

Act 5: Becoming Before Blessing

By Jim Christianson

Good morning, church.

— *Good morning.*

Oh, thank you, that's good.

A special welcome to those listening online and on the livestream as well. We wish you were here, but we're glad you're there and here with us. It is good to be here.

I'm glad Jake can take a little break and get some rest, but I do need to say this out loud—I have a bone to pick with Jake.

I recently got a text from the pastor. No, actually, it started before that. Let me go back.

A while back, Jake calls my good buddy Joe Bowen and says, "Hey Joe, I have an idea. How would you like to preach a sermon on suffering?"

Okay. Interesting choice. But Joe's a doctor—he understands suffering. He did great.

A couple months later, Jake calls Joe again and says, "You were so great with suffering. How would you feel about preaching on why God never answers prayer?"

Okay. Suffering. God not answering prayer. At this point, I'm thinking, man, if Jake calls me, I'm definitely hitting decline.

It gets worse.

Then Jake calls my good buddy, our good pastor, piano player, worship leader, David, and says, "David, you know that part in the Bible where God asks Abram to cut animals in half and then walk through them? It's really weird, right? I think that'd be a great chapter for you to preach on."

Yeah.

And then Jake texts me. I don't get a call that I cannot answer. I get a text, and it says something like, "Hey Jim, you mentioned you'd be open to preaching again. I'm looking ahead and wondering if you'd be open to taking Genesis 17. You know where God asks Abraham to circumcise himself?"

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah. So anyway, that's where we're headed today.

And I thought we'd just start today with a show of hands.

[LAUGHTER]

But before we get into that—which is so exciting—I just wanted to take a little walk back.

Over the last four or five weeks, we've been walking with Abraham, watching what it looks like to trust God without seeing the outcome yet.

A couple weeks ago, David took us into Genesis 13 and helped us notice something subtle but important. Abraham faces real tension with his nephew Lot. The land can't sustain both families. Conflict is rising, and something has to give.

Abraham has every reason to take control. He's the boss. He could secure his future, protect the promise, make the smart move. Instead, he lets go. He gives Lot the first choice.

And God does reaffirm the promise—but as David pointed out, here's what's easy to miss: the promise is reaffirmed, but not fulfilled. Abraham does the faithful thing and still has to wait.

Then last week, Jake took us into Genesis 16, which—to be fair—is a difficult chapter. This is the moment where waiting finally gives way to action. God doesn't withdraw the promise. Abraham and Sarah haven't stopped believing, but the silence has stretched long enough that doing nothing starts to feel irresponsible.

So they make a choice. They follow the logic of their culture. They choose a solution that makes sense to them.

And that choice changes everything.

Relationships fracture. Pain multiplies. And Hagar, who has no power in the decision, ends up carrying the weight of it.

Jake reminded us that even here, God still sees. He sees the pain that followed and the people who were hurt by it. God doesn't excuse the choice. He doesn't erase the consequences, but He meets people inside the mess they've made.

Genesis 16 doesn't resolve the promise. It shows us what happens when waiting feels unbearable and we reach for control instead of trust.

So that's where we've been, and today we step into the longest stretch of that journey.

There's something about silence.

And I've been known to tear up and cry a little bit when I do this, so I'm really going to try not to do that.

There's something about God's silence. When it feels like He isn't listening, that changes the way you pray.

When things are working, when life feels stable and predictable, prayers tend to be lighter—at least for me. They feel more open-handed, more conversational. You thank God, you ask for guidance, and underneath it all is the assumption that things are going well.

But when things stop moving—when answers don't come—when the future starts to feel less certain—prayer changes. It gets heavier. More tense. More urgent.

And this past year and a half has been that kind of season for me and Charlene.

After nearly twenty years of building a business—years of stability, growth, and momentum—things started to unravel. Not dramatically. Not all at once. Just slowly enough that I couldn't ignore it.

The kind of unraveling that doesn't make headlines but definitely keeps you up at night.

The business struggling. Bills tightening. Decisions getting heavier. The margin I was used to started to disappear, and with it, the quiet confidence that says, "We're going to be okay."

So we did what we know to do. We prayed. Not vague prayers. Not surface-level ones. Real ones.

I asked for wisdom. I asked for clarity. I asked God to show me what I couldn't see. I tried to listen. I slowed down. I paid attention. I waited.

And nothing seemed to change.

What surprised me wasn't that things were hard—we all expect hard times. It was the praying and hearing nothing back.

Days turned into weeks. Weeks into months. No clear direction. No unmistakable nudge. No sense of "here's what to do next."

And the hardest part wasn't that I stopped believing. It was that I kept believing—and still didn't hear anything back.

That's a different kind of tension.

Because when you stop believing, at least things make sense. But when you still trust God, when you keep showing up, when you keep praying and the silence remains, you start asking questions you didn't plan on asking.

Am I missing something?

Did I misunderstand what God was doing all those years?

Did I confuse momentum with blessing?

And maybe the hardest one—if God had been faithful before, why does this feel so uncertain now?

What I realized is that silence doesn't just test our patience—it exposes expectations.

Somewhere along the way, without ever saying it out loud, I started to believe that after enough faithfulness, after enough obedience, after enough years of watching God come through, silence would feel different. Shorter. Easier. Less disorienting.

But it doesn't.

If I'm honest, it feels like abandonment.

And suddenly—I'm getting choked up—suddenly I was back in a place that felt uncomfortably familiar. Waiting. Listening. Wanting answers.

Faith doesn't remove silence. Sometimes it simply reminds us how much we need Him.

And I didn't realize at first how deeply that silence unsettled me—not just because of what was happening, but because of what it stirred up.

Then it hit me. I've been here before.

Years ago, I found myself sitting in my parents' driveway. I had just come home after realizing the future I'd been working toward most of my life wasn't going to happen.

I had just opened my last letter from medical school. Twenty-five years later, it still gets me.

And the answer was no. Again.

My dream wasn't delayed. It wasn't redirected. It was closed. Finished.

Fifteen years of wanting and striving. Years of university. Thousands upon thousands of dollars invested—and suddenly nowhere to go.

I didn't have a next plan. I didn't have a backup dream. I didn't even really have language for what I was feeling.

I remember sitting there with the engine off, not wanting to go inside yet, because once I did, I'd have to explain something I didn't even understand myself.

That's when the verse from Jeremiah came to mind—the one so many of us were raised on:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future.”

And I remember thinking—not angrily, just honestly—God, what plans?

Because right then, it didn't feel like a future had opened up. It felt like it had disappeared.

So I prayed. I waited for direction. For reassurance. For anything that sounded like God.

And there was no answer. Just quiet.

What I didn't realize at the time was that the silence wasn't just painful—it was revealing something I believed.

I had assumed that if God had a purpose for my life, it would look like something happening. Movement. Progress. Results.

When that didn't happen, I started to wonder if nothing purposeful was happening at all.

And whether God's silence meant I was supposed to take over.

Do I need to fix this? Force something? Help God move things along?

I don't think that makes us rebellious. I don't think it means we lack faith. I think we've been trained to believe that purpose always looks like progress.

So when nothing changes out there, we assume nothing is happening in here.

But what if silence isn't the absence of purpose?

What if it's the space where purpose is being shaped?

And Scripture knows this place.

By the time we step into Genesis 17, Abram isn't new to faith. He's lived inside the promise for decades. God has spoken. The covenant has been made. Abram has obeyed—and still no son.

They're older. Their bodies tell the truth every day.

And then God speaks again. Not with a new promise. Not with a timeline.

He changes Abram's name to Abraham—father of many nations.

And every time someone says his name, the promise is spoken out loud before it exists.

God is shaping who Abraham is becoming before giving him what he's waiting for.

Later, God asks Abraham to seal the covenant through circumcision. This isn't symbolic. This is permanent.

This is a burn-the-ships moment.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this “costly grace.” Grace that calls us to follow.

This isn't salvation by works. Grace comes first—but discipleship has a cost.

Sometimes the cost hurts—not because God enjoys pain, but because cutting away what's killing us is rarely comfortable.

Genesis 17 shows us a God who says, “Before I give you what I promised, I need you to understand who you are becoming.”

And Abraham's response?

Genesis 17:17 says Abraham fell face down—and he laughed.

Not because he didn't believe—but because believing had become complicated.

And Sarah laughs too.

God's response isn't anger. It's a question:

“Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

That's not a question about power. It's about trust.

Faith is not the absence of doubt. It's the decision to keep trusting God's character while the outcome is unresolved.

Here's what I've come to believe: purpose isn't discovered at the end. It's formed along the way—especially in the in-between.

The waiting isn't wasted. The silence isn't empty.

In the in-between, God is shaping who you are becoming, not what you're trying to get Him to produce.

So maybe the question isn't "How do I fix this?"

Maybe it's "Who am I becoming?"

Let's pray.

Jesus, thank You for Your love. Help us remember that You are shaping us, that You are forming us, that You are not absent—even in the quiet. We love You. Thank You for Your sacrifice. Amen.