



the narrative of grace

#2 A Family Narrative



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Courage Church

My dad grew up in Cleveland.

Like every little boy who grew up in Cleveland, he adored the Cleveland Browns. The first year he ever started caring about football was 1964, and to everyone's amazement, the Browns beat the Colts 27-0 in the NFL

championship that year, in what will forever go down as one of the biggest upsets in football history.

He followed them every year since then, as they would rise only to fall, again and again.
Every single season.

And though my Father always lives with a hopeful expectation that the Cleveland Browns will one day rise again, a move to Michigan eventually found him rooting for the Lions.

Not any better. Our Lions once had arguably the best running back ever, and he retired because they refused to trade him, and he was sick of losing. We all know how this season is going so far.

Both teams have an absolutely fascinating history of disappointment. To this day neither has played in a Super Bowl.

Another man named Scott Entsminger grew up much like my dad, only he stayed in Ohio. He loved the Browns, and held season tickets each and every year, and each and every year showed up with that same hopeful expectancy, and like a routine workday that never changes or a broken record that plays the same song over and over again, each year ended in a broken heart.

he did what he could to contribute to the team by writing and sending them a new song every year, along with his advice on how to run the team.

He took the Browns very, very seriously.

So seriously, that when he passed away in July of 2013, his obituary actually included the Cleveland Browns.

"He respectfully requests six Cleveland Browns pall bearers so the Browns can let him down one last time."

Do you ever feel that way?

Waiting for the day when for once you do not feel let down by the ones who are suppose to always be there for you...

You expect things to change, but they never do.
You expect God to show up, but he never does.
You expect to be married by now, or to be out of debt by now...

but you find yourself here today, still waiting.

And you wait in faith anticipating the hollywood ending we all love to watch and have come to expect to play out in our own lives... when something amazing happens at the last second and changes everything,

but it doesn't end that way.

And then come the Holidays.

Thanksgiving.
Christmas.

The most wonderful time of the year... For some.
The loneliest time of the year, for others.

And once again we are blasted with the music and commercials and the TV shows and the children's books that remind us of how magical everything is supposed to be, and of the impossible standards and expectations that it sets, only for the day to come and it not even snow.

Or you didn't do enough for your kids.
Or you didn't even see your kids.
Or you could not make it home.

Even with the impossible standards and expectations,
I still love Christmas.

I remember last year living in Brooklyn, every morning I would walk my daughter Milly to school, and on Court street around the corner from our house there was a tiny Christmas tree lot. And every day as we passed it I would make her take in the smell of the trees, and we talk about it.

It's one of the ways we try and teach our kids about the wonder of God...
By letting them experience the wonder of his creation, like the way a cut down Christmas tree can fill an entire city block with an aroma that fills people with a sense of nostalgia, and sparks excitement in the hearts of the young for the coming Christmas.

So every time we passed the trees, we smelled the trees. We talk about the trees.

We took in and enjoyed the trees, and it would get us excited for the wonderful and exciting days that were ahead of us.

Its not hard for me to see God in Christmas.
Christmas never let me down.

Maybe some of you fail to see to beauty in it all, all the joy and happiness and marketing when the reality is we live in this incredibly unjust, unequal, unfair world where some people want to fight about red cups while others are being killed for their faith or just for being in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

maybe you have struggled with your past, and how to reconcile what you have done, with the message of Christmas.

And before I say another word this morning or get into a single scripture I want to tell you this: God may not erase your scars, but He will breathe new life into them if you let him his Christmas.

Because the most beautiful thing about Christmas is that God does show up.

If you would open your bibles up to Luke chapter 1:46-56.

After that we will spend most of our time bouncing around in Genesis, but there is no better place than to start than here.

The first chapter of Luke records a song that Mary the mother of Jesus sang called **the Magnificat**.

She had just met with Elizabeth who was pregnant with John the Baptist, and Elizabeths baby leaped in her womb at the very presence of Jesus. And then Mary sings this song.

This is the Magnificat:

Mary's Song of Praise: The Magnificat

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

56 And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.”

We are in a series called “The Narrative of Grace” and the entire series is a look through the genealogy of Jesus Christ as recorded in the gospel of Matthew.

The reason that I just read you Mary’s song, “The Magnificat,” is because it is an incredibly important, often overlooked part of the Christmas story. One of the first things that she says, essentially, and its so powerful, is that God is doing something, and it is going to bring injustice to its knees. I love how it says “He will fill those we are hungry with good things, but the rich he will send away empty.” This is not because it is bad to be wealthy... It is just like we talked about last week, Jesus has come for the ones who are hungry. They know that they need him and so he feeds them. It is the ones who think that they have everything figured out all on their own, because of what they have gained in their own lives, and in their own strength, that God is literally unable to work through. But Mary’s song is saying that no matter what you think you have or don’t have, God is going to level the playing field. If you hold what you have, you will lose it. Because He is God. and he hates injustice.

We will look at this song a little more in depth later in this series, but the part we are going to focus on today is the last part of the song.

what Mary was saying was this: The promise that was passed down from generation to generation is finally coming to pass.

and that promise was made to Abraham, for the first time in Genesis 12 and affirmed through the next several chapters in Genesis. That promise said that from Abraham’s seed, all of the families of the earth will be

blessed. He promised a man with no children that he would be the Father of a great nation.

But Jesus' genealogy in Matthew recorded 42 generations between that promise and Jesus birth. That is a lot of waiting. A lot of stories from Father's being passed down to their sons for generation after generation. A lot of people thinking that the savior would come in their generation, only to watch their fathers who believed the same thing, pass away, and realize that their time was coming next.

It was 42 generations of disappointment.

It probably was beginning to feel more like a fairy tale than a reality.

But what Mary's song says is essentially that grace is about to break through the broken genealogy, and the promise to Abraham will finally be fulfilled.

But at the beginning of the genealogy, God had another promise to fulfill.

Because Abraham could never be the Father of a great nation if he wasn't a Father at all.

Now Abram was already 75 years old when he received this first promise. That by his seed, everyone will be blessed. And it was a pretty big promise to a pretty strange recipient. Abram, his birth name, means "exalted Father." But having no kids, that made no sense. When God later changed his name, he gave him the name Abraham, which means "Father of a multitude." God was making some pretty big promises to a pretty unlikely candidate.

Abraham was already an old man, as was his wife, Sarai. To make matters more complicated, Sarai was barren. They had no children, and no physical way that they ever would. Not only was she beyond child bearing years, but she was incapable even her prime of becoming pregnant.

Three chapters later, (Genesis 15:1-6) God brings Abram outside and tells him to (v5,6) **"Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are**

able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” ⁶ And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Abram, you are about to be the Father of a *very large* family.

That is an incredible promise, especially for someone, who has no offspring.

and its a promise that Abram believed. Notice what it says... Abram BELIEVED, it was counted to him as righteousness. He didn't say a fancy prayer... He didn't change everything about his life and turn into this perfect version of himself... No, in that instant and it was counted to him as righteousness.

He just believed.

But you only have to go one chapter ahead to see His faith begin to waiver again. and suddenly, he and Sarai agree that the best way to see Gods promises fulfilled, is to help Him with them. So Abram, at his wife's suggestion, sleeps with Hagar, their maid servant.

Sarai said that “she would obtain children through Hagar.”

Because God wasn't moving fast enough. Because the timeframe wasn't ever given along with the promise... and the very faith that saved Abraham suddenly caused him to fall into unbelief. The thing that he believed would happen he believed he had to make happen.

He believed that God was going to give him a child. He just didn't believe it would be with Sarai. With the wife that He had chosen. With the life partner that God had given him. Now, we don't have time today to get into Ishmael, but a great nation was built from Him as well. Abraham took matters into his own hands, and suddenly through two separate mothers, two nations would be established and to this day they still are at war with each other.

But what happened is, after this happened... after Abraham had a child with Hagar... Sarai became a pretty bitter person.

She probably wasn't very pleasant to be around. Because everything that she had ever been told was turning out to be a lie. The God that her and her husband had given up everything for had not come through, and the only child that God gave her husband, wasn't even through her. But in reality, the promise, at that point, had only been given to Abraham. Until Genesis 18.

The Promise to Sarah

Genesis 18 records a story about three strangers who come into Abraham's tent... Travelers passing through. In reality, one of these strangers is the Lord... but the bible says that suddenly Abraham looked and there were three men standing there.

So Abraham meets these strangers and immediately goes out of his way to make them feel at home. To entertain them like they were his own family. He brings them water and gives them shade and washes their feet and brings them bread and bakes them cake. He ran and found a good calf and asked one of the young men to prepare it. (Gen. 18:1-8)

All for men that he had never seen before.
That he did not know.

He shows them grace. Right where they are. Strangers in a foreign land, and Abraham wasn't sure what they had, but he knew what he had. So he gave it to them.

Because that is how you are supposed to treat strangers when they come into your life. The writer of Hebrews (13:2) later put it this way "Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without knowing it!"

This verse and verses like Matthew 25 have to be life verses for Courage Church. This has to be the blood in our veins because the gospel is completely and entirely *inclusive*.

We need to share MORE meals with people that we don't know. We have been saying this same thing since the moment that we got to Detroit and that is this: There is only one ministry that is actually given in the bible, and that is the ministry of reconciliation. Reconciling people to Jesus Christ.

One fascinating thing I learned not long ago, was that the Hebrew, word for reconciliation is the *same word* as the word for table.

In fact, there is found, throughout the Narrative of Grace in the old testament, several moments in which a meal of reconciliation takes place. Abraham has one. Jacob has one. David has one.

Its just like in the New Testament when the prodigal son returns, what happens? They throw a huge party, they kill the fatted calf, and they eat a great meal.

If this is your first time here today, we want to welcome you. We want to let you know that we are here for you! Please let us know if there are ways that we can help you or serve you.

Maybe you just came because you heard there was going to be Turkey... and Tamales... and my wife's unbelievable seven layer salad. And its going to be amazing. But we wanted to bring you here to feed you and to tell you that we may not know you, but we love you. And we want to be a place that you think about if you ever find yourself in trouble. If you ever find yourself needing grace, and not knowing where to turn... we want to be a place that offers that to you. We want to be a place that offers you friendship, and hopefully, by the grace of God, we want to be a place that offers you hope.

Where you come from does not matter.

This is a place where your socio-economic status does not matter.

Your skin color does not matter.

What neighborhood you live in does not matter.

What you do for a living does not matter.

This jacked up mindset that says that where you come from separates you from someone else in a positive *or* negative way... that has no place in this community and should have no place in any Christian community.

Galatians says (Galatians 3:28) "In Christ we are neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, male or female. We are all one." and everyone matters.

Hospitality matters.

The least of these matter.

The stranger, matters.

And look at what that hospitality opened up for Abraham in his life!
Because these guys were strangers, and he invited them *in*.

And they confirm, that this promise will actually come through Sarah.

Genesis 18:9-15:

⁹ They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." ¹⁰ **The Lord said (all of the sudden, He is talking to the LORD... He was entertaining the LORD)**, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and **Sarah your wife (not Hagar, your servant this time)** shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" ¹³ The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴ **Is anything too hard for the Lord?** At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." ¹⁵ But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh."

Now, God had promised all of these things, already, to Abraham. But this time, through these strangers, God told him so that Sarah could hear.

But You see by this time Abraham was 99. He was one year shy of 100. Ishmael was almost a teenager. Sarah was 90.

So when the bible says that Sarah laughs... I don't think it is saying that she was happy about hearing it. Because why would God have confronted her on that?

No. She had been hearing this for 25 years. She laughed because as far as she was concerned, she was done hearing this. It was the same garbage her husband had been feeding her barren year in and year out. It had taken to much of a toll.

But God was bringing GOOD news.

And she laughed. And that was troubling to God because the laugh was not a happy laugh... it was a "yeah right God, we have heard this before for the last 25 years laugh." it was a "this is never going to happen, stop trying to get us excited about nothing laugh."

This was a "the only child we will ever have came from an illegitimate relationship because you promised us something you couldn't deliver" laugh.

This was a "God is not big enough to actually do the impossible, *for me*" laugh.

This was a "I have stopped believing in this fairy tale" laugh.

This was a "God, you never actually show up for us," laugh.

But look at how God responds to her cynical, skeptical, even angry laughter:

"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

The Hebrew word used here for "is anything *too hard*?" is the word "*pala*'" (pa-lah) and it literally means "wonder."

He is telling Sarah, "your laugh lacks wonder."

She was laughing, wrong.

But God was saying to her, “I can restore your wonder.”

and that is huge.

Because I think that most of us that have lost our faith that God is actually going to show up in our lives, started by losing our wonder for life in the first place. Because we stop letting the smell of Christmas trees take us back to a time that we were young and we thought that we could do anything, or be anything, or go anywhere. Because we have become so caught up in our devices that we let other people be creative for us... We let other people dream for us. And we become content going through the motions in life, that consists of Siri telling us how to get where we are going, and then we don't even look around on our way there.

I have seen it happen so many times. Peoples spirits just seem to die as their lives don't pan out the way that they believed that it would... and even success feels like failure because success can buy you Siri and it can buy you a nice car... But only wonder will put you in that car and on a journey to nowhere... Only wonder will get you in that car heading South as far as you can go, and then west as far as you can go, with no destination really even in place to remind you that life is about the journey. and that every last step that God allows you take take on that journey is grace.

Sarah had lost her wonder, and before long, she had lost her hope.

and she heard a promise from God himself and it sounded like all the other promises that her husband had given her and by the time she heard it from the one and only true God himself, she was already numb.

But God knows how to break through the numbness in your life.

And wouldn't you know God does show up. And suddenly, the 90 year old woman with her 99.9 year old husband, conceive a child.

Because this is a narrative of Grace.
Each participant getting what they do not deserve.

God being faithful when his people are faithless.

But that leads me to another question:

When people are on the receiving end of grace, they change...

Right?

When you, in your most jacked up moment, hear that still small voice speaking to your heart saying "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Deut. 31:6) -

it doesn't matter what you've done... It doesn't matter what you are going to do...

That changes us, right? Suddenly, you don't necessarily want to do what you are about to do... you maybe feel bad that you did what you did.

It should. Grace should change you.

But what happens when you find yourself doing some of the old habits? Doing some of the same things you did before you had "Jesus."

You have to ask yourself this question: How big is your God?

Is God still God when you think that he doesn't show up?

Is God still God, when you are sinning?

Is God still God, when you do the very things he said not to do?

Or does he become a distant God who builds walls every time you sin and before you know it there is a house standing between you and grace...

and before long that house becomes a castle.

Then a city. and before you know it, the grace of God that once starred you in the face refreshing your very life feels a world away.

when in reality, it hasn't gone anywhere. In reality, it is you who is building up those walls in your mind. And it is God who keeps on knocking. (Rev. 3:20)

Well that is what happened to Abraham. He received grace, and still reverted to his old ways.

I told you guys last week, Abraham was a liar and a coward. In Genesis 12, when his name was still Abram, he and Sarai went to Egypt. And when he got to Egypt he said to his wife:

“You are beautiful in appearance and when the Egyptians see how beautiful you are, they will kill me and let you live... if they think you are my wife. But if we say you are my sister, they will let us both live.” (Gen. 12:10-14) - So that is what they did. And of course, the Egyptians saw Sarai, and, like Abram predicted, they thought she was very beautiful. And the bible says that they “dealt well with Abram” because of her... (Gen. 12:16)

But then the Pharaoh brought her into his house... and so the Lord afflicted Pharaoh. and reveals to him what was happening... and to not touch Sarai.

Fast forward until after the promise with a timeframe... After God actually says “its not open ended anymore, this child is coming this year!”... Fast forward to after suddenly Sarah is pregnant with grace, and what happens?

and Abraham does it again.

He is a repeat offender.

Genesis 20 records it. They go into Gerar. Abraham said of Sarah “She is my sister” and so Abimelech the King of Gerar took her into his house... and God came to the King in the night and said “You are a dead man, because the woman you have taken is another man's wife.” (Genesis 20:3)

and God told Abimelech that Abraham is a prophet, and if the King returns Sarah to Abraham, then God will spare him because the King had not yet touched Sarah.

Now, at this point, Abraham is 99 years old. Sarah is pretty up there in age too. I can't imagine her being all that huge of a stumbling block for the King and his men, but Abraham in his old age acted in the same way he had done years before in Egypt. And the King confronts Abraham. He asks him, "What have you done to us? and what did we do to you to make you bring such a sin on *our* Kingdom?" (Gen. 20:8-10)

Andy Stanley, in his book "The Grace of God" (which is an incredible book highlighting how grace has been with us from the very beginning and through every page of the bible, we will probably quote it several times in this series) makes this observation about the second situation in which Abraham lies and then King confronts Him, and I think this is so powerful:

"The irony of a pagan king lecturing God's chosen man on the need for integrity could not have been lost on Abraham. How could a man who had been promised so much trust so little? Why would a man who had been protected by God in miraculous ways fear a mere king? And no doubt in the back of Abraham's mind was the nagging fear that perhaps his breach of faith would forfeit God's promises. This incident, along with the attempt to fast-track an heir, was certainly reason enough for God to renege on their deal. But as Abraham was discovering, **he didn't really have a deal with God. Instead, he was the recipient of an unconditional promise.**"

And that last line is just so incredibly powerful.

He didn't have a deal with God.

He had a *promise from God*.

This is so opposite from the way that we tend to think God is, is it not? We think that as long as we do our part, God will do His... but yet we think that He is just waiting... waiting for that deal breaker... waiting for that moment when we slip, so that suddenly He can take it all away and give it to someone who has lived more perfectly.

But that is not grace. It is not the way that God works as much as we think it is. There is a verse in Paul's second letter to Timothy (2:13) that says

“even when we are faithless, He is faithful... Because God cannot deny himself.”

A lot of you, I think that you have lived your whole life making deals with God.

Thinking, God will save me... IF. And when you are living right, you are on top of the world and you feel like you can do anything... but the moment you doubt... or the moment you screw up, or the moment life hits you and you respond like you are actually a human...

suddenly you find yourself with your faith teetering, and wondering if it is even there anymore or if it ever was really there at all...

and I want to encourage you that those are the moments that God is still faithful. Those are the moments that God carries you. That God knocks even harder on your door.

Because even though Abraham and Sarah screwed up in Egypt... and they didn't learn from that mistake and they made the same mistake in Gerar... God still showed up.

Even though they had a promise from God of a son... they took matters into their own hands... they created a mess that still to this day we are reminded of every day when we turn on the news...

God still showed up.

I love that way that the NIV bible puts it in Genesis 21:1... it says “The Lord was gracious to Sarah... and He did what he had promised.”

Sarah, in the midst of all of that bitterness, found herself right in the middle of God's grace. And she bore the child... and its then that she said (Genesis 21:6) “God has brought me *laughter*.” This time, she wasn't laughing with bitter skepticism. this wasn't a “yeah right God” laugh...

God had restored her wonder. Because God can do anything.

That promised child, Isaac... was born... His name literally means "laughter" - what a transformation. A legacy built around a display of Joy.

And through *laughter*, the genealogy of Jesus Christ continued.

Nothing about this family was right.
None of it was perfect.

Yet according to Matthew, 42 generations later, one that was greater than Isaac was born. Another child of promise entered the world, as God himself became a baby, born of a 14 year old virgin, an even more impossible circumstance than that of a 90 year old woman. And this baby allowed himself to be raised in a corrupt world and managing to not let it corrupt him, for the sake of perfection one day taking the place of our pride. For the sake of perfection one day taking the place of our unbelief, our skepticism, our insecurity, and pain.

And He wants to restore your wonder. He wants to be the transformation in your life. I know you some of you, you have, and have had a very hard life. I am not going to even begin to pretend that I know what you have gone through, or that I know what you are going through right now. I am not promising you a cure that will fix it all in a moment...

And I am not promising you that everything in your life is going to magically come together and everything will just get better, but I can promise you this:

If you give your heart to Jesus, He will make your heart whole.

The bible says that God loved you so much, that he looked at the mess that we all have made of our lives... the mess that to you and to me may seem so irreparable... God looked at it and said "I can fix this."

The bible says that Jesus has gone and prepared a place for us (John 14:3) - He wants to spend eternity with you in a place far better than this one. In a place where there will be no more tears or pain, no more cancer. No more debt, no more abuse. No more arson. No more murder.

but there has to be a price.

Sin costs. The messes we make, they cost. But God said, you know what, I am not going to make you pay the cost... I will let Jesus pay it for all of you.

God so loved you, that he gave his only son to die in your place, so that you can have eternal life, then, and so you can have a clean heart, here. Now.

Because the Narrative of Grace is that God does show up. He showed up for Abraham, and He will show up for you.