

The Cage of Assumptions

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Hey! Anybody get wet this weekend? What happened? I didn't know hurricanes were supposed to affect us. A cloud burst seems like the right description. The heavens opened up, I was feeling like Noah. What a crazy Wild Goose chase weekend! Among other things, what great timing! How do you plan like about a year ago that September 6th would be a great day for the Convoy of Hope? Long story short, around 5:00 a.m. with some prompting from Homeland Security, we did not want to put people in harm's way, so here's the deal. Bottom line is Jesus has stopped a hurricane, He could have done it again, but for whatever reason, He didn't. So guess what we are going to do? We're going to do the Convoy of Hope on Sunday and it is supposed to be a beautiful day. We are excited. God is right on time. It is a little chaotic, when there are 973 messages in your voice mail, something is going on! It's chaotic, crazy, but I want to encourage those of you who are at any of our locations, if you want to take off right now before I start preaching and head over to RFK, I will not be offended because this weekend, we are not one church at four locations, we are one church with five locations. The truth is, I always laugh that we call services services, because what's happening at RFK with Convoy of Hope, we truly are serving, rolling up our sleeves. We want to encourage you to head out there and be a part of what God is doing this weekend.

In this series, we are talking about six cages. Last week, we talked about Moses and the cage of routine; next week we will talk about Peter and the cage of guilt; this weekend we are talking about Abraham and the cage of assumptions. Turn in your Bible to Genesis 15, we'll get there in a few moments, or you can follow along on the screen.

One of our kids' favorite destinations in DC is the Air and Space Museum. It's not too far from our home, so every once in a while, we venture over to the Air and Space Museum and retrace the history of aviation from kites to rockets. And on one particular visit when Josiah was a toddler, there was a display set up, it was a cross-section of an American Airlines Douglas DC 7 airplane. You could walk through it and as we prepared to board, I noticed a look of concern on Josiah's face and I asked him if he wanted to get on the airplane and my little toddler said, in

that cute little toddler voice, “It not take off?” Laura and I couldn’t help but laugh at the impossibility, because there was no engine, no wings, no runway, it was a 20-foot cross-section of an airplane. Yet Josiah thought the thing might just take off. The cute thing is that every exhibit we went to that day, it was the same question. “It not take off?” That, to me, epitomizes the beauty of childhood. Children don’t know what can’t be done. They have not yet defined what is and what is not possible. No impossibilities, no assumptions. The only limitation they know is their God-given imagination. Unfortunately, we grow up, and here’s what happens to most of us as we grow older. We stop make-believing, if you will, and we start making assumptions. We start thinking the way we’ve always thought, we start doing what we’ve always done, and generally speaking, the older we get, the more assumptions we make. And before we know it, we’ve lost some of the spiritual adventure. We’ve lost that edge on our faith and we end up in what I would call the cage of assumptions. And I think Abraham is this beautiful assumption of how we get out of that cage.

Genesis 15:1—

After this, the Word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. “Do not be afraid Abram, I am your shield, your very great reward.” But Abram said, “Oh sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.” Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.” He took him outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Let me set the scene. Abraham and Sarah are childless. Their deepest desire is to have children, but Sarah is barren and for decades they lived with the pain, and in that culture, the shame. I think we tend to forget the human element in this story. Every time one of Sarah’s friends got pregnant, every time she heard a child laughing, or maybe when she got that invitation to a baby shower, I think she felt that familiar pain in the pit of her soul, and it didn’t get easier, it got harder. I think she and Abraham must have cried together. I bet they had a few fights together. They felt the ache of emptiness and the confusion of helplessness, because what they wanted most, they could not have. But one day, to flash back to what I said last week, one day, God makes a promise. He says, “*Look up at the heavens and*

count the stars if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be.” But it is not just what God says. It is what God does. If you look at this passage very carefully, it says that He took Abraham outside. Now, I think it is easy to read a passage like this, to read right past it, but let me preach between the lines, if you will. Abraham was holed up in his tent. In a sense, he had this man-made ceiling, and 8-foot ceiling. When God decided to take him on a little field trip, He took him outside that manufactured environment and He told him to look up into the night sky and to count the stars. Now I have no idea how long it took. It might have been an all-nighter. I have no idea how many times Abraham lost count. But by the time he was done, I think God had taught him an object lesson he would never forget. See, Abraham would never look into the night sky the same way again, because those stars in the sky were a nightly reminder of the promise that God had given to him.

It was about a year ago that I took Parker and Josiah camping. It was Parker’s birthday and it was one of those fall nights, just a little chill in the air, clear sky, and when you’re out at a campsite like that, you don’t have the lights of the city to compete with and there was an open field behind our campsite and I remember when the sun went down and the stars came out, at one point I went out in that field with my two boys and we laid down on the ground on our backs but with our heads right by each other just a few inches apart. It was only a few minutes, it seemed like an eternity but we just sat there and looked up into the night sky and Parker pointed out a few of the constellations, I was impressed with that. Josiah pointed out a few of the movie stars, also known as airplanes. As we looked into the sky that literally stretched billions of light years in every direction, it was a reminder of how big God is. There is something about looking into the night sky that recalibrates me spiritually. It kinda reminds me of how small I am but how big God is. I think it can be a healthy and a holy thing.

So why did God take Abraham outside? Why did He tell him to look into the night sky? Why did He tell him to count the stars? I think the answer is so obvious, it eludes us. As long as Abraham was inside his tent, his vision was obscured by an 8-foot ceiling. It kept the promises of God out of sight, and as the old adage says, out of sight, out of mind. I think God wanted to remind Abraham of how big He was, so He told Abraham to go outside and do a little stargazing. I think it was God’s way of saying, *Abraham, don’t put on 8-foot ceiling on what I can do.*

It was about half a century ago that one of my favorite writers, A.W. Tozer said something that is so profound and so true. He said, “A low view of God is the cause of a hundred-lesser evils. But a high view of God is the solution to 10,000

temporal problems.” I think here’s what happens in many of our lives and how many of us end up in this cage of assumptions, how many of us forfeit the spiritual adventure. What happens is this. We tend to reduce God to the size of our biggest problem. Or we reduce Him to the extent of our left-brain logic or whatever can fit within the cerebral cortex, or we reduce Him to the size of our greatest fear or our worst sin. And what we end up with is a god, small g, that looks an awful lot like us and seems to be about our size, and I think it is idolatry in it’s most subtle yet deadly form. I just have to say that I’m pretty convinced that our biggest problem isn’t our biggest problem. The biggest problem is that we think that God isn’t bigger than our biggest problem. I’ve shared this before but let me share it again because it is a lynchpin in my theology. It’s kinda my ground zero or my square one theologically. Let me tell you why I share things with you sometimes more than once, even though I know each of you has a perfect photographic, sermongraphic memories. For starters, we have a lot of people coming and going all the time, but I want to share something and frame why I’m sharing this. I think spiritual growth is about so much more than learning new things. It is not just about head knowledge, it is about knowledge becoming a conviction that actually dictates the way we live our lives. It’s not just about information, it is about a conviction that actually transforms your life. I just want to go on record saying I’d rather have one person with one deeply held conviction than 1,000 people who know 1,000 things. So I think what I’m about to share is one of my gut convictions, and it really is my starting place for the way that I think about God and the way I relate to God. Isaiah 55:8— *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”* If you’ve been around NCC for any length of time, you know that light travels at the speed of 186,000 miles per second. In the time it takes me to snap my fingers, light circumnavigates the globe about half a dozen times and that’s faster than fast. Let me try to put it in perspective. Our sun is about 93 million miles away, and that’s quite a distance. If you were to drive a car 65 miles an hour, 24 hours a days, 365 days a year, no pit stops, no rest stops, no gas stops, it would take you more than 163 years to get there. But the light that warms our face on a sunny day is only 8 minutes old because light travels that fast. Now here’s the thing, our sun is the nearest star in our tiny little galaxy called the Milky Way. But astrophysicists have discovered galaxies, the latest number I heard was 13.7 billion light years away but it wouldn’t surprise me if it’s even farther than that by now. If you do the math, one light year is equivalent to 5.88 trillion miles. So if the farthest galaxy is 13.7 billion times 5.88 trillion, for the mathematicians out there, that is about 80 sextillion miles. That distance is virtually incomprehensible and God says that’s about the distance between your thoughts and His thoughts. So here’s my

thought, your best thought on your best day is about 13.7 billion light years short of how good and how great God really is. Everybody walking into each of our locations, listen, you underestimate God by 13.7 billion light years. He is 13.7 billion light years beyond your wildest imagination and yet, we live in this tiny little cage of assumptions. What I'm trying to say is that when you enter into a relationship with Christ, when you begin to chase the Wild Goose, all assumptions are out the window. Why? Because God exists outside of our space-time dimensions. He is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent. I love these verses. It's one of these threads that run through Scripture. Philippians 4:13—*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.* Ephesians 3:20: *He is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine according to His power that is at work within us.* Romans 8:31—*If God is for us, who can be against us?* Mark 9:31—*All things are possible for those who believe.* What I'm saying is this—by virtue of being in relationship with God, God takes the ceiling off of our lives, and I think that is the heart of the story here with Abraham. I think God tells Abraham to look up in the sky at these stars, I'm the One who made them, don't put an 8-foot ceiling on what I can do. Quit assuming, start believing, and that's exactly what Abraham does. Now listen, Abraham has his moments of doubts, he has his fears, he gets frustrated, but I love the way that Romans 4 captures his faith. It says, verse 18: *Against all hope, Abraham, in hope, believes and so became the father of many nations just as it had been said to him, so shall your offspring be. Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead, since he was about 100 years old, and Sarah's womb was also dead, yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God has the power to do what God had promised.*

I want to talk about some assumptions that keep us caged. First, let me talk about faith for a moment. Faith is not logical, but faith isn't illogical either. Faith is theological. It just adds God into the equation so that what we're able to imagine isn't just determined by our human ability. What I love about this is that it says that Abraham faced the facts, he wasn't out of touch with reality. But it says that he was also fully persuaded that God had the power to deliver on His promises. You might want to write this down because someone a lot smarter than me said it. F.B. Myer once said this, "Unbelief puts our circumstances between us and God. Faith puts God between us and our circumstances." Do you want to hear that one more time? Unbelief puts our circumstances between us and God. Faith puts God between us and our circumstances. Faith is not mindless ignorance, it simply refuses to limit God to the logical constraints of the left brain. It puts God between us and our circumstances. So, let's get personal for a moment because this isn't

just about a guy named Abraham who lived thousands of years ago, it is about you and I. What 8-foot ceiling have you put on God? What assumptions have kept you caged? What promises have you given up on? Let's talk about a couple of assumptions that I think keep us from chasing the Wild Goose and keep us from living the spiritual adventure that God ordained for our lives. One of them is right here in this story. I think it epitomizes some of the assumptions that we make.

For starters, here's an assumption I think keep us from really living the spiritual adventure that God wants—I'm too old. Here's an assumption, 90-year-old women don't have babies. Is that a fair assumption? It's biological impossible for a barren, post-menopausal woman to get pregnant. Or is it? Can I give you some good news? One of our core values at NCC is that it's never too late to become who you might have been. God is the God of second chances, and it may feel like time has passed you by and like the window of opportunity closed a long time ago, but the good news is it's never too late. One of the joys over the last couple of years for me has been reading emails from people how got their hands on the prequel to Wild Goose Chase, In a Pit With a Lion on a Snowy Day, and people will share their stories about lions that they are chasing and some of them, I'm like, oh man, I sure hope you've heard from God, and other people, maybe God is telling you to try out for *American Idol* but you better have a decent voice too. But other stories have just stirred my spirit in a way that I can't even describe. I love all the stories and the way that people are playing offense for the kingdom, but the most inspiring stories that I've gotten are the people that I didn't think I was writing the book for. People in their 60s and 70s and people in their 80s who have emailed me, and what I love is that these people have figured out that they are old, not dead. And they still have lions to chase. It reminds me of Caleb, like I'm as strong now as I was. 85 years old and bring on the Promised Land because I'm going to take it. I think you are never too old to go on a .

And I want to flip the coin here because I think it is the other assumption, you're never too young either. It just seems like God uses a lot of really old people and really young people. As far as we know, most scholars think that Mary was probably a teen-ager, maybe 16 years old. What a huge responsibility! And the disciples, many of them 20-something probably. And David, but a child when he takes on Goliath. You are never too young, and I want to say to those of you who feel like you're too young, you will never be ready. For that matter, you'll never be experienced enough, you'll never be educated enough, and you will never be spiritual enough. Does that cover all of us? Too often we allow what we cannot do to keep us from doing what we can do, and we allow who we are not to keep us from being who we are. I think we allow the fear of failure to keep us from even

trying, or we allow the fear of looking foolish keep us from daring to be different. I think a lot of us forfeit the miracle because we are afraid of looking foolish, we're afraid of falling on our faces, and we never accomplish anything because we never try anything. This week, I read an article written by Steven Kisling, a 49-year-old editor of Spirituality and Health, and he is a rower, forgive me if that's not the technical term, he rowed at Yale in 1980 and 28 years later, he decided to train for the Olympic team, make his comeback 28 years later. Now, let me ruin the story right out of the gate, he did not make the team. He didn't come close to making the team, but I love the fact that he tried out. He said, "Had I stopped to squarely face all the numbers from the beginning, I would have concluded that winning was impossible because rowers have gotten faster over the last 28 years. But that seems to me like choosing to never live because you know that you are going to die. We were careful not to lie to anyone, especially ourselves. Instead we chose to suspend belief. The New York Times picked up on the story and this is what they said, "Perhaps the pair (and his partner by the way was 40, 48 and 40 trying out for the team, dude, at least pick someone who is like 24 or something!) has about as much chance to win the French Open doubles title as they did making it this past weekend, but that never was the point of the comeback. The message was to not be afraid to try." "We showed up," Kisling said, "with a lot of talent out there, but there was a lot of real, raw talent that didn't show up. They didn't want to take a crack at it because they were afraid of losing. He who gets embarrassed loses first. You've just got to show up." I like this approach to life, and I see it in Abraham. I don't have time to go into another episode in his life, but Mt. Moriah where he takes Isaac to potentially sacrifice, I don't know if I could've, but he shows up, and because he shows up, God shows up and provides a ram in the thicket and it changes his life forever. You gotta show up. Against all hope, Abraham held on to hope.

Let me talk about one more assumption. I think it is one of the assumptions that keeps us in the cage. It's the old adage, "It's never been done that way before." Until the late 1960s, the standard high-jumping technique consisted of leaping over the bar by straddling it face down. This technique was called the western roll. The world record was about seven and a half feet. Then along came Dick Fosbury and instead of straddling the bar sideways, Dick Fosbury jumped over the bar shoulders first and twisted so that he would face up instead of face down. The coach tried to get him to drop his unorthodox style or drop the sport, but Dick Fosbury kept perfecting his style all the way to a gold medal and a world record in the 1968 Olympics. Now we dug into the Olympics archives, take a look at this.

[Video element]

The 1968 Olympics games proved to be a turning point in the history of the high jump event. Into the Mexico City Olympic Arena came not only a new name to the sport, but a new approach, which was to revolutionize the high jump event. Dick Fosbury from the United States demonstrated a new style of high jump which some considered strange and awkward. It was a jump he had devised in the previous years and one which unsettles his opponents. While the crowd at first saw him as a novelty, his continued success at clearing the ever-increasing height soon made it apparent he was a serious contender. Valentin Gavrilov from the Soviet Union failed at his attempt of 2.22 meters while Fosbury and his U.S. teammate, Edward Caruthers, cleared their way to a jump-off. The bar, set at 2.24 meters, Caruthers failed and Fosbury took his new style of high jump over the bar and into the history books. Fosbury had won his gold. Within a few years, the Fosbury flop had become the standard method of jumping in this great Olympic sport.

I don't have time to unpack this, but progress in every arena depends upon those who challenge the assumptions, doesn't it? Amazon assumed that to sell books, you don't even need a bookstore. Wikipedia, you don't need door-to-door encyclopedia salesmen, you don't even need books, you don't even need experts! Fosbury assumed you don't have to go over forward, you can go over backward, and in fact you might even win a gold medal and set a world record. One of the things I love about Jesus is that as I look at Him in the gospels and think, why were the Pharisees so resistant? Why were they so threatened? Because Jesus challenged every assumption in the book! I think spiritually, we have to be careful that we don't just live in this cage of assumption but we find ways to break out of that. As I look at my own Wild Goose chase, I think the defining moments are the moments when my assumptions were challenged and I had a choice to make, hang on to my assumptions or hang on to God, and you really can't do both. I think we as a church have tried to challenge assumptions. We have a core conviction that drives us, there are ways of doing church that no one has thought of yet. That's exciting to me. I think there are ways of reaching people, there are ways of discipling, things that we can do that we have not imagined yet. When we started meeting in a movie theater all those many years ago, it was a novelty. I remember how I would meet pastors and they would lovingly say stuff like when are you guys going to get a church, because evidently without a church building, you aren't really a church. Part of me wanted to say, at that point we were just meeting at Union Station, I wanted to say, "Have you seen our church?" Because not too many churches have their own subway system that runs throughout the entire metropolitan area! Pretty

sweet set-up. The assumption is “oh, movie theaters, then they are a short term rental option.” No, we are not. We are a long term strategy, for lots of reasons. Our vision is to reach people who are unchurched, who don’t come from a church background. A lot of people who don’t come from a church background could be a little uncomfortable, a little unsettling, the thought of walking into a new environment, into a church building, and there’s something about a movie theater that is very non-threatening. I think I would describe it as a safe place where we preach a dangerous message, and we want to remove any obstacles that would keep people from the cross. That should be the thing, the determining factor. So we are trying to challenge that assumption. And you know what? I think there are between 400 and 500 churches now meeting in theaters across the country, and I dream of the day when there is a church meeting in every movie theater in America. Why not? What a great place!

Here’s another assumption: churches build church buildings, right? Churches don’t build coffee houses. But the bottom line is this, Jesus didn’t just hang out in the synagogues, He also hung out as wells. Wells were natural gathering places in ancient culture. Coffee houses are post-modern wells. A place where the church and community can cross paths and where we can interface with our community and serve them, serve them coffee but at the same time, it is beautiful to see how many people end up at our Saturday night service at Ebenezers or one of our other locations. Here’s the thing, we had no experience going into it, and I think the assumption is that you need a little bit of experience if you’re going to open a coffee house, but up until about six months, maybe nine months before we opened our doors, nobody on our staff had any experience working in a coffee house. Christina Borja who was our Business Administrator at that point did a little stint at Starbucks, a little stint at an independent coffee house, got a little bit of experience, and I’ve come to the conclusion that, yes, educate yourself, get as much experience as you can, build your resume, those are wonderful things, but in God’s economy, no experience equals no problem. It is what God is calling you to do. We went into it and God has blessed it. Did you know that a lot of the money that we’ve needed to pull off the Convoy of Hope this weekend and the way that we are going to bless our community, a lot of those monies come from the profits from Ebenezers Coffeehouse and it goes all the way back to our motivation. Every penny of profit goes right into local outreach opportunities, foreign mission opportunities; it’s coffee with a cause. That challenges the assumption a little bit, but I think as a church, we want to do that, and I want to challenge you to do that in your own individual life. Quit assuming and start believing. Don’t assume that you can’t start the business or write the book or get the job or save the marriage or

overcome the addiction or experience the miracle. Quit assuming and start believing. Quit putting an 8-foot ceiling on what God can do.

I want to give a closing picture of what happened in Abraham's and Sarah's life. I'm going to be honest, not every story ends this way, but this one ends with a sweet touch to it. I think the older we get, the more assumptions we tend to make, but not Abraham. He made fewer assumptions, he had more faith. I wish I could tell you that God always delivers on His promise in one week or one month or one year, but for Abraham, he was about 75 years old when God called him out of Ur and that's when the Wild Goose chase began, but he was 100 years old, it was about 25 years it took for God to fulfill His promise, but it is a sweet ending. Genesis 21: Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah said, (I don't think we can comprehend the depth of emotion that she must have felt as she said these words) "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me."

Listen, waiting 25 years for God to fulfill His promise must have seemed like an eternity to Abraham and Sarah, and it had to be spiritually confusing and emotionally exhausting. As the years passed, I've got to think that Abraham and Sarah lost a little bit of their laughter. It was hard to laugh when you feel a deep sadness in your soul that never goes away. That's why Isaac's name is so apropos, it means laughter. To be perfectly honest, I used to think that the name was punishment because Sarah laughed at God when God said that she was going to have a baby, but I've changed my mind. Listen, a child's laughter is precious. Nothing brings me greater joy than hearing my kids laugh. Just last night, my little niece, Ella, was laughing her lungs out. I could listen to that forever. Nothing is as precious as that. And God is no different. God loves it when we laugh, and Isaac, I think, was God's way of giving Abraham and Sarah their laughter back. He is the God who literally conceives laughter. I also think Isaac's name reveals a dimension of God's character. I close with this, when Sarah laughed at God, God said, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" A part of me wonders if God waited 25 years until the thought of Sarah having a baby was absolutely inconceivable, pun intended. I work hard at stuff like that, at least give me the courtesy laugh. So the thought of Sarah having a baby was absolutely inconceivable, then he broke through the 8-foot ceiling and proved once again that nothing is too hard for him. It

was God's way, Isaac was God's way of saying to Abraham and Sarah, get this into your spirit, "I'm going to have the last laugh." Let's pray.

Lord thank You and You are the God who is so much bigger than our problems and our fears and our failures and our assumptions. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are your ways, your thoughts, higher than our ways and our thoughts. Lord, just as You told Abraham to look up at the night sky, God may we look up into that sky, do a little bit of stargazing of our own and remind ourselves once again of how big You are. And as we are reminded of how big You are, God, may You coax us out of this tiny little cage of assumptions that we find ourselves in. May we have the courage to live by faith, to chase after the Wild Goose. God help us not to become captive to these assumptions, too old or too young, not educated enough, not experienced enough, not spiritual enough, it's never been done that way before. God I believe that if we open ourselves up and say to You, have Your will and Your way in our lives, that there is nothing that You cannot do. For that we are grateful because we dwell in possibilities. We live in this realm of possibilities. All things are possible for those who believe. We celebrate who You are and what that means in our lives. In Jesus' Name, Amen.