



P R O M I S E

Genesis 12-25

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SERIES BREAKDOWN

SUNDAY TEACHING	PASSAGE	STUDY
28 April	Gen 12	#1 God's Call
5 May	Gen 13-14	#2 Kings & Nations
12 May	Gen 15	#3 God's Promise
19 May	Gen 16	#4 Sarai's Solution
26 May	Gen 17	#5 People of the Promise
2 June	Gen 18-19	#6 Judgement & Mercy
9 June	Gen 20	#7 Faltering Faith
16 June	Gen 21	#8 God's Provision
23 June	Gen 22	#9 Obedient Faith
30 June	Gen 24	#10 God's Kindness
7 July	Gen 23; 25:1-11	#11 Still Longing

INTRODUCTION

Our God is a God of gracious initiative. If it was any other way, we would still be dead in our sins. Despite humanity's propensity to push God away, the Bible testifies to God's passionate pursuit of us as he works to bring humanity back into His blessing – the blessing which Adam and Eve so tragically forfeited in the garden. The first seeds of God's cosmic plan of redemption are sown here in these chapters of Genesis as God plucks a man out of obscurity and issues him with a covenant promise to restore God's blessing to the nations through his family.

In Abraham we have a very rugged portrait of someone caught up in God's gracious plans. He is an example of how God desires us to respond to his great promises – with faith, “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6) Yet Abraham's faith also faltered as he lived in the gap between promise and reality, he readily struggled to reconcile God's promises with the impossibility of his personal circumstances.

This gap between promise and reality is a tension that we also live in. We know our eternal inheritance, we know God's goodness and his plan of salvation, but we live through many pains, griefs and longings that threaten our confidence in God.

Abraham's life thus serves as an example for us as we live in the gap between promise and reality. His failings a warning and his triumphs a commendation of continued confidence in God, even until our final breath. As Hebrews 11:3 says of Abraham and other such figures in Genesis, “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.” (Hebrews 11:13).

Like Abraham, God desires us to keep trusting Him (sometimes seemingly against all the odds) as we long for our heavenly home. Yet if Abraham is only an example, he would not be much an encouragement for us who fall way short of his standard. **Abraham is much more than an example**, his life and the promises he received, point forward to the culmination of God's plans of redemption - redemption which was accomplished through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the risen Lord Jesus led a Bible Study for the disciples on how the whole Old Testament foreshadowed his passion (Luke 24:25-27). When he did so, it's highly likely he covered these chapters! As we move through the term ahead of us, let's scour these chapters like explorers looking for bush tracks and fire trails (no matter how seemingly obscure the location) that terminate upon the priceless treasure of Christ. For Jesus has succeeded where we (and Abraham!) have failed. Jesus did what we could not. He lived a perfect life of faithful obedience and so took the curse of our sin upon the cross so that God's blessing might be restored to us for all eternity.

THE BOOK OF GENESIS¹

OVERVIEW

The title Genesis means ‘origins.’ This is an apt description, for the book covers the origins of God’s creation, humanity’s fall into sin, and God’s plan to redeem humanity from our sin.

Though viewed by modern readers as one distinct book, it actually forms one literary unit with the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). As such it is effectively ‘prequel to the main story of the Pentateuch, giving the background to the events that led up to Israel’s dramatic deliverance.’²

GENRE & HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Genesis is best described as *theological history* in that it ‘focuses on God’s relationship with his human creatures and eventually with Abraham and his descendants.’³ The book is thus not primarily concerned with providing a scientific account nor precise historical dating. With this in mind, perhaps ‘at best we can say that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived sometime around the first quarter of the second millennium BC.’⁴

It is also worth noting that there is a marked shift in the narrative as Genesis moves into chapter 12. Where previously the narrator uses figurative language and a wide angle lens to capture large swathes of history, here the narrative time slows right down to concentrate on the lives of Abraham and his descendants. ‘The author thus signals an interest to communicate actual events in a more precise manner as the narrative turns to events which form the foundation for Israel.’⁵ We therefore read Genesis 12-25 in a different manner than we do to chapters 1-11.

AUTHORSHIP

The Pentateuch has traditionally been ascribed to Moses. Within the Pentateuch Moses is described as writing things down (Exo 17:14; Num 33:2; Deut 31:24). Furthermore, the Old Testament refers to the Pentateuch as the book of Moses (Josh 1:7-8; 2 Chron 25:4; Neh 13:1 etc). Jesus does likewise (Matt 19:7; Mk 7:10; Jn 1:17). Objections to Mosaic authorship have been raised on the basis that there are verses which clearly pre-date Moses (Gen 1-11) and post-date him (Gen 11:28, 31; 14:14; Deut 34; Num 12:4). Yet given the Biblical data already mentioned, it’s hard to deny that Moses was integral to the book and likely marshalled oral sources in the composition of Genesis. His writing was then probably supplemented by the later additions of inspired editors as the book reached its final form as known and affirmed by (and in the time of) Jesus.

¹ A summary of the excellent introduction provided in Tremper Longman III, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

² Ibid., 1.

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Ibid., 8.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROMISE

CREATION

Genesis 1-2. God is the all-powerful creator of the heavens and earth. Distinct from the rest of creation, he made humanity in his image and they enjoy his blessing –

*God **blesed** them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.” (Gen 1:22)*

FALL

Genesis 3-11. Enticed and enlisted into the serpent’s rebellion, this blessing is quickly forfeited by Adam and Eve who disobey God’s command and take from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Their act is indicative of the sinful human bent to assert ourselves as moral arbiters in place of God.

In judgement, Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden. No longer do they enjoy God’s *blessing* and presence. Instead they, and the world in which they live, are placed under a curse.

From Genesis 4, we see humanity spiral downward in sin. The events of Cain, Noah and Babel follow a similar pattern: human sin, God’s judgement announced then executed. Yet also in each instance, God gives a token of grace to indicate that he has not given up on humanity.⁶

REDEMPTION

Genesis 12 onwards. In Genesis 3:15 God gives a hint of the redemption he will bring about in order to restore humanity to his *blessing* – Adam’s seed will crush the evil serpent, yet this crushing will come at a cost, as the serpent will also strike the heel of Adam’s seed.

God’s plan of redemption takes firmer shape from the end of Genesis 11 when we are introduced to Abram son of Terah from the land of Ur. Though humanity sought to make a name for itself at Babel, God promises to make a name for Abram and to *bless* the whole earth through him (Gen 12:1-3). It will be through Abraham’s line that God’s *blessing* will be restored to humanity. The rest of Genesis thus traces Abraham’s line through to Joseph until we meet the nation of Israel in Egypt whom God rescues in keeping with his covenant promises.

It is from this nation that Jesus, the serpent crusher, eventually comes to redeem humanity and restore us to God’s *blessing* .

CONSUMMATION

Revelation. This *blessing* will be consummated when humanity is finally brought back into God’s presence – not back to the Garden of Eden, but forward to the city of Zion, complete with not one tree, but two trees of life and in the immediate presence and glory of God.

⁶ Tremper Longman III, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 2.

HOW TO USE THESE STUDIES

OVERVIEW

An overview has been provided for each study to help orientate us to the text and understand its meaning. This overview is best read after you've read the passage and thought through the questions – for in a few instances the overview may cover some of the questions and short-circuit your own discovery process.

PROMISE & FULFILMENT

Leaning in to Jesus' statements that the whole of the Old Testament converges upon him (Luke 24:25-27, 44-47), we'll spend some time each week considering how various aspects of Genesis 12-25 foreshadow or predict the sufferings and glory of Christ.

SHARE

If group members contribute towards the beginning of a session, it increases the likelihood that they'll continue to participate throughout the rest of the time together. Accordingly the 'Share' questions are designed to do just this – to get everyone talking on a subject matter that dovetails with the week's study. It's a time for sharing stories and airing opinions without arriving at any definitive conclusions (that will come when we let the Bible do the talking!). This will likely be a great time for group members to get to know each other better too.

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Before moving into reading and discussing the Bible text, invite some(one) to pray that your time together in God's Word would be rich and transformative. The 'Observe & Reflect' questions are primarily focussed on understanding the content of the passage – they will often do so with reference to the context of Genesis 12-25, as well as the wider Scriptures.

NEXT STEPS

This part of the study is absolutely crucial. We cannot afford to be mere hearers of the Word and not doers of the Word. Ensure that adequate time is given to *prayerfully* considering the impact that God's Word should have on our lives. This section is particularly crucial to our Bible Study groups because in a smaller setting, God's Word will be able to be applied in a much more targeted and group-specific manner than is possible from the pulpit. Accordingly, Group leaders should feel free to tailor the *Next steps* questions to suit their group and should consider having the study in the week following the sermon so as to focus on application.

STUDY ONE - GOD'S CALL

- GENESIS 12

OVERVIEW

Genesis 11:27-12:3 – Genesis 1-11 captures how God's blessing of humanity in the garden is quickly forfeited in sin. In place of God's blessing comes a curse and humanity cycles downward in rebellion and depravity. There seems to be little hope as even Noah (Gen 9:20-23) and his descendants (11:1-9) are tainted with sin. Yet as the narrative zeroes in on the life of Abram, we see God working to restore his blessing to all humanity. Unprompted and unearned, God takes the gracious initiative and makes a unilateral promise to bless Abraham, and in turn the world, through his offspring. God's promise to make Abram's name great stands in sharp contrast to the inhabitants of Babel who proudly sought to make a name for themselves. It's highly likely that the Lord's call came to Abram whilst in Ur (see Acts 7:2-4, Gen 15:7 and Neh 9:7). Excavations in the 20th century reveal the darkness of Ur – it was a centre for lunar worship and a place of human sacrifice.⁷ In sin, God and his ways had become shrouded in darkness. It was into this darkness that God took the initiative to shine the light of the knowledge of his Name (cf. Josh 24:2).

Genesis 12:4-9 – God's great promise is received by Abram with great faith (cf. Hebrews 11:8-19). Though childless and nomadic, he left everything behind in faithful obedience to the Lord. Abram reminds us that faith evidences itself in obedience (Jas 9:21-22) and is confident in what we hope for and certain about what we do not see (Heb 11:1). This confidence is reflected in Abram's tour through the Promised Land. From North to South, he erected altars, worshipping and proclaiming the name of the one true God in a land of darkness. Of this Hughes' powerfully reflects, 'Abram would build altars at Bethel, Hebron and Mount Moriah ... How beautiful – the only architecture that remained from Abram's life were altars.'⁸

Genesis 12:10-20 – Due to thematic overlap, comment will be reserved for our later study in Genesis 20. Suffice to say however that obedience doesn't exempt us from difficulty and that in this early difficulty, Abram's faith falters as he turns to his own scheming in place of trust in God. Though he serves us as an exemplar of faith, his actions here also stand as a warning for us too.

⁷ Tell el-Muqayyar. The city dates back to 5000BC, features a prominent ziggurat devoted to the moon-god Nanna and also a 'death pit' of 73 servants sacrificed to accompany the corpse of Queen Puabi in death. See R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis*, 181-182.

⁸ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis*, 187.

PROMISE+FULFILMENT

OFFSPRING

Of Abram's 'offspring' or 'seed' in verse 7, Paul later writes in Galatians 3:16,

"The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ."

Though Abram's offspring did become a great nation in the people of Israel, Paul points out that God's promise ultimately found fulfilment in "Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1).

Through this seed, God's blessing has come to the nations. Jesus took the curse of our sin upon the cross that all who trust him in Him might be restored to God's blessing for all eternity.

As those who have been joined to Jesus by faith, we too are part of Abraham's seed and heirs of the eternal promised land –

"If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Gal 3:29)

Christ's global church, bringing blessing to the nations (1 Pet 2:9-10), the risen Jesus receiving the name that is above every name (Phil 2:9), God's promises to Abram have truly been fulfilled in the one who left not Ur, but his heavenly home, in obedience to the Father.

SHARE

1. What has been the most significant season of change in your life? How did you adjust, and what challenges did it bring?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read Genesis 11:27-12:3

2. On what basis does God issue this great promise to Abram?
3. Where in the Genesis account does it reveal what it is like to be under God's blessing? How was this blessing jeopardised?
4. How is it that God will ultimately fulfil the promises made here to Abram and restore his blessing to the nations?

Read Genesis 12:4-9

5. In what ways is Abram here an exemplar of faith? (cf. Heb 11:1)
6. In what way does Abram here foreshadow the ultimate exemplar of faith, Jesus? (cf. Phil 2:5-11)

Read Genesis 12:10-20

7. Abram's bold act of faith was met with a famine. Has there been an instance in your life when a great step of faith/obedience was met with early and serious discouragement?
8. What is God's purpose in periods of such testing? (cf. James 1:2-4)
9. Abram turned to Egypt when his faith gave way to fear, to what do you usually turn when things go wrong and you're tempted to disbelieve God's goodness and power? Alternatively, reflect upon what personally gives you confidence for the future in this time of global upheaval? Is it God or in more natural things such as the scientific community, government policy or your own asset portfolio or resourcefulness?

NEXT STEPS

10. Spend some time together praising God that in Christ, his promise has been fulfilled. Specifically, that we the 'peoples' or 'nations' of the earth have been restored to God's blessing that we might know him and enjoy him forever! What a certain hope!

STUDY TWO - KING'S & NATIONS

- GENESIS 13-14

OVERVIEW

Genesis 13 – Abram's failure in Egypt is here followed by a renewed expression of trust in God. Like Abram, we too are often a strange mix of faith and of self-centred reliance. The chapter begins as Abram retraces his steps back through the Promised Land to recapture his previous walk with God (cf. 12:8). In the face of failure, true faith turns to God in repentance, depending not upon our own merit, but upon God's mercy. Abram exhibits this. Abram's faith however, is soon tested, this time not by the adversity of famine, but by prosperity. Where previously Abram had relied upon his own cunning, the worship which envelopes this chapter (13:4 & 18), suggests a renewed prayerful dependence upon God.

Accordingly, in contrast to Lot, Abram walks by faith, not by sight (2 Cor 5:7). Secure in the knowledge that God will grant him the Promised Land, Abram feels no compulsion to grasp at God's promises and so pull rank on Lot. Instead, he peaceably and generously lets Lot decide. Abram's faith is affirmed with a re-iteration of the Lord's covenant promises (14-17). Lot on the other hand, like Eve before him, disregards God on the basis of what appeals to the eye (Gen 3:6). Not concerned about Sodom's wickedness, Lot pitches his tents *near* Sodom (13:12) and eventually ends up *in* Sodom (14:12). Lot moves to the very outer reaches of the Promised Land and away from Abram and the focus of God's promised blessing. Lot's example warns us against being like those who would jeopardise the spiritual well-being of their families in the name of material and financial pursuits.

Genesis 14 – Lot's entanglement with the Sodomites soon lands him into trouble. The detail given to the conquest of Kedorlaomer and his allies shows us what Abram was up against. This ruling coalition included the powerful king of Babylon (aka Shinar) and had defeated tribes otherwise reputed as mighty (cf. 4:5; Deut 2:20-21). Yet Abram walks by faith, not by sight. Though not recognised as such, he knew that by rights he was God's appointed King of the land and so intervenes with God's authority to bring about justice. The raiding armies would soon learn the force of Genesis 12:3, "whoever curses you I will curse." Abram's potentially costly intervention to save an undeserving kinsman foreshadows Christ's costly rescue of undeserving sinners who also failed to appreciate his reign. As those redeemed, Christ empowers us and calls us to do the same. Abram's refusal to benefit from the exceptional evil of Sodom is also an example for us.

PROMISE+FULFILMENT

MELCHIZEDEK

In this chapter, where we see Abram portrayed at his most ideal, as the man of faith acting as king of land that was his by right, we see also the mysterious figure of Melchizedek towering over him. Although there is great blessing to be found in Abram, here is one who is even greater than Abram.' (Duguid, 46)

The enigmatic Melchizedek disappears from the Old Testament almost as soon as he appears - cited only elsewhere in Psalm 110:4 where it is predicted that the Messiah would also be a King-Priest like Melchizedek.

As King of Jerusalem (Ps 76:2) and Priest of the most high God, Melchizedek uniquely combined the offices of King and Priest and so foreshadows Christ who rules as King, yet intercedes for us as our High Priest.

Though it is speculative to say that Melchizedek was a pre-incarnate appearing of Christ, Hebrews 6:20-7:19 later reveals that he *foreshadows* or *resembles* (7:3) Christ in three further ways:

Firstly, his priesthood was not based on heredity but calling. Jesus similarly was not from the priestly tribe of Levi, but appointed priest by God himself. **Secondly**, his priesthood is eternal. Just as Melchizedek as a *literary* figure has no *reported* beginning or end in the Bible, Christ has no *actual* beginning or end. **Thirdly**, his priesthood is superior, just as Levi through ancestor Abram bowed to Melchizedek as God's appointed mediator, so too do all bow to Christ as our mediator with God.

SHARE

1. Have you ever had an experience where something looked good on the surface, but the reality turned out to be much different? Share with the group your experience.

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read Genesis 13

2. Given his recent failing in Egypt, what is the significance of Abram re-tracing his steps back to Bethel? (cf. 13:3-4; 12:8)
3. How does Abram's gracious offer to Lot (v. 8-9) demonstrate growth in faith since his failing in Egypt?
4. What are indicators that Lot operates here not by faith, but by sight?
5. Read Proverbs 30:8-9. How can prosperity be as much a temptation to sin as adversity?

Read Genesis 14

6. If you were in Abram's shoes, would you have bailed-out your nephew? Why or why not?
7. In what ways do Abram's actions here foreshadow the redemptive work of Christ?
8. How does the mysterious King of Salem foreshadow Christ? Why did Abram give him a tithe? (cf. Hebrews 6:20-7:19)⁹
9. In what way is Abram's response to the King of Sodom one of faith? (cf. Heb 11:25)

NEXT STEPS

10. Reflect with the group on one of the following –
 - a. Lot shared the fate of the Sodomites. Where have you been in danger of over-acclimatising to the worldview or expectations of others in your family, workplace or community?
 - b. Has your prosperity impacted negatively upon your relationship with God?
11. Read Ephesians 1:3-10 together. Though we can't *see* these promises in all their fullness yet, what would it look like in the day to day if we were to walk by faith in light of them?

⁹ Hebrews 6:20-7:19 is complex and worth a study in and of itself. Accordingly, don't feel the pressure to break it down in detail, rather simply familiarise yourself with its contents and see in general terms how the Melchizedek of Genesis 14 is a pointer to Christ.

STUDY THREE - GOD'S PROMISE

- GENESIS 15

OVERVIEW

Genesis 15:1-6 – With newfound enemies following the expedition of Genesis 14, God reminds Abram that he need not fear, for he has God himself as his shield. Though Abram faithfully declined the offer of plunder from the King of Sodom, he is reminded that he won't come up short, for God himself is his very great reward. Yet Abram's response in verse 2 betrays a despondency about the future – he lacks an heir and wonders how God's promises could come to fulfilment. The repeated heartbreak of failed conception has taken its toll. Accordingly, Abram indicates that his mind had turned to adopting a household servant – Eliezer of Damascus – as his heir. This is in keeping with an ancient near eastern practise whereby wealthy, childless couples would adopt a household servant so as to care for them in their older years in place of a son (Longman, 202). This also explains why Lot is not included as an heir. Abram again seeks to manipulate and manoeuvre in order to fulfil the promise. Yet God promises that Abram will indeed have a biological son. It is not insignificant that God powerfully conveys this promise with reference to the stars – for given the lunar worship that was so prevalent in Abram's homeland, he was likely well acquainted with their beauty and sheer number. In the face of impossibility, Abram takes God at his word and believes. This is faith.

Genesis 15:17-21 – Having addressed the first part of his promise (people), God now turns to the corresponding promise of land. Given the affirmation of Abram's faith in verse 6, it's right to see Abram's request for certainty in verse 8 not as an expression of unbelief, but of faith seeking understanding and battling doubt (cf. "I believe help me overcome my unbelief!" Mark 9:34). Genuine faith isn't immune from struggles and doubts, but through them all, at its core, refuses to jettison trust, confidence and reverence for God. God looks to give Abram certainty by initiating a covenant ceremony which appears strange to modern eyes, yet was an accepted custom in Abram's Mesopotamian homeland whereby animals would be killed, divided and their carcasses walked through by each party in order to solemnize a covenant (cf. Jer 34:17-20). Yet significantly, it is only the presence of God which passes through the carcasses. God thus graciously initiates a unilateral, unconditional covenant, 'saying in effect that he will be like those killed and divided animals if he does not keep his promises.' (Longman, 204). This of course brings Abram certainty, because God is indestructible and true. Yet this promise will nonetheless be for a future generation, and the awaited glory will be preceded by the suffering of slavery in Egypt.

PROMISE+FULFILMENT

FAITH ALONE

God's dealings with Abram here reveal the gospel in advance to us – that faith alone, and not works, place us in proper relationship to God.

To have righteousness credited or imputed to us is to receive a righteousness that is not our own, but Christ's (2 Cor 5:21). Jesus died on the cross in our place, that we who trust in him might stand in his place and have his perfect standing before God (his righteousness) credited to our account.

Thus when Abram looked to the stars and trusted God, it was because of Jesus' payment for his sins some 2000 years later, that his faith could be credited as righteousness. And so it is for us when we come to Christ in faith.

Romans 3:21-4:25 powerfully points out that Abram's justification in Genesis 15 came prior to the Law and prior to his circumcision (thus whilst a Gentile and not a Jew), reinforcing that we are saved by faith alone and not by works.

James 2 also famously quotes this passage and reminds us that though we are saved by faith alone, saving faith is never alone and will be accompanied by obedience which flows out from our faith. Works are thus the fruit and not the root of our salvation.

Like Abram, God calls us to respond to his grand and mind-blowing promises with faith that seeks not to work, not to manoeuvre, not to earn, but that simply trusts.

SHARE

1. What is the greatest offer you've ever been made? How did you respond?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read Genesis 15:1-6

2. God calls Abram not to fear (v. 1). What might have been causing Abram to be afraid? How does God's response allay these fears?
3. On what basis is Abram counted as righteous? (cf. Rom 3:21-4:5) What does it mean to be counted as righteous? (cf. Rom 4:6-8)
4. How does Abram's example demonstrate the relationship between saving faith and works? (cf. James 2:20-24)
5. What are the ways, or when are the times, when you find yourself slipping back into a mindset of 'works-based righteousness' in your relationship with God?

Read Genesis 15:7-21

6. What does the fire-pot and torch represent? (cf. Exo 3:2; 19:16-19; 40:34-38)
7. What is the significance of the torn animals? (cf. Jer 34:17-20) And why is it significant that it is *not* Abraham who passes through them?
8. How did this covenant ceremony give Abram certainty about God's promises (v. 8)?
9. Is it possible for a believer to have complete certainty that they too will one day inherit God's promise of eternal life?

NEXT STEPS

10. *'We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone.'*
Like Abram, has your faith in God and corresponding obedience changed the course of your life? Do you see evidences of faith in your day to day life, or do you need to repent of a distinct lack of evidence?
11. *'The whole point of faith is that its power doesn't rest in itself but in its object; God himself, the God who does the impossible, who gives children to the elderly and infertile, who gives a land to a people that didn't even then exist, and who takes broken and sinful people...and himself atones for their sins.'* (Duguid, 58)
Spend time reminding each other of the glorious object of your faith. For those comfortable, perhaps share a favourite scripture which speaks of the character of God, or share an instance of God's faithfulness in your own life.

STUDY FOUR - SARAI'S SOLUTION

- GENESIS 16

OVERVIEW

Genesis 16:1-6 – The focus now turns to Sarai. At 75 and having been in Canaan ten years (cf. 12:4-5 and 17:17), Sarai, like Abram, struggles to reconcile God's promises with their childless reality. Sarai thus engineers a solution which was a common cultural practise at the time – marriage contracts uncovered from the ancient Mesopotamian city of Nuzi, 'stipulate that if the wife turns out to be barren, she should provide the husband with a surrogate child-bearer.' (Walton, *NIV Application Commentary*, 445-6). Sarai nobly sacrifices her marital intimacy in order to expedite God's promise. Yet however culturally acceptable this polygamous approach was, it ignored God's monogamous design for marriage (2:24), betrayed a lack of trust in God's power and provision, and rode roughshod over Hagar. Furthermore, the turning to an Egyptian signals an ironic reversal of Genesis 12 - it is now Abram, rather than Sarai who is handed over to an Egyptian. The event serves as a warning to the original readers of Genesis, who, wandering in the desert after the Exodus, were themselves tempted to return to Egypt (Num 11:4-6). However, 'if we are scandalized by Sarai's volunteering of Hagar as her surrogate, Abram's passive, compliant conduct is even more offensive' (Hughes, 239). Note the striking parallel between Genesis 16 and 3 – both Eve and Sarai "take" and "give" (3:6; 16:3) to their husbands who "listen to the voice of their wives" (3:17; 16:2). The point here being *not* that it is wrong for a husband to listen to his wife (Abraham is called to do just that in 21:12)! Rather, in both instances, "There was an inversion of the proper spiritual leadership structure in the home, and the result in each case was disaster. Adam and Abram both abdicated their God-given role of spiritual headship, and instead of leading their wives toward the path of obedience to God, they followed their wives away from obedience.' (Duguid, 64 cf. Eph 5:21-33). Sarai is thus right to blame Abram for the fallout, which itself is the narrator's comment on the folly of polygamy.

Genesis 16:7-16 – Though Hagar wasn't entirely innocent (16:4), she certainly was the prime victim in this scenario and so flees back toward Egypt. Much like God hears the cries of enslaved Israel, he graciously hears the cries of Hagar (cf. 3:11; Ex 3:7), and manifests his presence (v 13) in the form of the 'angels of the Lord.' God calls Hagar to return to the one through whom God's global blessing would come. Indeed God foreshadows his blessing upon the nations by blessing Hagar. Her son's name a reflection of what she had come to know of the Lord (Ishamel = God hears). He indeed hears us, sees us, and comes to us in our suffering, and has done so in Christ.

PROMISE+FULFILMENT

HAGAR+SARAH

Paul explains that Hagar and Sarah are figurative of the Old & New Covenants respectively.

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise. These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother... Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. Galatians 4:22-26, 28

As Ishmael was the son of a slave, so too does the Law (given at Sinai) hold us in bondage to sin (thus liable to judgement). On the other hand, the New Covenant in Christ's blood sets us free from the guilt and power of sin and leads us to be heirs of the promise like Isaac.

Whereas Ishmael was the result of human effort and scheming, Isaac was a miracle of God's grace. In the same way, we become children of God as a result of the promise and not according to the works of the flesh. We are justified by faith and not by works. Let us therefore cease trying to secure the promise of God's blessing through our own efforts, manipulation and performance but place our faith in God's promise of salvation in Christ.

SHARE

1. When it comes to navigation on the road or on foot, do you prefer shooting for the shortcut, or staying on the main route?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read Genesis 16:1-6

2. Is Sarai's proposal commendable in any way (v 1-2)? Why or why not?
3. Noting Hagar's nationality, what has Egypt come to represent thus far in the narrative (c.f. 12:10; 13:10) and why might this have been significant for the original hearers of Genesis?¹⁰
4. Is Sarai justified in her accusation against Abram (v 5)?
5. How does this account parallel that of Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden?
6. Do you have any general principles that help you respond constructively when a loved one is perhaps pointing you away from obedience to Christ?

Read Genesis 16:7-16

7. Why might the Lord have called Hagar to return to Abram and Sarai?
8. From a Jewish perspective what might have been surprising about God's response to Hagar? (cf. Exodus 3:7)
9. What do we learn of God's character through Hagar's encounter with Him?
10. *'Yet though sin cannot simply be waved away and often has deep and lasting consequences in our lives, its eternal ramifications have been dealt with. Sin cannot be buried and forgotten, but it can be atoned for.'* (Duguid, 73)

What comfort is there here for those of who (though having been forgiven by Christ), live with the ongoing ramifications and complexities of sinful failure?

NEXT STEPS

11. Where in your life are you tempted to take short cuts as opposed to going God's way? Spend time praying for each other that you'd remain faithful and steadfast in obedience.

STUDY FIVE - PEOPLE OF THE PROMISE

- GENESIS 17

OVERVIEW

Genesis 17:1-8 – Thirteen long years have elapsed since the events of the previous chapter (cf. 16:16 & 17:1). Abram's failing, along with the domestic turmoil that ensued, left him in need of God's reassurance. God thus issues a second covenant renewal (similar to Genesis 15), to bolster Abram's faith in God's covenant promises. In so doing, God reveals two new names – firstly his own, *God Almighty* (Hebrew: *El Shaddai*, perhaps literally *God of the Mountains*). God seeks to enlarge Abram's vision of himself so that he might understand that nothing is impossible for God whose majesty and might are more weighty than the most imposing of mountain ranges. Secondly, Abram becomes Abraham (literally *father of many*). *El Shaddai* will himself ensure that the childless and ageing Abraham won't just be the father of a nation, but of many nations and of kings. Indeed the very act of renaming Abraham is reflective of God's power and authority, and was common practise in ancient treaties whereby a superior king would rename the lesser one as a demonstration of control and power (2 Ki 24:17).

Genesis 17:9-14 - Abraham thus found himself in the benevolent crosshairs of a truly mighty God. Accordingly, there can be no other response to His covenant of grace than complete surrender and obedience. This is reflected in the covenant symbol of circumcision. Promised offspring, it is fitting that the sign of the covenant is connected with Abraham's reproductive organ – a reminder that God alone, and not human scheming, would bring about the promise. Furthermore, like the dividing of the carcasses in Genesis 15, the circumcision ritual is self-maledictory - 'When the foreskin is cut off, the implicit significance of the ritual is that it indicates that if this child breaks the covenant, he will be *cut off* from God and the community and thrown away.' (Longman, 221). Like a wedding ring, the sign was permanent and to be reflective of faithfulness to one's covenant relationship with God (see sidebar). Without this symbol one could not participate in God's covenant community.

Genesis 17:15-27 – Two further names are revealed here: Isaac, a reflection of the joyous blessing that God would bring in the long awaited provision of a son. Sarah (west Semitic pronunciation of eastern *Sarai*, both meaning *Princess* – Longman, 220), reinforcing God's promise that Abraham and Sarah were effectively royals by virtue of God's promise - rulers of the land and ancestors to Kings. To all of this Abraham and his household model the appropriate response to God's covenant of grace, absolute surrender and obedience in adhering to the circumcision command.

PROMISE+FULFILMENT

CIRCUMCISION

Under the Old Covenant, circumcision was a sign for males and their households of belonging to God's covenant community. It reflected externally what God desired internally – wholehearted devotion to Him. Israel are thus repeatedly called to turn away from sin and circumcise their *hearts* to the Lord (cf. Jer 4:4; 9:26; Deut 10:16; 30:6 etc)

Yet Israel's repeated failure evidenced the hardness of heart which sin brings and of our need for God's intervention in Christ to circumcise our hearts so that we might become part of God's covenant community.

Colossians 2:11-13 describes how Christ brings this about -

In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins...

By faith we are joined to Christ such that the guilt and power of our sinful nature was cut off through his death on the cross, and our hearts made new through his resurrection life. Baptism symbolises this dying to sin and coming to life in Christ and so replaces circumcision as the rite of welcome into God's church.

SHARE

1. Is there any significance to the name(s) that you've been given? For parents, is there any significance to the names that you've given your children?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read Genesis 17:1-8

2. Why might the Lord have needed to renew or re-affirm his covenant with Abram?
3. What is the meaning and purpose of each of the two new names given here?
4. Abram's faith needed redirecting to God's might and greatness. Do you see any evidences in our collective life of faith that betrays a belief in a small or domesticated God?

Read Genesis 17:9-14

5. In what way(s) was the cutting off of the foreskin symbolic of the Lord's covenant with Abraham? (Hint: 17:2 & 14)
6. Read Jeremiah 4:4 & Romans 2:28-29. How did the sign of circumcision display outwardly what God desires inwardly of all of his people?
7. How does the sign circumcision in the Old Covenant relate to the sign baptism in the New? (cf. Col 2:9-15)
8. What do both these signs reveal about how God desires us to respond to his grace?

Read Genesis 17:15-27

9. What is the meaning and significance of each of the two new names given here?
10. In what ways do you resonate with, or are challenged by, Abraham's response to the Lord in these verses?

NEXT STEPS

11. 'When we fail to recognize the incredible grace and condescension of God in entering a relationship with us – the Lord of heaven with utter sinners – we desire a God who won't change our lives and make demands of us.' (Duguid, 83)

What most often stops you from going 'all-in' for God? Share with the group then pray for each other.

STUDY SIX - JUDGMENT & MERCY

- GENESIS 18-19

OVERVIEW

Genesis 18:1-15 – Though we are not immediately sure when the penny dropped for Abraham, it would seem as though he wasn't initially aware of the identity of his visitors (Hebrews 13:2). Abraham's frenzied activity and lavish hospitality is the kind of expression of faith repeatedly affirmed throughout the Scriptures (Heb 13:2; Rom 12:13; Matt 25:34-36; Lev 19:34) – as those who graciously welcomed by God we are to do the same for others.

As per the sidebar, this episode is an extraordinary expression of God's gracious friendship with Abraham – God meets and eats with Abraham so as to reaffirm his covenant promise of descendants and to iron out Sarah's lingering doubts as to the certainty of this promise. In so doing, God reveals himself to be omnipotent ("Is anything too hard for the Lord?") and omniscient (he knows Sarah's internal thoughts cf. Ps 139:1-4).

Genesis 18:16-33 – God's friendship and partnership with Abraham to bring his blessing to the nations, finds further expression through the disclosure of his intention to bring judgement upon Sodom and Gomorrah. It would seem that this disclosure has the added intention of aiding Abraham in directing his household in the way of righteousness (v 19) by witnessing sin's consequences.

Though the sin of Sodom is popularly connected with its sexual perversion, the language of 'outcry' (v 21) indicates brutality and oppression were prevalent also (cf. Exo 2:23). Indeed we learn later in Ezekiel 16:49-50, 'Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me...' These are sobering words for us here in wealthy Sydney.

We thus learn that the all-seeing and all-powerful God is also righteous and just. And it is on the basis of God's character that Abraham pleads boldly for mercy. This friend of God is also a friend of sinners and makes intercession for them just like his future Seed.

Abraham's implicit reasoning is likely that a sufficient remnant of righteous people in the city might be enough to turn the tide (cf. Prov 11:11). Chapter 19 however attests to the reality that there was no such sufficient remnant. Yet God hears and responds to the intercession of his friend and rescues Lot and his household.

Duguid thus writes, "Time ran out for Sodom – but it has not yet run out for us. We may still turn to Christ and receive salvation from his nail-scarred hands. We may still intercede for our friends and family, recognizing God's right to judge, but pleading the merits of Christ." (p 105). Like Abraham, we can do this as friends of God.

PROMISE+FULFILMENT

FRIEND OF GOD

Throughout the Old Testament, Abraham is the only one given the stunning designation 'friend of God' (2 Chron 20:7; Isa 41:8; cf. James 2:23).

We see this friendship beautifully worked out as God manifests his presence via the 'Angel of the Lord' (cf. 16:7-11) and consumes a meal with Abraham – the only time he does so prior to the Incarnation. As God does so, he lovingly confronts Sarah's doubts and reveals to her afresh his omnipotence and omniscience. He also reveals his plans of judgement to Abraham – for friends know and make known their desires and plans.

This friendship is remarkable given the holiness of God and the sin of humanity. Yet God initiated this friendship so as to restore His blessing to the nations through Abraham.

Indeed, as Isaac was to be an unlikely child (born of an elderly woman), it was through another unlikely child (born of a virgin), that Abraham's Seed would come into the world and so enable the nations to share in this friendship with God. Jesus himself says in John 15:15-16 –

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.

JUDGEMENT

Genesis 19:1-38 – Though nowhere near the lavish feast provided by Abraham, Lot’s hospitality toward the angelic messengers stands in stark contrast to the lust-crazed mob, thus vindicating God’s verdict and reflecting Lot’s relative righteousness (cf. 2 Peter 2:6-9)

The mob’s indignation at Lot in verse 9 is indicative of a sinful tendency to attack others who don’t condone our sin. Of this Hughes (p. 272) writes, ‘Sinners...are offended because you do not give hearty approval to their action (cf. Romans 1:32). In their eyes, absence of approval is unforgivably judgmental.’ How true this is in our day.

Lot’s place at the gate of the city indicated his prominence in Sodom. Yet Lot’s rise to prominence in such a city couldn’t have come without compromise and we see this reflected in his conflicted state over the coming verses – he staggeringly tries to maintain his virtue as host whilst abandoning his post as a father (v 8); he hesitates to let go of his life in Sodom and needs to be dragged out of the city (v 16); though aware of God’s grace (v 19), he struggles to trust his full deliverance and asks for refuge in Zoar (which literally means “Small” ie “Little Sodom”); we then see that the ways of Sodom have been allowed to infiltrate his daughters who ironically subject their father to the same mistreatment that he was prepared to allow them to suffer at the hands of the townsfolk (v 30-39). His utter loss and tragic ending stand as a warning for us who though righteous by faith, struggle leave behind the sinful and worldly values around us.

Furthermore, the parallel drunken endings of Lot and Noah (cf. 9:20-23) are a reminder of the enduring problem of sin which faces humanity – for even those rescued by God were still compromised by sin soon after. We thus are left awaiting Abraham’s Seed who is to restore God’s blessing to the nations.

Of the fiery destruction which takes place, many scholars have sought naturalistic explanations. The most popular is that an earth quake (of which a series in the area helped form the Syrian-African Rift), ‘opened a fissure, releasing gases that then ignited, setting the sulphur and petroleum deposits aflame, resulting in a catastrophic firestorm.’ (Hughes, 274-5)

This would explain the salt like corpse of Lot’s wife, who likely succumbed to sulphurous gases when she stopped on the plain and was then covered in salt and debris – ‘Her backward look was far more than momentary because the destruction of the cities did not begin until Lot and his daughters were safe in Zoar. Evidently she refused all encouragements to leave and lingered far behind.’ (Hughes, 275).

The devastation of Sodom and Gomorrah is used as a motif throughout scripture to warn of God’s coming and final judgement upon sin. For example, Jesus says in Luke 17:28-33 –

It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. 29 But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all.

30 “It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. 31 On that day no one who is on the housetop, with possessions inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. 32 Remember Lot’s wife! 33 Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.

Talk of God’s judgement is unsettling and uncomfortable, but the reality remains that humanity’s predicament in sin was so serious that Jesus had to go to the cross to rescue us from God’s coming wrath. Though Lot sought temporary refuge in Zoar, we can find true and lasting refuge in Christ. The cross is thus the supreme expression of God’s love and justice.

As those saved and thus aware of the judgement to come, we are called to pray for, and plead with, the world around us to be reconciled to God in Christ (2 Cor 5:20). We are also called to cease trying to hold onto worldly possessions which will perish, and instead live in light of the eternal hope which awaits us.

SHARE

1. How difficult do you find it to broach the topics of sin and judgement with loved ones or friends who aren't believers?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read Genesis 18:1-33

2. What do you think was the purpose of the Lord's visit to Abraham and Sarah?
3. Why does the Lord choose to disclose the coming judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah to Abraham?
4. Is God's just and righteous character good news or bad news?
5. Abraham is uniquely referred to in the Old Testament as the 'friend of God' (2 Chron 20:7; Isa 41:8; cf. James 2:23). How is that friendship demonstrated here?
6. Read John 15:15-16 & Rev 3:20. How easy do you find it to accept that in Christ, God's judgement has been turned away and that you too have become a *friend* of God? How should this reality colour the way you relate to God and others?

Read Genesis 19:1-38

7. What provoked the Lord's judgement upon Sodom? (cf. Ezekiel 16:49-50)
8. Where does Lot's faith shine and where does it falter in this chapter?
9. Read Luke 17:28-35. In what ways should Genesis 19 function as a sober warning for us?
10. For all his failings, Lot is later commended as one who was 'distressed by the depraved conduct' of the city around him, and as one 'tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard' (2 Peter 2:6-9). Do you think that on the whole we are like Lot? Or have we become callous and unfeeling toward sin in the world around us?

NEXT STEPS

11. Spend a moment in prayer (or song) praising God for 'Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath' (1 Thess 1:10) for indeed 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Joel 2:32). Then, as friends of God, spend time interceding for our city.

STUDY SEVEN - FALTERING FAITH

- GENESIS 20

OVERVIEW

Genesis 20:1-7 – The chapter begins with Abraham pushing south, he begins in the southern desert region of the Negev and then goes even further to Kadesh (in the northern region of the Sinai peninsula). He then doubles back to Gerar. As a nomad, he lacked the usual protections of clan structure and local rulers and so was naturally vulnerable as his household made such journeys.

Despite having just received the promise that Sarah will bear a son in a year (Genesis 18), Abraham threatens to derail God's plans almost immediately by again passing off Sarah as his sister.¹¹ In so doing, he mirrors his earlier failure in Egypt and reveals a habitual (v 13) sinful propensity to 'help' God's promises along through his own cunning, and in so doing, reveals a heart that does still not fully trust God.

Mercifully, God restrains Abimelech from sleeping with Sarah (v 6) – another signal of God's sovereign power in all situations. Knowledge of such sovereign power should inform our prayers when praying with concern for others caught up in sinful patterns of behaviour.

Genesis 20:8-18 – Ironically, though Abraham thought that the residents of Gerar lacked a fear of God, the response of Abimelech and the officials prove otherwise (perhaps a caution against assuming the worst or being pessimistic when sharing the gospel with unbelievers!). Indeed, their righteous and earnest response expose Abraham's own lack of fear and reverence – for had Abraham appropriately feared the Lord, he wouldn't have felt the need to lie about Sarah in the first place.

Furthermore this fear led Abraham to fail in his Godly leadership and encouragement of Sarah – in the name of 'love' (v 13) he convinces her to become complicit in his lack of faith. Yet God doesn't give up on Abraham and uses him to bring resolution and great blessing to the situation. This is an encouragement for all of us as we falter in our faith, as Iain Duguid (p 128) powerfully observes -

'God's ability to use even our sins for his own purposes shows that he doesn't love us simply for the great things we can do for him. All too often we think that in order for God really to love us, we must live an epic life of grand achievement... we typically focus on external achievements as the way to win God's approval: we want to attempt great things for him. The Bible, however, focuses on the internals: God's work of creating a great heart in us characterized by humility, gentleness, patience and love.'

¹¹ Which turns out to be a half-truth (20:12) – 'Interestingly, such a marriage was prohibited by later Mosaic Law (Lev 20:9). Since God blesses his marriage with Sarah, it is unlikely that such a marriage was considered wrong at this time. Indeed, this marriage, out of keeping with later Israelite sensibilities, provides an argument against attempts to late date the writing of the patriarchal narratives.' (Longman, 263).

PROMISE+FULFILMENT

INTERCESSOR

Abraham is the first person in Scripture to receive the title of Prophet. Though we usually associate such an office with one who speaks oracles on behalf of God to His people, here we see that one core prophetic function is to intercede with God on behalf of his people.

Abraham has already done that with respect to Lot and Sodom (Genesis 18), and is formally called to do so with respect to Abimelech and his household.

After the prophet Abraham, came the prophet Moses, who also interceded with God on behalf of his people. Yet Moses still looked forward to a future prophet –

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him. Deut 18:15

This long awaited prophet is none other than Abraham's promised Seed – Jesus. Of him we read,

Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Hebrews 7:25

He is the perfect intercessor for us. His eternal nature means he is ever present to intercede for us in the courts of heaven, and his perfect righteousness secures his standing before God and makes sufficient atonement for our sins.

The household of Abimelech found physical healing through Abraham's intercession, we find healing from our sins in Christ.

SHARE

1. Are there areas in your life where you are a creature of habit?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read Genesis 20:1-7

2. What are the similarities between this episode and Abraham's earlier failure in Egypt?
3. Given recent events, what makes Abraham's actions particularly reprehensible in this instance?
4. Who is it that keeps Abimelech from sin and how might our knowledge of this inform our prayer lives?
5. The severity of the Lord's threats to Abimelech reveals the God-ordained sanctity of marriage. How might we better uphold this sanctity together as God's people?

Read Genesis 20:8-18

6. What fear led Abraham to persuade Sarah to pretend that she was his sister, not his wife? Why was that fear unfounded?¹²
7. How might Abraham's intercession and the Lord's answer have been both painful and encouraging for Sarah?
8. Abraham's failure is not isolated (v 13). What encouragement is there in this passage for us who wrestle with habitual sins?
9. How does Abraham the prophet anticipate the future office and work of Jesus?

NEXT STEPS

10. Share with the group any failures or disappointments you've experienced in bringing appropriate honour and glory to the Lord before others. Pray for each other that God would grow our hearts through such failures and glorify his name nonetheless.

¹² Question sourced from Duguid, 129.

STUDY EIGHT - GOD'S PROVISION

- GENESIS 21

OVERVIEW

Genesis 21:1-7 – At age 100, it had been 25 long years since Abraham had first set out from Harran with the promise that he would be made into a great nation (12:4). Now finally, God's promise of offspring was finally coming to fruition.

Isaac's name recalls the initial response of Abraham and Sarah at the prospect of having children in their old age (cf. 17:17-19; 18:12-15). Yet upon Isaac's birth, his name more fittingly describes their sheer joy at God's gift. Abraham and Sarah thus now know more than ever before that God's promises are as good as done, for he has delivered on what he promised, and done what he said he would do (21:1).

Genesis 21:8-21 – Three years was the traditional time for weaning a child (Hughes, 294. Cf. 1 Sam 1:23ff). Due to high infant mortality rates, a feast was usually held at such a time to celebrate and thank God for the survival of the child. Yet what stands out is sixteen year old (cf. 17:21, 25) Ishmael's mocking laughter¹³ in sharp contrast to joyful laughter *with* Sarah and Abraham (v 6). Galatians 4:29 casts Ishmael's response in terms of persecution. Though Isaac's birth bore testimony to the power and promise of God, Ishmael does not respond with faith and stands in the line with the mockers who are at odds with the faithful and righteous (c.f. Ps 1:1).

What follows is a heart wrenching separation between Abraham, Ishmael and Hagar. Whilst Sarah's response appears harsh, God confirms this to be the appropriate course of action, 'for the sake of the promise, Abraham had to commit himself fully to Isaac (v 12)' (Duguid, 134). God allays Abraham's fatherly concerns by promising to richly bless Ishmael (1:13, 18). Furthermore, just as God later intervenes to save the life of Isaac (22:11), he also speaks to save the life of Ishmael (21:17). Our God is the one who sees all, and hears the cries of the distressed (cf. 16:11,13) and has compassion on the fatherless (Deut 10:18; Ps 10:14; Jer 49:11 etc). The tangled knots of by sin are weaved together by God's grace to bring blessing to all.

Genesis 21:22-34 – Though Abraham was once timid before Abimelech (ch 20), he is so no longer. Though he once feared that there was no 'fear of God in the land' (20:11), Abraham is now able to dwell in the land for a long time (v 34). Indeed, he plants a tamarisk tree as a sign of faith that he and his descendants will be in the land for a long time. Indeed, as will the tamarisk tree, Abraham's seed of faith has grown in stature over 25 years of joys, pains, failures and successes. This strength of this faith will be seen in Genesis 22.

¹³ In the Hebrew, the verbal form of Isaac's name is used to describe Ishmael's response. In its intensive form, the verb is rightly translated by the NIV as 'mock'. The narrator thus forms a jarring contrast between Sarah's laughter and Ishmael's 'laughter.'

PROMISE+FULFILMENT

UNLIKELY CHILD

Through the Old Testament, God blesses barren women with children born for a special purpose. Think of Rebekah (with Jacob and Esau), Hannah (with Samuel) and Samson's mother. This is also the case with Sarah and Isaac.

In each of these instances God makes it clear that it is *he* who is the one who has provided these special individuals for his covenant people, thus demonstrating his power and love.

Longman (p 276) thus goes on to insightfully write,

It is on this [Old Testament] background that we should read the story of Jesus' birth.

According to the Gospels (e.g., Matt 1:18-25), Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus.

Read against the background of the narratives of barren women giving birth to important children in redemptive history, Jesus' birth story stands out with its message that this child was truly special, far surpassing the importance of Isaac or any of the children born to barren women.'

Jesus is the most unlikely of children, raised up for the most important of purposes.

If Ishmael's fortunes rose and fell on the basis of his response to the promised son, how much more so do we on the basis of our response to the long awaited son of God. Will we trust in him and so become part of God's covenant people, or will we reject him and so be separated from God?

SHARE

1. What is the longest wait you've ever had for something you were longing for?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read Genesis 21:1-7

2. How long had Abraham and Sarah waited for this child? Briefly recount some of the ups and downs that had taken place over this period of time.
3. What is the point being stressed in verse 1?
4. What is the meaning and significance of Isaac's name? (cf. 17:17-19; 18:12-15)
5. Read 2 Corinthians 1:20. God's promises are trustworthy. What are some promises in Scripture that you have found particularly precious in your walk with Christ?

Read Genesis 21:8-21

6. What is so problematic about Ishmael's mocking laughter (as opposed to Sarah's joyful laughter)? (cf. Gal 4:29)
7. Was Sarah right to respond to Hagar and Ishmael the way that she did?
8. What do we learn of God's character in the way that he responds to Hagar and Ishmael?
9. Why is it problematic when people respond to God's ultimate promised son with mockery? What wisdom have you gained in knowing how to faithfully respond to those who mock Jesus?

Read Genesis 21:22-33

10. What evidences do we see in these verses of Abraham's growing trust in God?

NEXT STEPS

11. As you reflect on your own journey, have you seen God graciously working all things together to grow your faith? Can you see growth in other members of your group?

STUDY NINE - OBEDIENT FAITH

- GENESIS 22

OVERVIEW

Genesis 22:1-8 – As muscle develops only when exercised, so too does faith. Over decades Abraham has grown in faith as he has learned to trust God rather than his own devices. Now Abraham's faith meets its greatest test as God commands him to sacrifice Isaac.

The cost of the command is highlighted in verse 2 – *your only Son whom you love*. Yet not only would the command have strained Abraham's heart, but also his hopes, for Isaac was the promised offspring through whom God's earlier promises would be fulfilled. Though perhaps not widespread, child sacrifice did happen in the region (cf. 2 Kings 3:26-27). Hughes helpfully points out that,

'...it was not beyond the range of Abraham's experience or credulity. Human sacrifice took place in Ur, and it was also a part of Canaanite culture. Human sacrifice was therefore familiar to his conceptual worldview, however dumbfounding and repulsive it may have been to him.' (Hughes, 301).

Not yet having the later revelation that child sacrifice is abhorrent to God (Lev 18:21; 20:2-5; Deut 18:9-12; Jer 19:5), Abraham immediately obeys and saddles up the next morning. Hebrews 11:17-19 states that in the face of God's earlier promises, Abraham reasons that God will raise Isaac from the dead. This hope is perhaps evidenced in his statement to his servants (v 5).

Genesis 22:9-19 – Yet the God who tests is also the God who provides. Abraham's obedient faith is vindicated, Isaac spared, and a ram provided. One can only imagine the elation of father and son.

Taking place at the site of the future Temple (2 Chron 3:1), God's provision of a substitute anticipates Israel's future sacrificial worship. Yet even more so, as per the sidebar, this heart-wrenching moment for father and son foreshadows the cross, not least in Isaac's willing obedience. As the carrier of the wood, the adolescent¹⁴ Isaac was clearly the stronger of the two and could have resisted the elderly Abraham. Yet as father *and* son willingly ascended the mountain, so too did God the Father *and* the Son at Calvary (Isa 53:7. 10).

Abraham is commended for his fear of God (v 12). Indeed, genuine faith doesn't trifle when it comes to matters of obedience. If we really trust God, like Abraham, we will obey. We are justified by faith alone, but genuine faith is never alone. As an accent betrays one's locality, so too does our obedience reveal genuine faith. James 2:21-24 thus calls us to heed the example of Abraham and exposes spurious faith.

¹⁴ The Hebrew word for 'boy' (*na'ar*, v. 12) is also used to refer to the 16-year-old Ishmael (21:17) as well as the servants in this passage.

ONLY SON

God had promised to bless the nations through Abraham's Seed. It is in this climactic chapter and its searching events that we are given something of a window into how God will bring that blessing about.

Just as Abraham's heart was wrenched at offering up his only Son, so too did God the Father have to make such a sacrifice (cf. Mark 1:11; Isa 53:10). Just as Isaac bore the firewood up Mount Moriah, so too did Jesus bear the cross up the nearby Golgotha (Jn 19:17). Just as Isaac willingly obeyed his father, so too did Jesus (cf. Mark 14:36; Isa 53:7).

Yet ultimately, Abraham was not called to sacrifice his only Son, but only to trust God who would provide the necessary sacrifice for sin. As verse 8 more literally says, *'God will provide for himself the lamb...'* (ESV).

As God provided a substitute for Isaac on Moriah, so too has God ultimately provided a substitute to satisfy his wrath – *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."* (Jn 1:29)

Genesis 22 begins to make more sense when understood in light of the cross. In it we have a very real and vivid insight into the Father's love for us. As Iain Duguid writes, *'It was not just the Son who paid the price of our sin on the cross: the Father also paid deeply for our sin as he laid it all on his beloved Son, bringing down the knife of his righteous judgement against sin upon his Son's defenceless head.'* (p 147).

SHARE

1. Share with the group any personal highlights from our time in Genesis so far this term.

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read Genesis 22:1-8

2. In light of all the promises, all that has happened, and his fatherly love, how do you think Abraham must have felt upon receiving God's command?
3. At times Abraham's faith has faltered, what strikes you about his response here?
4. Read Heb 11:17-19. On what basis did Abraham hold resurrection hope for Isaac? Do you see any early hints of Abraham's hope in the passage?
5. Has there been a time in your life when you've had to make a significant sacrifice in following Jesus? What happened and how were you blessed from this experience?¹⁵

Read Genesis 22:9-19

6. How does this event foreshadow the cross and help us understand the Father's love?
7. Read Jas 2:21-24. What does Abraham's example teach us about genuine justifying faith?
8. What did Abraham come to learn of God's character and how is this an encouragement for us? (cf. Rom 8:32)

NEXT STEPS

9. Listen to *How Deep the Father's Love* (lyrics below) and together reflect on the love of God poured out for us at the cross. Respond in prayer by giving thanks to God.
10. *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.* (Romans 12:1)

*'...we can't claim that our obedience is sacrificial until it hurts.'*¹⁶

Are there areas in your life that are more precious to you than God and in which you would struggle to make costly sacrifices in obedience to God? Pray for each other.

¹⁵ Question adapted from Duguid, *The Gospel According to Abraham*, 149.

¹⁶ Richard Coekin, *A Few Good Men*, 43.

How Deep The Father's Love For Us

How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss –
The Father turns His face away,
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory.

Behold the man upon a cross,
My sin upon His shoulders;
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished;
His dying breath has brought me life –
I know that it is finished.

I will not boast in anything,
No gifts, no power, no wisdom;
But I will boast in Jesus Christ,
His death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer;
But this I know with all my heart –
His wounds have paid my ransom.

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STUDY TEN - GOD'S KINDNESS

- GENESIS 24

OVERVIEW

Genesis 24:1-9 – In faith, Abraham pursues God’s promise of descendants by seeking out a wife for his son. He does so by means of his senior servant (Eliezer of Damascus in 15:2?), for he has already learned how ill-advised it is to personally leave the land God had promised to him. He thus makes his servant swear that he will not cause Isaac to leave the land either. The placement of the servant’s hand so close to his procreative organs (cf. 47:29), signals the purpose of the mission and God’s promise of a seed/offspring. Abraham’s instruction for Isaac not to marry a Canaanite woman is likely tied to God’s judgement upon the godlessness of Canaan (15:16; cf. 9:25). Abraham thus prizes not ethnicity, but Godly character arising from faith (which we shall soon see evident in Rebekah and her family’s response to the servant). Given the events of Gen 22, Abraham is confident in the Lord’s provision of a bride.

Genesis 24:10-27 – Aram Naharaim was located in the transitional zone between Mesopotamia and Syria and would have taken several months to reach. Upon arrival, the servant wisely prays for God’s guidance in revealing a woman of noble character. This was no arbitrary test (cf. Judges 6:36-40) but a prayer that would God reveal a suitable bride as she met the criteria of a generous and hospitable spirit. Duguid writes of the servant, ‘He didn’t ask for a miraculous sign from God. Instead, he sought supernatural guidance in the way it so often comes, through the ordinary events of life.’ (p 164). Indeed, God’s providence shines in Genesis 24 as we see him orchestrating the ordinary events of life to bring about his purposes, for before the servant even finishes praying, Rebekah appears (v. 15 – meaning she probably left her dwelling *before* the servant even begun praying!) Of her impressive response, Hughes writes (p 318)

‘...the ancient well was a large, deep hole in the earth with steps leading down to the spring water – so that each drawing of water required substantial effort. And more, a camel typically would drink about twenty-five gallons of water, and an ancient water jar held about three gallons of water. This means that Rebekah made between eighty and one hundred descents into the well.’

The process would have taken 1-1.5 hours! Rebekah was certainly a woman of gumption, generosity and hospitality! Her family connection to Abraham confirms her as the Lord’s choice and causes the servant to rejoice at God’s kindness to Abraham.

Genesis 24:28-67 – Rebekah’s suitability is most clearly confirmed by her Abraham-like faith that is ready to leave her homeland in response to the revelation of God (24:58). She went by faith.

PROMISE+FULFILMENT

AT THE WELL

Type-Scenes are a literary device whereby a familiar set of circumstances are used to build expectations as to what will transpire, or to signal the significance of an event.

Type-scenes are prevalent in Biblical narrative. In fact, one recurrent type-scene is the meeting of a man and a woman at a well which serves as a precursor to marriage – e.g. Isaac/Rebekah, Jacob/Rachel, Moses/Zipporah.

It is therefore surprising in Jesus’ day to find him speaking with a woman at a well in Samaria (John 4:27), Jacob’s well no less!

Yet far from signalling impending nuptials, Jesus’ invites the woman into a much more significant and intimate relationship than marriage, Jesus invites her into a relationship with God himself.

Indeed, ‘*Jesus invites all of us into a spiritual marriage with him, one that will culminate in the “marriage supper of the lamb” (Rev 19:1-10).*’ (Longman, 322).

Even the most idyllic marriages (e.g. the sunset/fairytale ending of Genesis 24) are but a faint picture of what God offers *all* of us eternally in Christ.

Indeed, perhaps one further parallel with the gospel can be seen between the selfless senior servant who prepares the way for the bridegroom and John the Baptist who did the same for Christ (cf. John 3:29-30; Hughes, 317).

SHARE

1. Has there been an instance when you felt overwhelmed with a sense of God's kindness?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read Genesis 24:1-9

2. Why was Abraham adamant that Isaac not return to his ancestral homeland?
3. Why might Abraham not have wanted Isaac to marry a Canaanite? (cf. 9:25; 15:16)
4. How is the maturity of Abraham's faith evident in this passage?

Read Genesis 24:10-27

5. What do you think was the reasoning behind the servant's prayer in verse 14?
6. Read Romans 8:28. What is God's providence and how do we see it demonstrated here?
7. Read Proverbs 3:5-6. How is the servant's example instructive for us as we seek God's guidance in our day to day lives?

Read Genesis 24:28-67

8. How does Rebekah demonstrate herself to be a fitting choice for Isaac?
9. *'There would undoubtedly be differences between Isaac and Rebekah that would have to be overcome. Certainly they would travel down some difficult paths together. But they had at their disposal the means of overcoming those difficulties because their lives were fundamentally headed in the same direction. They were both led by the same faith in Israel's God. God had brought them together, and their faith in him would sustain them all the days of their life.'* (Iain Duguid, *The Gospel According to Abraham*, 166)

How might this passage provide wise counsel for those considering marriage or supporting others who are?

NEXT STEPS

10. Are you facing a big decision in your life at the moment? Share it with the group and pray for each other that God might grant wisdom, guidance and an obedient heart.
11. God governs not only the miracles of life, but the each and everyday circumstances for our ultimate good. Spend time in prayer praising God for his goodness and his power.

STUDY ELEVEN - STILL LONGING

- GENESIS 23 & 25:1-11

OVERVIEW

Genesis 23 – Along with Abraham, Sarah is remembered for her great faith (Isa 51:1-2; Heb 11:11). After over 100 years of marriage and 62 years of pilgrimage, Abraham is understandably grief-stricken at the loss of his life partner (v 2). This is a reminder that the hope of eternal life, though a powerful comfort (1 Thess 4:13-14), doesn't negate the grief of separation and the pain of suffering and death. After all, Jesus himself wept at Lazarus' tomb (John 11:35).

Abraham's subsequent move to secure a burial plot for Sarah is significant. Though a nomad, he was so sure of God's promise that he decides not to bury Sarah in her ancestral homeland, but in the place his descendants would dwell. Of the bargaining process with Ephron the Hittite, Duguid writes,

'Ephron's answer, although a model of ancient Near Eastern deference and respect, offered quite a different deal. He wanted Abraham to buy the entire field, not just the cave, and without ever quite mentioning a price, he asked for the vast sum of four hundred pieces of silver-more than a year's wages for a normal worker. Yet instead of haggling over the extortionate price, as would have been the usual custom, Abraham paid the full amount without demurral.' (p 152).

Abraham spared no expense that this parcel of land be recognised to be undisputedly his. Indeed, this small slice of real estate remained the sum total of the holdings of Abraham's family for many centuries until Joshua led God's people across the Jordan River. Machpelah in Hebron thus became a symbol or token of God's promised inheritance and an important burial place for the patriarchs.

Genesis 25:1-11 – After 100 long years of pilgrimage, Abraham too dies. God's promise of dying in peace at an old age is fulfilled (15:15). So too do the genealogies convey an *initial* fulfilment of the promise of descendants. Yet despite the fact that these children would go onto father nations, Abraham knew that the ultimate fulfilment of God's promises would come through Isaac. So like Ishmael, these sons of his new marriage are lovingly provided for, but sent away.

Hebrews 11:8-16 points out that Abraham's life reveals what is true of the experience of faith – we live in the gap between promise and reality. We await the fulfilment of God's promises in eternity and therefore live presently as foreigners and strangers until we too are gathered together with God's people, 'the living fellowship of the redeemed.' (Hughes, 326). Abraham anticipated that his descendants would dwell in the Promised Land, but ultimately he looked forward to an eternal city (Heb 11:16), may we live in similar expectation.

PROMISE+FULFILMENT

DOWNPAYMENT

Centuries before the land of Canaan would come into the possession of his descendants, Abraham goes to extravagant lengths to secure a burial plot for Sarah and so secure something of a down payment on God's Promised Land. Duguid (p 153) thus aptly writes,

'To Abraham and his descendants Machpelah represented the firstfruits of the Promised Land. It was the downpayment by God, which represented an assurance that one day the whole land would be theirs.'

It was thus the place in which Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were also buried. It was also potentially the place (located in Hebron) which emboldened the spies Caleb and Joshua to declare that God would enable Israel to take possession of the land (cf. Num 13:22; 30).

Heb 11:8-16 reminds us that in Christ, the city and land we ultimately long for and that was ultimately promised to Abraham is eternal. Thus, whilst Abraham had Machpelah as a token of future earthly realities, we have an even greater downpayment on our heavenly inheritance- Eph 1:13-14 says, *And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession...*

May His presence embolden us as we await the fulfilment of the promise, just like Caleb and Joshua!

SHARE

1. In this study we begin by reading of Abraham's grief at Sarah's death. For those who feel comfortable sharing, what has been hardest in your experience of losing a loved one?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read Genesis 23

2. How does faith inform our grief at the death of a loved one? Does it completely remove our grief? (cf. 1 Thess 4:13-14)
3. Why did this 'foreigner and stranger,' or wandering nomad, want to pay such a high price to secure a piece of property?
4. Why was Machpelah such a significant location for the ensuing generations of patriarchs? (cf. 49:31; 50:13)

Read Genesis 25:1-11

5. What promises of God had been fulfilled in Abraham's life at the point of his death?
6. What promises remained to be fulfilled?

Read Hebrews 11:8-16

7. What does the experience of Abraham and Sarah teach us about the life of faith?
8. Like Abraham & Sarah, we too are 'foreigners and strangers' here on earth (cf. 1 Pet 2:11). What does this mean and how should it impact the way we live?

NEXT STEPS

9. Take turns reading the verses below about our heavenly inheritance. What do you most anticipate about heaven?
10. In the expensive purchase of Sarah's tomb, Abraham's 'ultimate priorities impacted his earthly expenditures.'¹⁷ How should we follow suit? How is Jesus' approach to earthly possessions instructive for us?

¹⁷ Duguid, 153.

Some Scriptures on Heaven

Revelation 21:1-4

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

1 Thessalonians 2:13-18

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Job 19:25-28

I know that my redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand on the earth.
And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God;
I myself will see him
with my own eyes—I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me!

John 14:2-3

My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there

to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Revelation 22:1-5

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Psalms 16:11

You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people’s disgrace
from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.

In that day they will say,
“Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the Lord, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.