, if she can overcome her past, I can overcome the heartaches of my choices and the hurts of my childhood."

Last week we began looking at the life of Abraham. We saw that when God called Abram to go to the land that God would show him, Abram didn't quibble; he didn't argue; he didn't question or make excuses. He went; he went by faith.

Likewise, God wants us to journey with Him through life by faith. In our journey of faith, however, we will, most certainly, face opposition. Sometimes, the source of that opposition comes from the outside. Satan seeks to deter us from pursuing God's will. The world attempts to sway us into following its agenda. While we do experience outside opposition, it may be that we will face even more internal opposition. We are often our own worst enemy when it comes to living a life of faith. We end up sabotaging ourselves.

In today's message, we are going to focus on overcoming our enemies—the inside enemies of our faith. I will layout a two-step process for winning the victory over the barriers that we ourselves erect that serve to hinder us in our walk with God.

Step #1: We Must Identify Who Our Enemies Are.

We can't defeat an enemy until we know who the enemy is. We can't target the enemy until we know where he is.

In Abram's life, we can easily see two chief enemies that he faced and that we face, too. **The first enemy is our fear, and the second enemy is our flesh.**

Our fear causes us to doubt or flatly deny that God can meet our needs or even accomplish in our lives what He has promised. Our fear claims, "God can't protect me; God won't provide for me; God is either unable or unwilling to do this thing I want this thing I need."

In response, our flesh says, "Since God can't or won't do this, then I will have to step in to make it happen." The motto of the flesh is, "If it's going to be it's up to me." The flesh attempts to assume the role of God in our lives by trying to accomplish what God alone should do and can do.

Our fear and our flesh are really two sides of the same coin. Where you find one you will find the other. **Our fear says, “God can’t.” Our flesh says, “I must, and I will.”**

We see Abram’s fear and flesh exhibiting themselves at two distinct times in his life. The first time is found in Genesis 12:10-20. Before we look at those two verses, we need to notice v. 8. In that one verse we see two things that Abram had. He had a tent, and he had an altar.

Metaphorically, every Christ-follower needs those two things. The value of a tent is that you can easily move whenever God calls you to go from where you are to where He wants you to be. The problem is that we don’t want to live in a tent. We want to live in a house, and we like our house; so, we don’t want to move. We want to find ourselves a comfortable spot and stay in that comfortable place. We want to sink our roots deep.

There is nothing wrong with setting down roots. The problem is where we set them. We are instructed in Colossians 2:6-7 that we are to be rooted in Christ. When you are rooted in Christ, you naturally move with Him when He moves. When, however, you are overly rooted in your culture, your career, your community, or even your church, you will find yourself unable to move when He moves. Those things will hold you fast and keep you from going with God.

Spiritually, we need to live our lives as though we were tent dwellers, ready at a moment’s notice to go with God when He calls.

Do you remember the show MASH? Those letters stood for Mobile Army Surgical Hospital. Such a hospital was not a brick-and-mortar hospital. Instead, it was made of tents. It was meant to move as needed.

Likewise, we are to move as God calls. Don’t get too-tied to this world and where you are presently. God just might want you to move; you need to be able to say “yes” to Him.

The second thing Abram had that we need is an altar. An altar is a place where we go to meet with God. Do you have such a place where you can meet with God? It might be your kitchen table, or your bedroom, or your office, or your closet. It is a place where you pray, read His word, and meditate upon it. It is a place where you can talk to God, and He can talk to you. Make sure that you erect an altar and you use it.

The only bad thing about a tent is that you might be tempted to pick up stakes and move when God hasn’t called you to do so. That is what Abram did. Look at 12:10. Abram was where God wanted him to be. He was in the land that we call Israel. While he was there, the unexpected happened. A famine hit. The rain didn’t come, and thus the crops didn’t grow, and because the crops didn’t grow, the food was scarce. I want you to notice that nothing in our story indicates that God called Abram to move from where he was.

Apparently, Abram was afraid that God wouldn’t be able to provide for him and his family in the face of the famine. That was his fear. Fear is the first enemy of faith. As a result of his fear, his flesh kicked in and he reasoned, “Since God can’t provide for me, what I really need to do is move south—to Egypt.”

Abram’s fear not only said, “God can’t provide for me,” it also said, “God can’t protect me.” Notice 12:11-13. Although Abram’s wife Sarai was 65 years old, she could still turn heads. Abram was fearful that the Egyptians would kill him in order to have his

wife. To protect his own life, he instructed Sarai to tell everyone that she was Abram's sister. It was a half-truth. Sarai and Abram had the same father but a different mother. A half-truth, however, is a whole lie. Abram meant to deceive people in order to insure his own protection. Of course, he wasn't doing much to protect Sarai either. This was not his finest hour. In vv. 14-16 we see that Pharaoh's officials notice Sarai's beauty, and she was taken to be part of Pharaoh's harem.

When we act in the flesh and try to do for ourselves what God alone can do and wants to do, we should not be surprised when our plans backfire and we end up endangering the people close to us.

Fortunately, for Abram's sake and Sarai's, God stepped in and righted the situation. The first three words of v. 17 are significant words—*But the Lord*. Our flesh will always get us and others in trouble. But the Lord is the One, the only One, who can step in and bring order out of a disordered situation.

The sad thing is that our fleshly actions bring dishonor upon the name of our God. When the Egyptians realized what Abram had done, they sent him away. Sadly, they had a greater sense of morality than Abram seemed to have, and they were the ones who worshiped idols. It is tragic when the world acts more righteously than do believers. When that is the case, our faith holds no attraction to others, and the cause of Christ is hampered. God may rescue us from our own foolishness, but we will end up soiling both our reputation and His in the process.

Let's look at one more instance in Abram's life when he allowed his fear and flesh to win the victory over his faith. Look at Genesis 16:1-4, 15-16. Eleven years had passed since God had appeared to Abram in Haran and had promised Abram that He would make him into a great nation. Still, Abram has no children. By now his wife Sarai is 75 or 76, has never had children, and it appears that the childbearing years are over for her. Abram fears he will never have children unless he helps God out somehow. Surprisingly, it is Sarai who comes up with the plan, and Abram agrees to it. Abram should have said, "No, let's let God decide how He wants to fulfill His promise," but he didn't.

He made the same mistake that Adam made. Both men knew what God said, and both men failed to do the right thing. Don't bow to peer pressure, even if that pressure comes from your spouse. Don't bow to your fear or your flesh.

It is interesting to note that it was through Hagar that Abram fathered Ishmael, and it was through Ishmael's line that the Arabs came. Later, Abram had a child with Sarai. That child was named Isaac, and through Isaac's line came the Jews. Abraham was the father of both the Arabs and the Jews. While both those peoples regard Abraham as their father, they have been at war with one another ever since Ishmael's little brother was born.

Just as the child of flesh and the child of promise conflicted with one another, it is also true in our lives that our flesh and our faith war with one another. Our flesh feeds upon and is fueled by our fear. In a moment we will look at how we are to strengthen our faith, but the first step to gaining the victory over the enemies of our faith is identifying who the enemies are.

We have identified two chief inner enemies—our fear and our flesh. Our fear cries,

“God’s can’t.” Our flesh asserts, “I will.”

Some of you might say, “My problem is not that I fear God can’t; my fear is that I can’t.”

- You are afraid that you can’t live the Christian life God wants you to live.
- You are afraid that you can’t succeed in serving God with the spiritual gifts He has given you.
- You are afraid that you can’t even live up to your own expectations much less God’s.

The Bible teaches that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. When you say, “I can’t,” you are revealing more what you believe about God than what you believe about yourself. You are saying, “My God isn’t big enough to make up for my weaknesses and my inadequacies.”

If I had the time, I would rehearse for you the story that is found in Dr. Spencer Johnson’s wonderful, little book *Who Moved My Cheese*. If you’ve never read that book, I would encourage you to get a copy and read it. It helps us look at how we deal with change. One of the things it teaches us to do is to ask ourselves the question: “What would I do if I weren’t afraid?”

If you had no fear of failing, no fear of messing up, no fear of embarrassing yourself, no fear of going bankrupt, what would you do? If you truly believe God is leading you in a certain direction, then do what God is calling you to do.

After identifying who the enemies of our faith are, there is a second step we are to take in order to overcome these enemies.

Step #2: We Must Employ the Weapons at Our Disposal.

The country of Ukraine knows that to win a war, you must have weapons powerful enough to get the job done.

God has provided us with weapons sufficient for the fight we face. What are those weapons? Look at Genesis 15:1-6. I find within these verses two weapons. The first is **the voice of God**, and the second is **the character of God**. That means we need to know what God says and who God is.

According to v. 6, “Abram believed YHWH.” Why did Abram believe God? Look at v. 1a and v. 4a. The word of the YHWH came to him. God spoke to him. God uses His word to create faith in our hearts. Paul testified, “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17).

Are you seeking to hear the voice of God? If you are going to be strong in your faith, then you must know what God says. So, where will we hear God’s voice? In Scripture? Most definitely! Everyday we need to search the Scriptures because in them God has spoken, and through them He still speaks.

There are, however, additional ways that we can hear God’s voice. One of my favorite books is Ken Gire’s marvelous book, *Windows of the Soul*. In the first chapter of that book, he wrote:

We reach for God in many ways. Through our sculptures and our scriptures. Through our pictures and our prayers. Through our writing and our worship. And through them He reaches for us.

His search begins with something said. Ours begins with something heard. His begins with something shown. Ours, with something seen. Our search for God and His search for us meet at the windows in our everyday experience.

These are the windows of the soul . . .

But we must learn to look with more than just our eyes and listen with more than just our ears, for the sounds are sometimes faint and the sights are sometimes far away. We must be aware, always and in all places, because windows are everywhere, and at any time we may find one.

Or one may find us.

God can and does speak to us in a myriad of ways. He may speak through a story, or a painting, or a piece of poetry. God's voice may be heard in a scene from a movie or one from our dreams. His voice may be discerned in an experience with others or in an experience with nature.

Now, don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that a movie or a book or a dream are on the same par as the Bible. Nothing can replace or trump the Holy Scriptures. The Bible alone is inspired and infallible, and we need to consult it daily. That said, God can get our attention through other means if He chooses to do so. I am convinced that God speaks far more often than we listen.

God spoke to Abram, and what did He say? Look again at v. 1b. God spoke about Himself. We will conquer our fear when we know what God says and when we know who God is. One of the best ways to discover the character of God is to read the names of God in the Bible and then reflect on whether and how God has shown Himself to be that in your life. For instance, In speaking to Abram God refers to Himself as *a shield*. Has God shown Himself to be a shield in your life? God said He was *a very great reward*. Do you view God as a reward of great value? Abram addressed God as *Sovereign Lord*. Is God sovereign in your life? Is He the one in control?

Do you remember the old game show *Let's Make a Deal*? It ran from 1963 to 1986 with Monty Hall as its host. You might remember that audience members would dress in outrageous costumes hoping that they might be selected to participate in the show. If they were chosen, they would be given something, usually money, and then be asked if they wanted to trade what they had been given for a hidden gift. The hidden prize might be of more value, but it might be something of no value. They had to make a choice.

The final segment of the show featured the Big Deal. The Grand Prize was to be found behind one of three doors: Door #1, Door #2, or Door #3.

Every believer faces three doors. If you look closely, you will be able to see that these doors are labeled. One door is Fear. Another door is Flesh. A third door is Faith. Believer, choose wisely. I can't tell you exactly what is behind the door of faith, but I can tell you that it is always worth it. Choose to live and walk by faith. That is where God's blessings are found; that is where God's blessings are experienced.