

**Following in  
our father's footsteps  
in  
GENESIS 12-23**

**A unique, verse-by-verse,  
life-application commentary  
by Terran Williams**

## Introduction to Genesis 12-23

Abraham is described as 'the father of all who believe'. Like a father who leaves footsteps in the beach sand, in which his children can follow, so Abraham's life (recorded in Genesis 12-23) captures the pattern for the life of faith. What a privilege and adventure it is to 'walk in the footsteps of the faith that Abraham had' (Romans 4:12).

Of all the studies I have done of various parts of the Bible, none has so impacted upon my life and faith as this one.

I encourage you to explore his life step-by-step, chapter-by-chapter. You'll be surprised by how his life and faith helps you make sense of your life and faith. You'll be stunned by God's magnanimous grace shown to him, and to us.

### A personal approach to going through Genesis 12-23

- 1) Make time every day. Allocate as much time as you need to really hear from God for your life. Read until you are full - don't just *snack* on the Bible, rather enjoy a *solid meal*.
- 2) Take your time as you go through Genesis, starting at chapter one, verse one. It doesn't matter if you do the whole Bible in a year, or in five years, just as long as you're *steadily* moving through it.
- 3) Trust God to speak to you every time you read the Bible. Expect to receive just what you need for each day. Invite the Holy Spirit to be your primary teacher as you read.
- 4) Keep two questions in your mind as you read: 1) What do these verses mean? 2) What do they mean for my life now? If you can't find solid answers to either of these two important questions then refer to this commentary.
- 5) Carry into your day what you sense God saying to you. Perhaps write down the main things you sense God telling you each day. Pray to God about what he has just said to you. Make any needed adjustments in your heart and life as God reveals more and more of his Word, will and ways to you.

## Small Group Guide

Why not work through Genesis 12-23 as a small group for four weeks? In preparation every week, everyone in the group needs to explore three chapters of Abraham's life, using part or all (you choose how deep you want to go) of this commentary for increased insight. When you come together, give a brief overview of the events of Abraham's life covered in the three chapters, and then have a conversation where people answer two questions: 'What did you find most interesting?' and 'What has God been saying to you through these verses?' Then end the conversation by getting everyone to briefly complete the sentence, 'One way I want to change my life in light of these verses is ....'. Then pray together in response to God's revelation in his Word.

Week 1: Genesis 12-14	Week 2: Genesis 15-17
Week 3: Genesis 18-20	Week 4: Genesis 21-23

## You may own a Bible, but does your Bible own you?

It's not enough to own a Bible. Our Bible should own us. After all, it is the main way God speaks to us. Did you know that God put every verse in the Bible so that your mind could be totally renewed, so that your life could be deeply changed, and so that your calling could be fulfilled? (See 2 Timothy 3:16-17 if you're not persuaded.) That's why reading the whole Bible again and again is one of the most important things we can do.

Sometimes, however, the Bible is hard to understand. That's why commentaries are so useful. Most commentaries help you understand the *technical* meaning of each verse. This commentary helps you do a little of that too, but more than that, it focuses on the meaning of each verse *for our lives now*.

What's unique about this commentary? Most importantly, it helps you to find *the meaning for your life now* in every single verse of Genesis 1-3. It is written with 21<sup>st</sup> century everyday people in mind. It builds on the scholarship of brilliant theologians and commentaries, but doesn't focus on the exhausting technicalities that fill most commentaries.

## Major sources used

- Michael Eaton's 'Preaching through the Bible: Genesis 1-11'
- FB Meyer's 'The Life of Abraham'.
- David Guzik's 'Commentary on Genesis' (*available on [www.enduringword.com/commentaries/01.html](http://www.enduringword.com/commentaries/01.html)*)

## Outline

- *great grace, great faith (12:1-9)*
- *trust God, love people (12:10-13:18)*
- *Christ's liberating grace (14:1-24)*
- *doubt and assurance (15:1-20)*
- *running ahead of God (16:1-16)*
- *the impact of God's promise on our lives (17:1-27)*
- *encountering God through openness and prayer (18:1-33)*
- *sobering realities (19:1-38)*
- *when believers blow it (20:1-18)*
- *God keeps his promises (21:1-34)*
- *radical obedience (22:1-24)*
- *ordinary life under an extraordinary promise (23:1-20)*

# Genesis 12

## GREAT GRACE, GREAT FAITH (12:1-9)

*Read 12:1-3*

### **Where sin increases, God's grace increases all the more (Romans 5:20)**

- Genesis 3-11 has vividly described the fall of humanity. Five times in those chapters (3:14,17; 4:1; 5:29; 9:25) the word 'curse' is used. It speaks of the downward spiral of depravity that has taken over the human race. But then suddenly, in fulfilment of the promise in 3:15, God turns the tide with his sovereign, gracious choice of Abraham - and five times in these few verses the word 'bless' is used! It is as though God is saying, 'The world may be on a downward spiral, but I have plans to turn it around.'
- God chooses Abram by pure, undeserved grace. Abram's faith is merely a response to God's grace-movements toward him. Abram, a moon-worshipper at the time, is no more godly than anyone else. Like Noah, he 'found grace' (6:8).
- If Genesis 3-11 can be summarized by the phrase 'sin increased', then these few verses can be summarized like this: 'but God's grace increases all the more!' It is as though our sin is the dark and stormy backdrop, against which the sun of God's grace rises and shines in radical contrast. Our sin only serves to magnify the wonders and beauty of his grace.

### **You have great promises, if you're Abraham's seed.**

- Notice the multi-faceted promise that God gives him. It is divided into two categories. The first category is blessing to him, which consists of four aspects: 1) land to enjoy (v1), 2) large numerical growth of his family ('I will make you into a great nation'), 3) personal blessing ('I will bless you') and 4) honour ('a great name'). The second category of promises is blessing through him. This includes: 5) usefulness ('you will be a blessing'), 6) God's strong backing (v3a), and 7) positive international impact (v3b).
- Remarkably, Galatians 3:7,9 tell us that all people who believe, in response to God's grace towards them in Christ, are in fact children of Abraham, and that we are 'blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith'. In other words, these seven promises apply to Christians too, not just Abraham! Let us look at all seven promises, remembering that the first four are about how God wants to bless us, and the last three are about how God wants to bless others through us:
- 1) *We're promised 'land'*. Ultimately, this land means the new heavens and the new earth, which we will live in and enjoy forever, but already now, we get to see God's kingdom at work in and through our lives. In a sense, every time we touch lives and spheres with God's grace, we're taking spiritual territory for God. God is currently reclaiming people and aspects of life and society for himself through his church.
- 2) *We're promised numerical growth*. As we persist as Christians in contagious faith and courageous, yet thoughtful evangelism, we continue

to grow numerically. God 'adds to our number' (Acts 2:47). It is God's plan to use us as 'fishers of people' (Matthew 4:19).

- 3) *We're promised personal blessing.* We have every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3) - this refers to the wonders of our salvation. We have the blessing of the Spirit, which Paul tells us is the main blessing given to Abraham (Galatians 3:14). This includes an abundant provision of joy, peace and righteousness (Romans 14:17). It is true that God will also provide for us materially (Philippians 4:19), but it must be said that material blessing is not emphasized in the New Testament to the degree that it was emphasized in the Old Testament.
- 4) *We're promised a name.* This refers to recognition and honour given by God. Although people may overlook us now, as they did to Jesus - the time will come when we will receive God-given recognition and honour. Jesus will mention our name before the father (Revelations 3:5), for example. Although Jesus has the name above every other name (Philippians 2:11), we receive some honour too. Our names are written on God's hand (Isaiah 49:16), and in the book of life (Revelations 3:5).
- 5) *We're promised that God will use us.* It is God's plan that we be a blessing to the people around us. Jesus desires that God's character of mercy and justice be revealed through our deeds of service (Matthew 5:16). We're even meant to bless our enemies (Matthew 5:44). The early disciples understood that the most obvious way they could bless people was by urging them to receive God's gift of salvation (see Acts 3:26). We too get to bless people practically and spiritually. God wants to use us in this way.
- 6) *We're promised that God will strongly back us.* Abraham understood that, by sheer grace, he was so central to God's purposes that if people opposed him it was as though they were opposing God. If people supported him it was as though they were supporting God. Still today, God takes it personally when people threaten the church (see Acts 9:4) and he is ready to bless those who bless even the most vulnerable of his people (see Mark 9:41).
- 7) *We're promised international impact.* Genesis 1-11 revealed that the nations of the world had fallen into sin. Amazingly, God promises that through Abraham the whole world - all nations - will experience salvation. Ultimately, it was through Christ, the seed of Abraham, that this blessing would touch the ends of the earth. And it is through us, those who share the message of Christ, that the ends of the earth are reached (see Acts 1:8). Mark Buchanan writes, 'God has much to say about the nations, and has purposes for them that span history and consummate in eternity. From the beginning, the nations posed a problem for God. Psalm 2 says they rage against God's Messiah, but the Messiah simply has to ask in order to inherit them. The gospel is for all nations, starting with Abraham's mandate to bless them and culminating in Jesus' sacrifice to win them. Heaven, the Book of Revelation says, is where the glory of the nations and the splendour of their kings come before God, and its company is made up of people from every tribe and tongue and nation.' Amazingly, every believer and every church has a part to play in this world-wide impact. Another way of thinking of this is that every believer is a 'sent one'. God is a missionary God who is in the

habit of sending his people out (v1). Abram was sent out from the place and people he knew, into unfamiliar territory. This must have come at a price, but still he obeyed. Still today, God sends his people out. We think of the gospel of John where Jesus repeatedly (40 times!) describes himself as 'sent' and then tells us that as he is sent, so we are sent (John 20:21). Every believer needs to have a readiness to 'go' the moment God sends us (see Matthew 28:19).

- *But these promises do not all get fulfilled instantly, and most of them have some condition attached.* For example, for Abraham it all hinged on his faith-based obedience to 'go' and to keep on going in the direction God led him (v1). For us too, we must perseveringly trust if we are to receive these promises (Hebrews 6:12).

Read 12:1-5

#### **Live by faith in God's word to you.**

- The New Testament describes Abraham as the model of faith. We walk in the 'footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had' (Romans 4:12). Notice a few things about faith:
- *1) Faith is a response to God's revelation.* The only reason that Abram had faith is because God spoke to him. Until God reveals himself, his will, and his promise to us, we cannot have faith.
- *2) Faith is usually based on God's promises.* Although faith may be a response to a revelation of who God is, it is usually a response to what God says - very often about the future, as is the case here. God had told Abram much about the future (v1-3), and Abram believed him. Still today, through the Scriptures, and through other means God gives us promises about our futures, and we best believe them.
- *3) Faith naturally leads to obedience.* Because Abram believed that God had a plan for his life, and would look after him, it naturally led to obedience. Romans 1:5 speaks of 'the obedience that comes from faith'. Still today, the extent to which we trust God and take him at his word will determine the extent of our obedience. An important aside to remember is that obedience is something very practical. We see Abram having to make massive adjustments - mobilizing a large group of people who are connected to him - as he obeys God. Obedience is worked out very practically in the details of our daily lives. It is more than a moment of decision; it is a process of adjustment.
- *4) Faith is not based on sight, but on God's promises.* We live by faith not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Though Abram did not know where he was going, he knew that God has a place for him to go. He knew that one day his faith would eventually translate into sight, but he had to live by faith not by sight until that moment came. In the following verse (v6) we will see this principle highlighted: we're told that as Abram noticed the Canaanites who owned the land, God told him that this land would eventually belong to his tribe. Abram lived by faith in God's word, not by an observation of current circumstances.

Read 12:6-7

**If you're faithful with God's revelation, he will give you more revelation.**

- Abram had responded to God's revelation that he should go. Once he had done so, this led to God, at a time of his choice, revealing some more to him (v7). This is important to see. As we respond to God's revelation with faith and obedience, we set ourselves up for further revelation. Very often the reason God is silent, is because the last time he spoke to us, we did not trust him. The life of faith is much like a join-the-dot picture: as we trust him at one point, he leads us to another point.
- *(For insight into the promise given in verse 7, see commentary on 13:14-17, where the promise is repeated with more detail.)*

Read 12:7-9

**In response to God's grace, make time to regularly meet with God.**

- We're told that Abram built many altars (one in Schechem (v7), one between Bethel and Ai (v8), one at Hebron (13:8), and one in Moriah (22:9). He would revisit them (see 13:4). But what do these altars mean? 1) They were a place where Abram would seek and freshly devote himself to God. The Christian too needs to set apart time, and perhaps even a place, to meet with God, where we freshly devote ourselves to him. 2) They were a place where animals were sacrificed (probably he was following Abel's example, with the understanding that the innocent animal took the punishment for his own sin - see commentary on 4:2-5.) As Christians, we don't sacrifice animals, but we do regularly re-affirm that our right standing with God is based on the substitution-death of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

**A life of faith is a life of journey.**

- From the moment he left Harran till his death (ages 75-125) Abram lived in a tent! And he moved from place to place. 'By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents ... for he was looking forward to a better city' (Hebrews 11:9,10).
- His faith in God translated into life as a journey. God led him from place to place. God unfolded revelation upon revelation. God exposed him to test upon test. The Christian life is like this. It is a journey. God is not so concerned about our settling down in our hearts, he is more interested in leading us on an adventurous journey. (God may, however, lead us as Christians, to settle down in one place, perhaps for our whole lives). He wants us to keep on evolving and learning. All the time, he wants us to long for him, and to remember that although we are in this world, we belong to another world and will finally settle there. We are not to gravitate to the wealth and the seductions of the world around us but rather to Our world beyond the stars. We are citizens of a heaven

(Philippians 3:20). As we live by faith, we are mere pilgrims, not settlers, in this world.

## TRUST GOD, LOVE PEOPLE (12:10-13:18)

*Read 12:10*

### **Beware of the loss of faith.**

- God had sent Abram into Canaan, and confirmed that this was the general area in which to stay (v7). God had promised to bless him (v2). But now a test comes: famine. Abram feels the pressure, and sadly takes his life back into his own hands. He heads for Egypt without seeking God first, and without any leading from God.
- Still today, the pressures of life will try and take our eyes off God and his promises to guide and provide. Instead we rely on our ability to save ourselves by our own initiative and resourcefulness. When this happens we no longer live by faith so our faith fails.
- The interesting thing is that if you were to ask Abram if he believed that God would still provide for him in the long-term, he'd say 'yes'. The problem was that he struggled to believe that God would provide for him in an immediate crisis. Similarly, we as Christians have no doubt that God will take care of us in the long-term and eternally, but our true level of trust is revealed by how we respond in a crisis.
- And as we shall see, when our faith fails, one sin leads to another...

*Read 12:11-16*

### **A failure to trust God easily leads to a failure to love others.**

- Abram, nervous that the men of Egypt will kill him to get his wife, tries to make himself less threatening by making his own wife more available to them. How shocking. Instead of trusting God, he is attempting to save himself and himself alone. And his self-help strategy actually works - Pharaoh takes her in as one of his many wives. Abram doesn't seem to mind, and he enjoys a number of material benefits (v16).
- In the words of FB Meyer, 'When we lose our faith and are filled with panic for ourselves, we become unmindful of all and every tie and are prepared to sacrifice our nearest and dearest, if only we may survive.' However, the opposite is true too: 'faith expresses itself in love' (Galatians 5:6). People who trust in God's ability to look after them are more likely to look after loved ones, rather than themselves, when tough times come.

Read 12:17-20

**A lack of faith undermines your life's basic mission.**

- Abram had a commission on his life: he was to be a blessing to the nations of the world (12:3). This would have included his own wife of course, and Pharaoh. But instead, Abram brings damage to his wife, and to Pharaoh.
- Still today, we Christians have that same commission to be a blessing to people everywhere, starting with our own family, and then to people of other nations. And yet, oh what a tragedy it is, we so often live in modes of self-preservation, thinking only of ourselves, our own security and comfort and profit! And what damage is done to the name of Christ. Let us not fail to trust God. Let us not fail in our life's basic mission: to bless others.

**God mercifully exposes your sin in order to restore you.**

- When we as Christians live deceitfully, God will mercifully expose us. This is what he did to Abram. Somehow he revealed to Pharaoh that Sarai was his wife. Amazingly, Pharaoh spared his life - no doubt because of God's mercy at work. Being exposed is humiliating and may not at the time feel like God's mercy, but he is committed to restoring us, and bringing us to a place of repentance. God gave Abram another chance. Still today, God exposes us in order to restore us.
- We must also remember that Abram wasn't exactly commissioned to be a blessing (as stated in the previous point) - God promised to make him a blessing. Today, despite our persistent selfishness, God will not stop working on us (as painful as this can be at times) in order to set us free to be a genuine blessing to the people around us.
- The good news is that Abram again humbled himself before God (see 13:3) - and once again became a person of genuine love (as we shall see in the way he relates to Lot in the next chapter). God is powerfully able to restore us to our life's mission.

## Genesis 13

Read 13:1-9

**Faith in God empowers a wise approach to dealing with conflict.**

- It appears that Abram had been lovingly disciplined by God not to look out only for his own welfare, but instead, based on his renewed trust in God, to be a blessing to others (12:17-3:4). And it appears that Abram was a new man because of it. Notice his love and maturity in dealing with a situation of serious conflict:
- 1) *He initiates respectful dialogue.* Instead of hoping that the conflict goes away, he organizes a meeting to resolve the matter (v8). Today, in conflict situations we should do the same.
- 2) *He seeks to maintain peace through separation.* After discussion, it seems that no real resolution is found, so he takes the option of agreeing

to disagree. He does this by allowing Lot to go his separate way (v9a). We see this same principle in the New Testament when Paul and Barnabas go their separate ways (see Acts 15:39), and again when unbelieving spouses are freed to leave their partner (1 Corinthians 7:12-15).

- 3) *He is very generous.* Abram so trusts God that he allows Lot to take whatever land he wants (v9b). How desperately we who trust in God need to be ready to become generous, being fully assured that God will look after us.

Read 13:10-13

**Spiritual immaturity is revealed by the decisions you make.**

- Just while Abram is showing signs of spiritual maturity (v1-9), Lot shows signs of spiritual immaturity:
- 1) *He makes a decision without reference to God (v10).* He does not seek God, but simply looks around. He is drawn totally by what seems to be best (v1). Still today, we dare not make big life decisions without reference to God, judging only by what seems best. It is a sign of spiritual immaturity.
- 2) *He makes a decision only caring about himself (v11).* Lot did not think of Abram at all, just himself. While Abram had been generous (v9), Lot was greedy. Whenever we make major decisions without thinking on how it will impact others, we show our immaturity.
- 3) *He makes a decision without discerning spiritual danger (v12,13).* Lot is drawn to the 'buzz', the wealth, and the apparent security offered by nearby cities. He purposely lives near a city, but fails to discern its great sin and depravity (v13). We too are spiritually immature when we make decisions without attempting to discern the spiritual implications this could have for us, and the people closest to us.
- Today, when we make such decisions on e.g. where to live, what career to take, what jobs to accept, what company to keep, who to marry, where to send our kids to school and what to do with our money, we are in danger of making all three of the mistakes that Lot made. Later we will see how destructive this kind of spiritual immaturity is (Genesis 19).
- There is one more major insight here: our spiritual immaturity may be hidden by the fact that we are connected to more spiritually mature people than ourselves. This was the case with Lot. Lot appeared to be as close to God as Abram, and as blessed by God as Abram - all because he lived with Abram. But the truth is, that although keeping company with more spiritually mature people than ourselves is helpful, the time will come when our levels of maturity will be revealed. It is not enough to be associated with others who are spiritually mature - we need to very intentionally seek our own spiritual maturity.

**God seeks to encourage you with wonderful promises.**

- Just when Abram is probably discouraged - by his failure in Egypt (12:10-20), and his separation from Lot (13:1-13), God encourages him by reminding him of his promises over his life. God is still like that. Often when we are most discouraged, God kindly seeks to encourage us by reminding us of his promises over our lives. Notice what is promised to Abram:
- 1) *God promises him much land.* Abram stands on the heights of Bethel from where a 360-panoramic view of the whole land is available, and promises him everything he can see (even the very land that Lot had just claimed for himself). Similarly, the life of a Christian is a life of expansive promise. Unlike Lot, we are not over-excited about a little wealth and security - we understand that somehow we, as God's children, will inherit the whole new heaven and new earth one day (see Matthew 5:5). Although we don't own the world, we get to enjoy it - it belongs to our father. We hear Paul's words to us, 'Everything is yours - whether Paul, or Appollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death - all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God' (1 Corinthians 3:22,23).
- 2) *God promises offspring.* The word 'offspring' or 'seed' is an interesting word, because it can be taken both as a single person, or as multiple people. In other words, it refers to Isaac (his son-to-be-born), and to the whole nation of ancient Israel, and the Jews of today. But even more interesting is that the New Testament will add that it refers to spiritual descendents too - so, on the one hand it refers to Jesus (see Galatians 3:16), and on the other hand it refers to all those who believe in Christ (see Galatians 3:7-9). Amazing as it seems, our faith in Christ is in some way a result of this promise God made to Abram, 4000 years ago! This promise makes us also anticipate that the number of Christians will continue to radically increase in number. All because God never makes a promise that he does not keep.
- 3) *God invites him to enjoy the future now (v17-18).* So far Abram had only set up altars to his God in the north (in Schechem - 12:7) and in the central region (in the area between Bethel and Ai - 12:8). In addition, he confidently sets up an altar in the south too (in Hebron (v18)). This is in response to God's promise that it will all belong to him and his offspring, and also in the light of God's instruction that he walks through the entire land (v17). It is as though Abram is enjoying now what will be his one day. God's deep assurance about the wonders of Abram's future changes his very approach to life in the present. His anticipation of a certain future energizes and thrills him as he lives his daily life. Similarly, we should be filled with joy and hope by the power of the Spirit, as we anticipate the glorious eternity God has for us (see Romans 15:13), and as we taste of the powers of the coming age (see Hebrews 6:5).

## Genesis 14

## CHRIST'S LIBERATING GRACE (14:1-24)

*Read 14:1-12*

### **Sin gets you enslaved!**

- Lot is a picture for us of where our independence from God gets us. He had left Abram, who had provided everything he had. He had chosen to live near Sodom, a wicked city because of its wealth and apparent security. As time progressed, he even moved into Sodom itself. But he did not realize that he was not moving towards freedom at all, but towards slavery. It turns out that Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboyim and Bela (all towns just south of the Dead Sea at the time) were in fact subject to a tyrant-king in the East: king Kedorlaomer.
- Similarly, when we move away from God, and no longer acknowledge the fact that all we have comes from him, and we decide to be independent of him, and rather base our lives around ourselves and things like money and security and pleasure, we may feel we are on the path to freedom, but really we are on the path towards slavery. Our sin causes us to be captive to the devil, and to death, and to its addictive power. Sin does not bring freedom - it brings bondage. And any attempt to set ourselves free from this bondage only gets us more enslaved - we see how the people of Sodom, trying to flee, end up falling into tar pits, and some, like Lot, end up in chains (v12).

*Read 14:13-16*

### **Though sin gets you enslaved, Christ can get you set free!**

- In the last chapter we saw that Lot had rudely, and greedily turned his back on Abram (see 13:1-13). When Abram heard the news that Lot was enslaved, he could easily have said, 'It serves him right.' This would have been the just way to deal with him. But notice that Abram does not respond with justice, but rather with mercy - he recruited his own relatively small army and courageously pursued the armies that had taken Lot captive (v14). He thus succeeded, in setting him and many other people free (v16).
- If Lot is a picture of us, and our sinful turning away from God, then Abram, in this event, is a picture of Christ, and his merciful pursuit of us! Christ came to this earth on a mission, and in the weakness of the cross set us free from the bondage to sin's power, to the devil and to death. He did this, although we did not deserve it. What a merciful, and courageous, Saviour we have!
- Once we have received Christ's grace in our own lives, we too, like Abram, can extend mercy to people who have treated us and others badly. Energized by Christ's mercy, we can seek to overcome evil, through self-sacrificial love.

**Christ, the priest-king, comes to you to bless you.**

- Although he had not been involved in the war, a neighbour king, Melchizedek who was king of Salem (ancient Jerusalem) came to meet Abram. He was known as a priest-king - he was ready to mediate between God and man. The writer of Genesis makes much of Abram's meeting with Melchizedek.
- Fascinatingly, other parts of Scripture make much of Melchizedek, telling us that he is a foreshadowing picture of Christ (see Psalm 110:4 which tells us that the coming Messiah is in the order of Melchizedek) and Hebrews 5:6-10, and Hebrews 7). Although Hebrews 7 deals extensively with this theme, let us briefly note how Melchizedek represents Christ to us:
- 1) *Like this king, Christ reigns in a way that brings peace and righteousness.* Melchizedek means 'king of righteousness', and he was king of 'Salem', which means king of 'Peace'. In other words his reign is marked by peace and righteousness. This is just like Jesus, the prince of peace, who promises to bring justice and righteousness to this world.
- 2) *Like this king, Christ rules from Jerusalem.* Salem would become Jerusalem. Jesus was crucified and resurrected in Jerusalem. One day we will be with Jesus in the new Jerusalem, also described as the new heavens and the new earth.
- 3) *Like this king, Christ reveals more of God to humanity.* Abram used to call God 'Yahweh' (even though the meaning of this name would only be finally understood during the events of the Exodus hundreds of years later). In this event he learns more about God from Melchizedek: that God is 'God Most High' (v18,19,20). Abram begins to call God by this name in verse 22. The Hebrew is El Elyon which means, 'of all the spiritual beings in existence (referring to angels and spirits and so-called 'gods') this God is supreme'. Similarly, when Jesus came to us we learnt so much more about God - that he is triune for example, and that he is in his essence, a loving father.
- 4) *Like this king, Christ mediates between God and us.* Melchizedek was not just king, but priest. Priests represent God to man, and man to God. Similarly, Jesus is our priest, who mediates between us and God. 'There is one God and one mediator between God and man: the man, Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5)'. Hebrews 7 tells us that though the Old Testament priests became so through physical descendency from Aaron and Levi, Jesus like Melchizedek, came out of apparently no where. Melchizedek came from a neighbouring town; Jesus the priest came from heaven.
- 5) *Like this king, Christ refreshes, blesses and prays for us.* Melchizedek refreshed weary Abram with wine and bread (v18), and in prayer blessed Abram (v19). Similarly, Jesus comes to his people when they're weary and refreshes them with himself. He invites us to feast on himself, and experience the vitality of spiritual life (see John 6:35, 53-56). But not only does he vitalize us with himself, he blesses us. Abram had been told that God would bless him (12:2), but now we see that this blessing

comes to him through Melchizedek. Similarly, God's plan to bless us is funnelled through the ministry of Christ. It is through Christ that God blessed us with salvation. Also, in the same way that Melchizedek prays for Abram, so Christ continues to pray for his people - even when we think no one is praying for us, Christ is (see Hebrews 7:25).

- 6) *Like this king, Christ is worthy of our total devotion.* Abram gave him a tenth of everything he had (v20). This was his way of showing honour. Similarly, Christ our priest-king is worthy of our lives - we must honour him.

*Read 14:21-24*

#### **Depend on Christ to provide for you.**

- Upon Abram's return from battle he was met by two kings, the wicked king of Sodom, and the righteous king of Salem (v17,18). He received the gifts of the latter king (v19) - and even honoured him by giving him a portion of his plunder and possessions (v20). But notice that, in these verses, he refuses to receive anything from the king of Sodom. It is as though he is saying, 'Though Lot undiscerningly made the mistake of trusting in you, I will not make the same mistake. I want nothing to do with you and with your wickedness. My life will be provided for by God, not you.' (Interestingly, Abram had personally made this mistake before receiving gifts from the king of Egypt (12:14), but he now probably regretted that as a time of failure and wanted to make sure his trust was in God alone!)
- Although we all need money, we also, like Abram need to make sure we decide that our money will come to us on the path of dependence on God and Christ (Melchizedek represented Christ, remember?). As we trust God to provide for us, we will be able to overcome the temptation to idolize money, or receive money from questionable sources.

## **Genesis 15**

### **DOUBT AND ASSURANCE (15:1-20)**

*Read 15:1-5*

#### **God wants to reassure you with his promises.**

- At this point Abram probably had three insecurities. Firstly, he must have felt anxious about being counter-attacked by the kings he had just defeated (see 14:15). Secondly, he must have been worried about whether God would continue to provide for him. Although he had been promised land by God, he did not yet possess any land. Thirdly, he must have been concerned about having an heir, after all he had been in Canaan for 10 years and still had no child - he would even be forced to leave his inheritance to a mere servant (v2,3). Today God still allows us

to feel concern and need which drives us to a place of dependency on him.

- Wonderfully, God speaks to Abram directly at the point of these three needs. God gives him fresh re-assurances (despite the three sets of assurances he had already given over the years (see 12:1-3, 12:7 and 13:14-17) that he will take care of these needs. Regarding Abram's fear of counter-attack, God promises to be his shield of protection (v1). Regarding his worry about provision, God promises that he will be greatly rewarded (v1). Regarding his need for an heir, God even adds new information telling him that his heir will be a biological son (v4), and that not only will his descendents be as many as the dust of the earth (see 13:16) but as many as the stars in the night-sky (v5). God still speaks to us and re-assures us with promises he may already have made. He knows exactly what we need to hear to keep our faith-levels up. How desperately we need to hear God's reassuring words to us! We too, like Abram, experience attacks of doubt from time to time and need to hear God whisper to us his same old promises *once again*. And, like Abram, we discover that, as we walk close to him, the promise grows in progressive detail.

Read 15:6

#### **God makes you acceptable to himself by sheer, undeserved grace.**

- The word 'righteousness' here means 'acceptable, right, justified in the sight of God'. God totally accepted him. But notice that this acceptance was 'credited' to him. This was not something Abram needed to experience - God simply changed his category as one who, like all sinners everywhere, was unacceptable to God, to one who now by sheer grace, was acceptable to God. And what did Abram do to have his category changed in the sight of God? He simply believed God when God spoke to him about his future.
- This verse is quoted twice by Paul in the New Testament (see Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6) as he argues that, like Abram, the only way that sinners can be accepted by God is by faith in his word of promise, and faith in his grace. Abram did nothing and yet he received God's wonderful gift of justification, acceptance and righteousness. Being justified by God is something entirely from God, and entirely by grace. It is not something we earn or deserve. It is something we receive by faith. This is where it all starts in the Christian life - the moment we respond to God's grace in the Saviour Jesus Christ (the seed of Abram) we are 'credited with righteousness'. We aren't made right with God because of anything we bring - obedience, religious ritual, ethnic identity - we simply respond with faith to his initiative of grace. The moment we trust in Christ as our Saviour, we change category and status in the sight of God. Though being weak and wayward still, we are now eternally accepted by God on the grounds of grace. Although the Christian seeks to practically become more righteous over time, we will always experience some weakness and waywardness - and this reminds us that

our acceptance before God is by faith, and by grace alone! Christ became sin for us, that we might in him become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). As we trust in Christ, his righteousness becomes our own!

- Does this verse mean that only at this point, 10 years after being in Canaan that Abram was made right with God by faith? The answer is no. Since God's call on him at Ur, Abram modelled a faith-response every time God spoke to him. In other words, this verse describes Abram's persistent faith that in a sense, reaches a climax at this point. God accepted Abram the first moment he responded to his word with faith.

*Read 15:7-8*

**Justification and inheritance are two major, yet very different, salvation-blessings God has for you.**

- Verse 6 speaks of the blessing of justification, whereas verse 7 speaks of the blessing of inheritance. Let us look at these two blessings from God.
- The moment Abram took God at his word and received his grace by faith, he was 'credited with righteousness' (v6). All he did was exercise initial faith, and he was justified in the sight of God. Similarly, Christians are justified the moment we trust in Christ and his grace. All we need to exercise is initial faith. Once accepted by God on the basis of grace, Abram was not rejected by God - even though he was still wayward and weak. Similarly, once we're justified, we're always justified. This is the doctrine of assurance.
- But notice that, although he already had been justified, he was promised something over and above justification: inheritance (v7). God had much for him to receive and achieve. Similarly, once we're justified, God promises us something over and above that: inheritance, which is all that God wants us to receive and achieve in this life and the next.
- What is the difference between justification and inheritance? There are three differences. Firstly, justification is a 'done-deal', a permanent change in status before God that cannot be lost, whereas inheritance is something we experience and can potentially lose. Secondly, justification comes to us instantly and at a moment in time, whereas inheritance comes to us progressively, over time. Thirdly, justification is received by initial faith, whereas inheritance is received by persistent faith.

*Read 15:9-11*

**The basis of God's covenant to you is the blood-sacrifice of Christ.**

- Though God had promised the land (v7), Abram was longing for even more certainty that he would inherit the land God had for him (v8). Fascinatingly, God begins making a covenant. A covenant is something even greater than a promise - it is a contract or bond of relationship, and it is based on blood-sacrifice, and as we shall see it has an oath

added to it. Although the covenant-making process will only be complete by chapter 22:16, God starts the process with Abram.

- Notice that the first thing God does in making a covenant is to provide for the shedding of blood (v9,10). It was a common ancient covenant-making ritual for sacrifices to be arranged in a narrow pathway - and then the parties would walk down the middle. This is what God seems to be doing (v10). But the blood-sacrifice has great significance: God is foreshadowing the blood-sacrifice of Christ that becomes the basis of the new covenant. The promise of eternal life and inheritance that God makes to the Christian is on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus.
- But notice that Abram has to protect the blood-sacrifice from the vultures (v11). This is a powerful picture of how the Christian needs to keep on guarding the centrality of the blood-sacrifice of Jesus as the basis of their relationship with God. This is why Paul would say things like, 'God forbid that I should boast in anything but the cross of Christ' (Galatians 6:14). The enemy would seek to snatch away the revelation of the cross from the church and from Christians through false teaching, distraction and condemnation - but we must not let him. We need to keep reminding ourselves that our relationship with God is based on the blood-sacrifice of Christ. Without the sacrifice of the cross, sinners like ourselves could not be forgiven, neither approach a Holy God in loving relationship, nor receive an inheritance from him. Let us keep our eyes open to the vultures that would undermine this central revelation of the Christian and the church.

*Read 15:12-16*

**God sometimes reveals prophetic glimpses into your future.**

- The presence of God descends on Abram in the form of 'a thick and dreadful darkness' (v12). God gives him some detailed glimpses into the future of his descendants (v13,14,16) and his own future (v15).
- Still today, the church of Jesus which is covenant has some certainties about the future as revealed in the Scriptures. We know that Jesus will build his church. We know that the gospel will go to all the nations, and will experience both persecution and yet with God's amazing support in its forward movement. We know that Christ will return. We know that Judgment day will come and that a new heaven and a new earth will be ushered in.
- But over and above these Scriptural promises, the Holy Spirit still reveals glimpses into the future of local churches and believers. Paul, for example, as a new believer knew the name of the man who would come to him (Acts 9:12), knew what would happen in the coming days (Acts 22:17-18) and knew what his life's work would be (Acts 22:21). God still reveals glimpses of the future to those of us in covenant relationship with himself.

Read 15:17-20

**The new covenant in Christ is wonderfully pre-pictured in the Abrahamic covenant.**

- First God's presence manifested in darkness (v12), but now it manifests as, or at least is represented by, fire. Since the garden of Eden, no one had encountered God's presence this dynamically. Similarly, the new covenant in Christ consists literally of God coming to earth, this time not represented by fire, but firstly in the incarnation of Jesus, and secondly in the outpouring of the Spirit.
- God is busy making a covenant with Abram, a covenant that will only be totally confirmed later (in 22:16,17). It was an ancient custom for two parties 'to cut' a covenant with each other by creating a small pathway between cut up sacrifices, and for both parties to walk through the middle saying, 'If I don't keep my side of the covenant, I deserve to be cut up in pieces' (see Jeremiah 34:18 for example). Amazingly, God cuts a covenant with Abram but instead of both parties walking down the middle, only God does. It is as though he is saying, 'This covenant is based on me alone, not on us. It is not a covenant we make with each other, but one that I, by sheer grace, make with you.' This foreshadows the new covenant that comes to us in Christ. God literally walks through the sacrifice of the cross - he 'cuts' a covenant with humanity based solely on *his* initiative and *his* grace. It is a unilateral covenant.
- Notice that the covenant had beneficiaries - Abram's descendants (v18) and specifically promised land (v19). In the same way, the new covenant in Christ is built upon this Abrahamic covenant: we - those who share the same faith as Abram, get to receive the promise of inheritance. '*You have great promises, if you're Abraham's seed*'. (See the commentary on 12:1-3 which unpacks this theme).

## Genesis 16

**RUNNING AHEAD OF GOD (16:1-16)**

Read 16:1-4

**Beware of running ahead of God by making big decisions without reference to God.**

- The first thing we learnt about Sarai is that she was barren (11:30). God had promised Abram that he'd have a child. Since he and Sarai were now very old, he had even thought his descendent would be an adopted servant rather than a biological son (15:3).
- Now watch 'a comedy of errors' unfold as Abram and Sarai run ahead of God. Sarai, desperate for a child, proposes that they embrace a common custom of pagan culture - let the husband sleep with a servant-girl and then take the child as their own. Unthinkingly and undiscerningly, Abram agrees. Both of them fail to think through the relational consequences - and both of them fail to seek God around this major decision. Abram's

first recorded blunder had been running off to Egypt when in need (12:10) and now it is sleeping with a girl that he and Sarai took into employment when in Egypt.

- We're all in danger of running ahead of God, especially in our impatient desire to see God's plan unfold in our lives.

*Read 16:5-6*

### **Running ahead of God backfires on your life and relationships.**

- Last time Abram ran ahead of God it brought great trouble on his marriage (12:14-20). Now we see that his marriage comes under strain again. It seems that Hagar, begins to feel that she has been promoted to being Abram's wife (v4), and Sarai feels displaced. Instead of accepting some responsibility, she blames Abram entirely (v5). And instead of taking responsibility, he delegates all responsibility to Sarai (v6). Hagar ends up being badly treated by Sarai.
- Similarly, running ahead of God brings trouble to our lives and to our relationships. Undiscerning decision-making back-fires.

*Read 16:7-16*

### **God sees and hears you.**

- Hagar, pregnant and devastated by the ill-treatment Sarai was giving her, flees into the exposed countryside. She is the victim on Abram's and Sarai's sin. But notice how merciful God is to her...
- God kindly (the 'angel of the Lord' here was a representation of God, and possibly even a pre-incarnation of Jesus Christ) comes to her, and speaks to her, drawing her into a vulnerable conversation (v7,8). Today, God is still in the habit of getting us to reflect on our past and our future with these pointed questions, 'Where have you come from? Where are you going?' God then mercifully counsels her to return knowing that it would be better for her there, even if there is hostility (v9). God then graciously assures her that he will be involved in her, and in her son's, future (v10-12). He also reveals the nature of her son - a wild donkey, which means that he will be very individualistic, which no doubt will get him into some trouble (v12).
- Hagar is amazed by God's mercy. She learns that God is the God who hears and sees the victim. The name 'Ishmael' means 'God hears' 9v11), so it becomes clear that God hears her groaning and prayers. And she names God 'El Roi' which means 'The God who sees' (v13). She acknowledges that he is the Living One - the well is named 'Beer (which means well) Lahai (which means Living One) Roi (which means see)'. Just when she believed there was no one in the world looking out for her, God revealed that he was there for her.
- God is the Living God who hears us and sees us, and even allows us to encounter him. As with Hagar, he comes to us in our weakness, despair and confusion and generously deals with us with grace, mercy and

kindness! He draws us into conversation and reflection. He counsels and comforts us. He speaks promise over our lives.

**Sometimes God doesn't remove your problems, but he does give you the grace to persevere through them.**

- Abram and Sarai have run ahead of God. And Hagar, mistreated by Sarai, is running from Sarai. But unknown to her, she is also running away from God, since it was not God's will for her to leave. But instead of running from God, she runs right into God. His message to her is simple: go back to the tough situation and I will turn it for good, and you can be comforted by the fact that I am the God who hears your cries and sees your life. Similarly, God often does not remove our problems, but rather gives us the grace to persevere through them.

## Genesis 17

### THE IMPACT OF GOD'S PROMISE (17:1-27)

*Read 17:1*

**God sometimes withholds manifestations of his presence from you.**

- God regularly revealed himself to Abram in the preceding decade (see 12:1-3, 12:7, 13:14-17, 14:18-20, 15:1-19), but then a full thirteen years goes by without any special revelations (note that when Hagar returned to the camp he was 86 (16:16) but now he is 99).
- This must have tested Abram's faith. And still today, God sometimes does not reveal himself to us in special revelations for long seasons of our lives. From our side, this may be caused by our hardness of heart towards God, or our disobedience to the last thing he said to us. But from his side, God sees it fit to teach his children at times to have a faith that survives seasons without supporting celestial voices, amazing encounters with him and startling evidences of God's love and nearness. These things of course are wonderful, but we must be careful not to incessantly strain after them. FB Meyer writes, 'Such manifestations are indeed delightful, but they are meant as the bright surprises and not the rule of the Christian life. They grace our lives like a holiday breaks the school routine of a child, awakening the thrilling and unexpected emotions of joy.'

**God, after communicating grace to us, wants to give us the power to live whole-heartedly towards him.**

- God says to Abram that he is 'God Almighty' (v2). The Hebrew for this is 'El Shaddai'. It means, 'the God who, out of his inexhaustible power, is able to help those in times of need'. What a wonderful revelation God gives Abram - a revelation of himself.
- Then he calls Abram to a life marked by faithfulness and blamelessness. The word 'blameless' is misleading in that we can wrongly think it refers to absolute sinlessness - but a study of the use of the word in the

Scriptures tells us that it refers not so much to blameless behaviour (which can sound like legalism), but rather to a whole-hearted spirit. God is saying to him, 'I am the powerful God who wants to help you to live a life of total faithfulness and whole-heartedness to me.'

- Today God still reveals himself to his people as the God who, out of his inexhaustible power, wants to help us live whole-heartedly before him. Nothing transforms us like knowing who God is, and how he wants to help us become all that he intends us to become: people full of faith and whole-hearted devotion to himself. Let us, like Abram, fall down before God in both humility and dependence (see v3).
- Notice, very importantly, the order in which God has revealed himself to Abram. He has come to him in sheer grace. He has credited him with righteousness (15:6). He has revealed himself to him as El Shaddai. He has come to him with great, undeserved promise. And now, for the first time, God makes this single demand on him. That's the order with which God deals with us: he draws us to himself with grace, and then, once we're secured in grace, he makes a demand on us that we would be faithful and whole-hearted before him.

*Read 17:2-8*

**God, over time, often reveals more and more detail with regard to his specific plans for your life.**

- Each time God reveals his promise over Abram's life he reveals a little bit more detail (see 12:1-3, 12:7, 13:14-17, 15:1-19). In this prophetic revelation he repeats some of the same themes (i.e. covenant, many descendants, land) but adds some detail. Firstly, he renames Abram (which means 'exalted father') to Abraham (which means 'father of a multitude'). This renaming is a deep assurance of God's promise to Abraham. Secondly, not only will God make him into a great nation (see 12:2) but he will be the father of many nations, with many kings arising in these nations over the generations. Thirdly, the covenant God is making with Abraham is not just for the next many generations, but is an everlasting one (v7). (This is significant because ultimately the Abrahamic covenant is fulfilled in the new covenant through Christ, which is an eternal covenant.)
- We have already seen that in the life of a Christian, God often reveals prophetic insights into our futures over time (see commentary on 15:12-16). But now we notice that God progressively reveals more and more detail over time.

*Read 17:9-14*

**The circumcision of Abraham foreshadows God's plan to give you a new nature that makes radical obedience possible.**

- Circumcision is a symbol of something else. It is a cutting away of that which tended to be unclean. It is a picture of how God cuts away at the

uncleanness in our hearts and gives us a new nature, a new capacity to trust and obey him. This is exactly what God does to us in the new covenant: he gives us a new nature, a new capacity to trust and obey him (see Colossians 2:11-13). It is something done not by the hands of people, but by the hands of God.

- But God does not just give us a new nature - he calls us to start using it, to make sure that we (to use God's words to Abraham) 'keep the covenant'(v12). For Abraham *keeping the covenant meant* 1) to be faithful and whole-hearted (v1) and 2) to be circumcised. Similarly, we're called to 'keep the new covenant' and to make use of the new nature given to us by God. We too are to be as faithful and whole-hearted as we can. Although we, as those in the new covenant do not need to be literally circumcised, we are to 'be circumcised in the Lord'- which refers not to literal circumcision, but to a life of separation, purity and obedience. (see Jeremiah 4:4)

### **The circumcision of Abraham also foreshadows the giving of the Spirit to the believer.**

- In the previous point we identified the first major meaning of 'circumcision' for our lives - that we will receive a new nature, and start using it. But there is another major meaning for our lives ...
- God had already 'credited righteousness' to Abraham, accepting him in salvation (see 15:6). He had also given him many promises of the future: land, blessing, impact, descendants etc. God had walked through the sacrifices (15:17-18). Now he does something else - he calls Abraham and his descendants to be circumcised. Romans 4:11 explains that this act of circumcision 'seals' the covenant God was making, which means that God was giving Abraham an assuring confirmation and was *marking* Abraham before the eyes of watching people as a man in covenant with himself.
- Now think of the way all of this parallels the new covenant: God has walked through the sacrifice of the cross. God credits us with righteousness when we trust in Jesus. He makes wonderful promises over our lives. And he also 'seals' us with the Spirit which is an assurance to us that we are saved, and that we have a future inheritance, as well as being a sign to others that we are in covenant with God (see Ephesians 4:13,14). We are 'marked' with the Spirit.

*Read 17:15-16*

### **God may appear to overlook you for a season, but your time for God's blessing is coming.**

- Up until now God had never revealed that Sarai was definitely the one through whom Abraham's seed would come. This has resulted in Abraham wanting to adopt (15:2), and Sarai encouraging Abraham to sleep with Hagar. In all this, Sarai's barrenness had brought her great suffering. She had apparently been left out and neglected by God. God had spoken blessing and promise over her husband, but none over her.

But now he finally promises that in fact the promised seed will come from her body. God renames her from Sarai (which means 'Princess') to Sarah (which again means 'Princess' - in other words it is as though God is emphatically saying 'You are a real princess.')

- We too will experience times when it seems we have been overlooked by God, and all those around us are experiencing God's blessing and promise. God is free to work differently in different people. It is even more wonderful however when he finally does reveal his blessing and promise to us too.

*Read 17:17-27*

**In some ways God's promise and will for your life will fill you with astonished joy, but in other ways there may be a little disappointment.**

- Abraham has a mixed response to God's promise that his heir will come through Sarah. On the one hand he is filled with joyful astonishment (v17). On the other hand he is a little disappointed, because he had hoped that his thirteen-year old son, Ishmael would be the heir (v18). God alleviates his disappointment with the promise that he will still greatly bless Ishmael and his descendents (v20). (Interestingly, the Arabs of the world descend from Ishmael, so we can see that God really has kept this promise, and it gives us a basis to trust God for their eventual salvation). However, God is emphatic that the son, whom he names one year in advance 'Isaac' (which means 'laughter') will be the one through whom God will fulfil his promise (v19,21). Abraham then obeys God's instruction and circumcises everyone (v23-27).
- We see that God's plans for our lives will in some ways exceed our wildest dreams, but in other ways will require that we let go of our own dreams, often generated by our own sinfulness. This will mean that as we discern God's promise and will for our lives, in some ways we will experience joyful astonishment, and in other ways disappointment. But, looking at God's promised treatment of Ishmael, we can anticipate that God will even alleviate some of our self-inflicted disappointment with his wonderful mercy. He is a God who has allowed us to be disobedient, so that he can demonstrate his mercy (Romans 11:32).

## Genesis 18

**ENCOUNTERING GOD THROUGH OPENNESS AND PRAYER (18:1-33)**

*Read 18:1-8*

**Open your home to strangers (exercising some wisdom of course).**

- Abraham did not know at first that these three men were more than just men. But, on this hot day, he hosted these three strangers very well. He initiated the hospitality. He waited on them as a servant as they ate (v8). This was amazing hospitality. Although this kind of hospitality may

be foreign to the modern world, in many parts, such as Africa, this kind of hospitality is still common.

- We too should be ready to host complete strangers well (see Romans 12:13). Obviously we need to be wise. Hebrews 13:2, written with this precise story in mind, says, 'Remember to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing, some have entertained angels without even knowing it.'
- In this story, amazing blessing comes to Abraham as he opens his heart like this to strangers. We too can expect God's blessing on our lives, as we seek to bless others through warm and generous hospitality.

### **Open your life to Christ.**

- Who were these three men? There are three schools of thought: 1) They were three angels, and although the one speaks as though he is the LORD, in fact he is merely a messenger of the LORD. 2) They were two angels and the LORD presenting himself through an angel (since no one could look on God). 3) They were two angels and the Son of God. I personally go with this last view. Theologians speak of this as a Christophany, one of many times when the Son of God visited the world before his incarnation. The second and third views are confirmed by Genesis 18:1 which, immediately following on, says that 'the two angels' went to Sodom. This suggests that only two of the three were angels.
- FB Meyer, taking the third view, beautifully reveals that it was just like Jesus to seek out hospitality, and to reward those who gave it to him: While on the earth, he received the hospitality of Peter (Mark 1:29), Martha (Luke 10:38), Zaccheus (Luke 19:5) and the two disciples (Luke 24:29). But now that Christ is exalted he still seeks out the hospitality of people: in Revelations 3:20 he says that he stands at the door, knocking, and awaiting our invitation that we would fellowship him. Although Christ is exalted above the heavens (1 Kings 8:27) he makes himself at home in the heart of the humble and contrite (Isaiah 57:15). This all calls us to open our lives and our hearts to Jesus - in much the same way Abraham warmly hosted the three men.

*Read 18:9-15*

### **When you are faithless, God remains faithful.**

- At the end of the meal, Abraham must have realized that he was entertaining more than ordinary men - God spoke to him, revealing that he knew his wife's new name (which had only recently been revealed (17:15).
- He repeated the same promise that Abraham had recently received that his heir will come through his wife, Sarah despite the fact that she was ninety years old. But he adds a detail in verse 10: that conception is about to take place in the next few days. The NIV translation 'about this time next year' is probably wrong, and should be better translated 'in the time it takes for a baby to move from conception to birth'.
- Sarah, who has lived a life of long disappointment, overhears the prophecy and giggles to herself in cynicism. Abraham also laughed

(17:17), but his was a laugh of astonishment, hers is a laugh of disbelief. She is quickly rebuked by God, and he does not let her get away with her lying (v14,15). The essence of the rebuke is that she thinks that this is too hard for God to do, but she is reminded that nothing is too hard for God to do (v14).

- Sarah, is old, tired, cynical, battling deep-rooted disappointment, unbelieving - in short faithless, and yet God still remains faithful to her! God kept his promise to her (see 21:1-2). However, Hebrews 11:11 reveals that though Sarah had weak faith, yet she had some faith - enough for God to fulfil his promise to her. No doubt as he revealed his faithfulness to her, he roused her from faithlessness to faith.
- Still today, 'when we are faithless, God remains faithful, because he cannot disown himself' (2 Timothy 2:13). Though our faith fails, God's faithfulness is freshly roused in us, engendering trust in him to fulfil his promises despite long delays, great disappointment and cynicism.

*Read 18:16-21*

#### **God reveals his secrets to his friends.**

- One of the descriptions of Abraham in the Bible is 'friend of God' (Isaiah 41:8, James 2:23, 2 Chronicles 20:7). This section of Scripture reveals why he was called that - God revealed his secrets to him in a very relational way. Notice how Abraham 'walked along' with God like a companion (v16). Notice how God, in the context of this leisurely presence with Abraham, chooses to reveal a secret to him (v17) - firstly, God reminds Abraham of the great promises over his life (v18-19) (all of which he had heard before), then he tells him that he is deciding what to do with two wicked cities in the valley below (v20-21).
- Jesus still seeks to share his secrets with his friends. Jesus said to his disciples, 'I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know the master's business. Instead I have called you friends, for everything I have learned from the Father I have made known to you' (John 15:15). This also reminds us of Psalm 25:14, 'The Lord confides his secrets in those who fear him.' Will you walk with God as a friend? Will you show yourself trustworthy of his secrets?

#### **God is moved by the sin of a city.**

- God and Abraham looked down on the silent cities on the plains below, and yet God said that he heard a great cry coming from those cities (v20). If God heard the cry of a single sin (as in the death of Abel in Genesis 4:20), then imagine the sheer volume when a city of people are sinning. The land (inanimate creation) itself cries out because of the sin of people (Romans 8:22 speaks of it 'groaning in the pains of childbirth'). And no doubt the victims of violence, exploitation, lust - whether they were women, children, the poor, the weak, the aged - were crying out to God for justice.
- Today, though we may not hear the cry, God hears the outcry that comes from the witnessing creation around a city, and from those

unjustly treated. Sin grieves him. He is moved by it. He responds by investigating it (v20).

**Read 18:22-23**

**Never underestimate the preserving presence of the saints.**

- Jesus told us that we are like salt in this world. We have a preserving influence. Abraham pleaded for the preservation of many unrighteous people on the basis of a few righteous people. As Christians, we probably cannot imagine the importance of our presence and influence in the cities and cultures in which we find ourselves. Let us take courage - God looks at, and deals with a group of people differently, simply because believers are included amongst them (see Jeremiah 29:4-7, Matthew 13:29, Acts 18:10).

**Give yourself to prayer.**

- This is one of the most powerful examples of prayer, in general, and intercessory prayer, in particular, we have in the Bible. We note many things from it:
- 1) *Pray secretly*. 'Abraham remained standing before the LORD' (v22), all alone. Although we certainly need to pray with other believers, Jesus taught us to also pray secretly (Matthew 6:6). In a culture where people fear being alone, we as Christians must regularly seek out the solitude through which we can spend time with God. 'Draw near to God and he will draw near to you' (James 4:8) - we need to intentionally and regularly get into God's presence, turning our place of prayer into the very throne room of God.
- 2) *Pray lingeringly*. 'Abraham remained ...' (v22). Abraham had already spoken with God for some time, but he wanted more time with God. Although the story reads quickly, we get the sense this time of prayer lasting hours. We too need to 'remain' in God's presence. Although we can pray at any time, anywhere, even in the middle of life's business, yet we need to learn from time to time to enjoy some extended time in God's presence. Meyer writes, 'If only we had remained longer at the palace door, we might have seen the King come out with a benediction in his face, and a gift in his hand.' It was as Abraham lingered in God's presence that he experienced the privilege of God revealing himself and his will to him.
- 3) *Pray humbly*. Although Abraham enjoyed a personal relationship with God, he also carried a deep sense of the vast gap between God's infinite greatness and holiness and his own frailty and sinfulness (see verses 27,30-32). He humbled himself before God, and so should we. He is the one before whom angels veil their face. It is sheer privilege that we, little people are invited to approach him - we're like fireflies, and yet he is the blazing sun.
- 4) *Pray perseveringly*. Six times Abraham asks God to reveal his mercy. He successively asks for more. Jesus taught us that we too should pray perseveringly (Luke 18:1). Too many of us give up days before the

answer arrives. One aspect of persevering in prayer is that what we pray for may get progressively larger, as it did with Abraham. At first we may lack the boldness to ask as he did for what he really desire, but after many 'waves of prayer' he finally asked for it.

- *5) Pray boldly.* What was the basis of Abraham's confidence? Firstly, he understood that despite God's sovereignty, this was not a 'closed universe' (where the future was set in stone) but rather an 'open universe' where God was, to a degree, inviting human participation in the unfolding of events. We must never be fatalistic in our approach towards the future. God invites us, his children, to partially shape the future through our prayer, and partnership with himself. Secondly, Abraham reminded God that he was a righteous, merciful God (v23,25). This gave him boldness in his request. When we pray we must never think of it as trying to overcome God's unwillingness, but rather a case of boldly taking hold of his willingness to extend justice and mercy. *If anything, Abraham was not bold enough.* He stopped at 'ten' (v32). We will see that there were far fewer than ten righteous people - perhaps if he had reduced this number his prayer would have been answered. God did however partially answer his prayer by saving the few people that could, relative to the rest, be called 'righteous' (see 19:15-16).
- *6) Pray in the Spirit.* Although Abraham exercised initiative in this time of prayer, God *led* Abraham in his prayer. He put the matter before Abraham (v20,21). He replied to Abraham as Abraham spoke to him. Finally, he brought the time of prayer to a close (v33). As we pray with a sensitivity to the Spirit, we can still expect God to bring some matters to our attention, to draw out our prayers regarding these matters, to speak to us as we pray, and to bring the time of prayer to a close.

**Rejoice that Jesus is always praying for you.**

- Lot would be saved from destruction, all because Abraham had been praying for him. We have someone even more powerful praying for us all the time - Jesus (see Hebrews 7:25).
- He prays for our protection from the devil (John 17:15), for the preservation of our faith (Luke 22:31), for the unity (John 17:21) and effectiveness (John 17:18) of the church! We can take great courage from this!

## Genesis 19

### SOBERING REALITIES (19:1-38)

*Read 19:1-29*

**Sodom is the picture of corrupted society.**

- Notice how corrupt the city of Sodom was. Verses 4-9 reveal some of the most shocking sin captured in the Bible - hundreds of men, young and old, want to gang-rape the two men (who, being angels, were probably very attractive) who were staying at Lot's house. This is exactly the

opposite treatment they had received from Abraham that same day (see 18:1-8).

- We have seen from Genesis 4-11 that sin has a way of working its roots deeper and deeper into people, cultures and cities, until things deteriorate so badly, that God's judgment becomes inevitable and unstoppable.
- Similarly, in many societies around the world the raping and abuse of men, women and children, the wide-spread acceptability of homosexual promiscuity and a radical lack of hospitality are commonplace. These societies, with such a deep-rooted rejection of God and his ways, are also under God's judgment - experienced now in part, but promised fully on the Day of Judgment (see Romans 1:18-32).

#### **Lot is a picture of a compromised believer.**

- How sad - Lot started off as a man who seemed to share the same faith as Abraham. But then he was lured to live near Sodom (13:12) by its apparent wealth and security. Eventually he moves into the city (14:12). Now, when the two angels arrive, he is at the city gates - a place of prominence. In other words, he has put all of his energies into being accepted by the people of the city. But despite his living there, he has no real influence over anyone: he cannot dissuade the mob (v8,9), and he cannot persuade his own sons-in-law to come with him (v14). Ironically, Abraham has more influence from outside the city than Lot who is in the city (think how Abraham had rescued people from Sodom already (Genesis 14:16-17), and he had been praying for the city (Genesis 18)). Devastatingly Lot's own corruption had spread to his wife (who rebelliously looked back to the city (v26) and his daughters (see verse 32)). He may have originally justified his move to Sodom by telling himself he was on a mission to influence it, but the exact opposite had happened - Sodom had got inside of him.
- This is a radical warning of how even today believers in Jesus can become corrupted by the surrounding culture. Like Lot, we slowly and undiscerningly become comfortable in identifying with the values of a sinful society. And, though we may tell ourselves that we are trying to be a witness to it, once the sin of a culture takes root in our lives, we are powerless to change it for Christ. We lose any spiritual and godly influence and become a sinful force in the lives of the people closest to us. Oh, let us repent. Let us be those who, though we are in the world, are not of the world!

#### **The two angels are a picture of evangelic intervention.**

- Christ calls us to go and reach the gospel. These two angels beautifully illustrate evangelism to us:
- *Notice how they go into the city, and into Lot's home.* We cannot expect people to come to us. We must go to them. We're 'sent ones'. We're sent by God to go to where the people are - and impact them for Christ in their own city, in their own homes. Unlike Lot however, we reach people by living among them, but we're careful not to be seduced by their sinful values. We're in the world, but not of the world.

- *Notice how they warn Lot to escape the coming judgment.* This is the task of the evangelist - to awaken people out of their unreality, their belief that all is well, when in fact it isn't. In gospel-proclamation, we need to warn people that they're sinners on a collision course with a Holy God on judgment day and that they need to put their trust in Christ, who alone can rescue them from judgment. Our message must include this: 'whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him' (John 3:36).
- *Notice how they try work through Lot to rescue more people (v12).* In the same way, we need to realize that every person that responds to the gospel message is closely connected to many others who they can immediately influence for Christ (see Acts 16:31-34).
- *Notice how they help Lot overcome his unbelieving reluctance, by grabbing him (v16).* We too are called to snatch people from the flames of judgment (Jude 23). Meyer writes that we should 'set our hearts upon a person, and pursue them until they either accept or finally reject the gospel of grace'.
- *Notice how they try help Lot and his family make a clean break from Sodom (v17).* Similarly, once we reach someone for Christ it is also our responsibility to help them get a good start to their new life through initially discipling them.
- *Notice how they are motivated by God's mercy (v16).* In the same way, we minister to people not out of our compassion, but out of Jesus' own mercy for them. 'For Christ's love compels us' (2 Corinthians 5:14).
- *Notice how they are empowered by Abraham's prayer (v29).* We need prayer back-up if we are to succeed in reaching people for Christ (see Ephesians 6:19-20).

#### **The destruction of the cities is a picture of how God will pour out judgment on sin.**

- God's judgment against sin is definite. It is delayed. It comes after much warning. It is experienced in part in this life already (Romans 1:18), but is experienced totally on the day of Judgment (Romans 2:5). Jesus even uses this event as a foreshadowing picture of final judgment: 'It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But ... fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed' (Luke 17:28-30).

#### **The suffering of Lot is a picture of how the compromised believer will be dealt with on Judgment Day.**

- Lot suffered as he lost everything he'd lived for in Sodom - his home, his wealth, his new friends, his occupation, his sons-in-law, and even his wife. He experienced some of the judgment on the city.
- On Judgment Day, unbelievers will experience *eternal suffering* as they are separated from God forever (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9), whereas believers who live in compromise will experience a *temporary but real suffering* in judgment. The New Testament teaches that believers will ultimately be spared from coming judgment (John 5:24, 1 Thessalonians

1:10), but the New Testament also reminds us that if we as believers share in the sins of the world without repentance then we will share in some of its judgment (see Ephesians 5:3-7 for example). This does not mean we will lose our salvation, but it means that on the Day of Judgment, we will be 'saved as one passing through fire' (1 Corinthians 3:15). Lot illustrates this terrible truth. If we live in compromise we will, like Lot, suffer loss - all we have lived for will come to nothing. Like Lot, we will have a 'very small' (v20) reward - if any at all. Instead of facing Christ on that day and hearing him say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant' we instead arrive with deep regret and no eternal fruit from our lives on earth. We will have a deep sense of how we failed to fulfil the purpose for which we were saved.

- Amazingly, despite Lot's sin, God never stopped seeing him as a righteous person (see 2 Peter 2:7-9, which speaks of Lot being 'righteous' and 'godly' in God's sight). Once we have put our faith in Christ, he will never stop pursuing us as his own - even though we fall back into a life of sin. And, though we disappoint God deeply, yet he does not withdraw his love nor salvation from us. Lot is one of the greatest examples in the Bible of how even radical compromise in a believer does not cause them to lose their salvation - only their eternal reward.
- Sadly Lot's wife so clung to Sodom and its sin in her heart that she disobeyed the angels' instruction to not look back. The consequence was that she lost her life (v26). God takes no pleasure in the soul of a believer who shrinks back (Hebrews 10:38). This foreshadows how God will sometimes take the lives of disobedient believers even since the advent of Christ (see Acts 5:1-11 (Ananias and Sapphira), and 1 Corinthians 11:21-22, 29-30). Again this doesn't mean that they lose their salvation, just that they lose their eternal reward.

*Read 19:30-38*

### **Compromise can ruin your life.**

- FB Meyer's only commentary on this passage is this: 'Though Lot was sent out from Sodom, he took Sodom with him, and over the remainder of his life we must draw a veil.'
- It's possible to totally mess up our lives as believers. Lot started so well - he shared in the promise of Abraham, venturing out with him to the land God was promising. He had experienced great blessing in his partnership with Abraham, until he was, in some ways, Abraham's peer. But then he was drawn into a life of compromise. First, he moved near the city of Sodom (13:12), then into it (14:12), then the city moved deeply into him (as he embraced its values). Then he moved to the very small town of Zoar for a while (v20). After losing everything but his daughters he could have come back to God, but he didn't. Instead of allowing this disappointing experiment with sin to drive him to repentance, it only drove him into fear (v30). The tragedy is that, though he started out on the spacious hill-tops with Abraham, that he

ended up in a small cave somewhere (v30). And, if that wasn't bad enough, he is responsible for bringing about the two enemy nations of Abraham's descendents, the Moabites and the Ammonites, through his two children - borne to him by his own daughters (v36-38).

- Let us be warned. Just because God has a plan for our lives when we are saved, does not mean we will fulfil it. Compromise can radically side-track and devastate our lives like it did to Lot. If we are in sin, let us repent, and run to God and run to fellow-believers (unlike Lot, who seemed to avoid his uncle Abraham despite Abraham's previous willingness to help him out in times of trouble (14:14-16)).

## Genesis 20

### WHEN BELIEVERS BLOW IT (20:1-18)

*Read 20:1-13*

**The secret sins of your life bring damage, and will eventually be exposed by God.**

- Abraham, in the wake of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, moved far south into the Sinai Peninsula (v1). There his character flaws surfaced once again.
- Despite all the ways Abraham had encountered God over the years, and the great call to godliness on his life (17:1), Abraham failed morally once again. The same weak and sinful character traits that led him to offer his wife to Pharaoh (12:10-20) surface again. Notice his sins:
  - There is the sin of failing to trust God to protect him, which is why he came up with his own strategy for self-preservation through lying.
  - There is the sin of telling his wife to lie, and saying that this really was a way she could show her love to him (v13). The deep sin in his life was the ungodly contract between his wife and him, stemming back over twenty years, that, if needs be, she should pretend to not be his wife (v13). After all of God's trustworthiness he'd experienced, and the discipline he'd experienced from God years before (12:10-20), he should have cancelled this secret, evil contract between himself and his wife. But, in secret disobedience, he had not.
  - There is the sin of dishonouring his wife by allowing her to be taken into another man's harem (v2). This is a plain lack of courage to love and protect her.
  - There was the lie to Abimelech. Instead of blessing this man (remember that God had called him to bless all people (12:3) he brought God's potential judgment on this man (v7). And sadly, Abraham was the one who was meant to be representing God to the world - and doing a really bad job of it.
  - There is the sin of justifying one's sin with petty excuses rather than taking responsibility for it (v11-13).

- Even in those Christians who have walked with God for a long time, there are often secret sins of the heart that are hidden from view - however God knows they are there, and in due course their damage will visibly surface.
- Sin brings damage. It damages those closest to us (Sarah), it damages people not so close to us (ie Abimelek and family), it damages our intimacy with God, and it damages God's reputation in the world. For this reason, God seeks to expose our sinfulness (v6-7). He does this mercifully in the hope that we repent. God is committed to pulling out the deep roots of sin in our lives, and setting us free from the recurring character weakness that undermines God's plan for us.

*Read 20:14-16*

**Believers do not necessarily have a superior character to non-believers.**

- We are struck by the superior character that Abimelek shows. Notice how he communicated to all his officials the situation (v8). He entered into respectful conversation with Abraham (v10). He repayed wrong with blessing: he blessed Abraham with wealth (v14), he restored Sarah untouched, to her husband (v14), he allowed Abraham to live upon his land (v15), he vindicated them entirely (v16).
- The irony is that Abraham was God's friend and you'd expect that he'd be more godly than Abimelek. But he was wrong! Abraham's certainly presumed the worst about Abimelek's character, assuming he was the kind of man who would be willing to kill rather than offer hospitality (v11). This story reminds us that 'the line that separates good and evil goes through everyone's heart' - everyone has both a propensity for evil, and a capacity for good. The so-called 'godly' are, like Abraham, often less godly than we think. And the so-called 'ungodly' are, like Abimelek, more godly than we think.
- God does not choose or save any of us based on our character or good deeds, but rather despite our character. 'He saves us not because of the righteous things we have done, but by his grace and purpose' (2 Timothy 1:9). And certainly, he goes to work on our character flaws once he has saved us, but this process usually takes time.

*Read 20:17-21:1*

**As you bless others, so God often brings blessing into your life.**

- God had promised Abraham that Sarah would have a child. Yet it is fascinating that only once Abraham prays for Abimelek's wives and female slaves for healing from barrenness (20:17-18), that God grants him his own child (21:1). It is only once Abraham has a sincere concern for other women who are barren, that his own wife is healed.
- God has plans to bless us, but often waits for us to be a blessing to others before we are blessed. 'As we sow generously, so we reap generously' (2 Corinthians 9:6).

- This is a prominent insight into Abraham's life so far: 1) it was immediately after he was generous to Lot that God powerfully revealed himself to him (13:9-17). 2) It was soon after he rescued Lot in a time of trouble that he was blessed by Melchizedek (14:16-20). 3) It was directly after he was very hospitable to three strangers that God revealed more of his promise to him (18:5-19). In the same way, often God's promised blessing is experienced soon after we bless others.

**God is sovereign in the timing and means with which he fulfils his promises.**

- We notice that God is sovereign in the way he hands out his blessings. Abraham was able to pray for Abimelek's wives and female slaves - and they were healed. And yet, all this time, he had not been able to see his own wife healed. He could pray for some people's healing, but not all.
- God hands out his blessings and healings as he determines and we need to discern his specific will for every situation, and not assume we can make immediate demands on God for every situation. God is sovereign in the timing and the means with which he keeps his promises. We cannot manipulate him to act in the same way that he has acted in the past - he is free to do things differently each time. This applies to the ministry of healing too: although God may heal many people in answer to our prayers, we should not expect him to answer our prayers in the same way every time.

## Genesis 21

### GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES (21:1-34)

*Read 21:1-7*

**When you patiently trust God to fulfil his promises, you're more joyful.**

- Abraham had laughed when God told him that he would have a son through Sarah (17:17). So had Sarah (18:12). The name Isaac means 'laughter'. And that is what happened when Isaac was born: Sarah and Abraham laughed with joy. It was a joy that came from the surprise of God's undeserved blessing. It was a joy that came from the wonder of God doing them good against great odds. It was a joy that came with deep gratitude to God.
- To this day, when God works in our lives he does so through undeserved grace, and against great odds. He brings joy to our lives. All we have to do is patiently trust him to fulfil his promises.

*Read 21:8-13*

**There are two incompatible ways to live life: the self-generated way, and the God-generated way - choose the latter daily.**

- The two sons represent two aspects of Abraham's life - and our life too. Ishmael represents Abraham's impatience, unbelief and attempts to manipulate God to do something through his own self-effort. This is Abraham operating independently of God's initiative, power and grace. Ishmael is the self-generated way.
- Isaac, on the other hand, represents Abraham's patience, faith and experience of God graciously, supernaturally fulfilling his promise with sovereignty. This is Abraham operating in dependence on God's initiative, power and grace. Isaac is the God-generated way.
- We note in these verses that these two sons do not get on. Ishmael mocks Isaac and Isaac, if he is to thrive, must get rid of Ishmael. They are incompatible.
- Paul, in his letter to the Galatians (see Galatians 4:21-31, 5:16-17), uses these verses to teach us two very important truths. He does this by drawing out two parallels from these verses:
  - Firstly, according to Paul, *Ishmael represents reliance on the law of Moses, and Isaac represents reliance on Christ's grace for salvation and sanctification* (see Galatians 4:21-31). Ishmael's way is an attempt to earn God's acceptance and to become more godly through keeping the 613 laws of Moses. Isaac, however, represents receiving Christ's undeserved grace enabling us to be accepted by God and transformed into Christ-likeness. Paul makes it clear that the Mosaic covenant has been replaced by the new covenant of Christ and that the two are therefore incompatible. In the same way Abraham got rid of Ishmael, we must not trust in the Mosaic covenant with its 613 laws, but rather trust fully in the way of Christ and grace.
  - Secondly, according to Paul, *Isaac represents life in the Spirit, whereas Ishmael represents life in the sinful nature* (Galatians 5:16). These two ways of life are totally incompatible and at war with each other (Galatians 5:17). These two brothers were similarly in conflict with each other (v9). In the life of a Christian there are still two things at work: on the one hand there is the temptation to operate independently from God in impatience, unbelief, self-reliance, self-generated effort. Then there are the desires of the Spirit, which move us to patient trust in God and an experience of his undeserved, supernatural ability to keep his promises. This is the God-generated way. Daily we must reject the temptations of the sinful nature and willingly align ourselves with the desires of the Spirit. We certainly cannot choose both. In the same way Abraham told Hagar and Ishmael to leave, we must reject the sinful nature's desires and joyfully embrace the Spirit's desires.
- To Paul's two interpretations of these verses, I add a third slightly different one: *When it comes to seeing God's plan for our lives unfolding, we must trust God, not ourselves to fulfil this plan and his promises.* We must be careful not to run ahead of God in impatience, unbelief and an attempt to independently fulfil his plans. Rather we must operate always with faith, patience and reliance on God's power and leadership. If we fail to do this, we will deeply regret it, and some

of God's good work through us will be threatened and undermined by bitter fruits arising from our independence from God.

*Read 21:14-21*

**God will always hear and see you in your suffering.**

- This is the second time we have seen God's great mercy and tenderness to Hagar and Ishmael (see 16:3-16). She had already discovered that God is the God who sees and hears the victim. She had even named him 'El Roi', the God who sees me, and who helps me to see him. And now, seventeen years later, nothing has changed - God still sees her.
- It is interesting that though she is crying (v16), God only seems to hear her son crying (v17). Why is this? It is because the name Ishmael means 'God hears'. In that name, Ishmael, God had made a promise to hear him. That is exactly what he is doing here. And again he opens the eyes of Hagar, this time, however, not to see God (16:13), but rather to see God's provision for her (v19).
- We learn from this incident that once we have experienced God seeing and hearing us in our suffering, then we can be sure that he will keep doing this our whole lives through.

*Read 21:22-34*

**Be encouraged by the first instalments of God's promise to you.**

- 'At that time' (v22) tells us that this happened during the celebration of Isaac's weaning (v8). It seems that Abimelek (and his military leader, Phicol) attended. Observing God's blessing on his life, they asked to enter into a treaty of mutual protection, kindness and loyalty (v23). Abraham then immediately drew on the benefits of this treaty by asking for the use of the wells that he had dug, but which had recently been seized by Abimelek's servants (v25). After receiving seven sheep from Abraham, Abimelek agreed to give the well to Abraham (v30-31).
- As small as the giving of the well may seem, Abraham recognized its significance. He had been promised many descendants and had recently received Isaac as his first. But he had been promised much land, and yet up until recently had no land at all. But finally, this well (which he named 'Beer-sheba' which means 'Well of the Oath') was given to him. He took it as an encouragement from God that eventually all this land would belong to his descendants - and he planted a tree there, and built an altar there (v33).
- God makes big promises to us, but usually they take time to come to pass and usually they come in parts. Like Abraham, we should be quick to discern when God is beginning to bless us in the way he promised and we should celebrate it. Abraham had lots to rejoice about: the weaning of his son and the gift of the well. We too have much to celebrate when we think about it.

- Fascinatingly, in receiving the well, Abraham gave God a new name indicating what he was learning about God - calling him 'El Olam' which means 'God Everlasting'. It seems that he realized that God, though apparently slow to do so, would eventually in the generations to come, fulfil his promise to him. He realized that God had all the time in the world to fulfil his promises, because (unlike ours on earth) his life is eternal. When we are impatient to see God answering our prayers or keeping his promises let us draw comfort from this: God, the eternal One, will fulfil his promises at the right time.

### **God's Spirit is a deposit guaranteeing your inheritance to come.**

- As an early instalment of God's promise of land and inheritance to Abraham, God gave him a well. The well served as a kind of foretaste, deposit or guarantee of what was to come.
- Similarly, God has promised us as Christians a great eternal inheritance - he has also given us a foretaste, a deposit, a guarantee of what's to come in the indwelling and infilling of the Holy Spirit! (see Ephesians 1:13,14).
- Interestingly, Jesus presented the Spirit's ministry to us as a well of water overflowing with life-giving vitality (John 4:14, John 7:37-39). We already get to drink draughts of heaven's glory as we are filled with the Spirit.

## **Genesis 22**

### **RADICAL OBEDIENCE (22:1-24)**

<i>Read 22:1-2</i>
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### **God will test the extent to which you're willing to trust and obey him**

- Abraham had been accepted by sheer, undeserved grace (see 15:6). God continued to be gracious to him, sometimes even giving him great blessings after great blunders (see how 21:1-2 follows 20:8-18). But God's grace was not just about accepting Abraham. It was seeking to transform Abraham into a man of radical, persevering faith and obedience. Still today, God's saving grace comes to us undeserved and continues to be available to us despite our blunders. But God's grace also comes to transform us, making us more and more obedient.
- In these verses God was seeking to take Abraham's trust and obedience to a greater level than ever before, and the way he did it was to test him (v1). This 'test' must not be confused with a 'temptation' - since God never tempts anyone. When the devil tempts us it is because he is hoping we will fail. But when God tests us it is because he is hoping we will succeed. God's tests are a vote of confidence in the effect of his grace upon our lives. To this day, God from time to time asks us to do something or put us in a situation that calls for great trust and obedience. He does this to reveal the power of his grace in our lives and to deepen our trust and obedience.

- Notice that Abraham had just received great blessings (Isaac (21:1), the favour of kings (21:22-23), the unrestricted use of wells (21:30-31), and a new revelation of God (21:33). Today, we can expect that soon after great blessings and great revelations of God, we can expect great tests to come our way.
- Isaac by this time is about ten years old and we note that it has been 35 years since God originally revealed himself to Abraham. He waited till he knew that Abraham was ready before he asked him for such a great thing. All God's dealings with Abraham thus far had prepared him for this, the greatest test of his life. Similarly, we are assured that God will not test us beyond our ability to endure (see 1 Corinthians 10:13). We can trust him to ready us for great tests, so that when these come, we will be able to fully trust and obey God.

**God wants you to love him more than you love anything else.**

- Without a doubt the single most precious thing to Abraham was his son Isaac. Once he'd received promise that he would have a son, he had waited 25 years for Isaac's arrival. Isaac was the one through whom all the promises of God would be fulfilled. And yet God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.
- Why is this? One reason is that God wanted to ensure that Abraham's love for God was greater than his love for his son. This is seen in God's highlighting Abraham's love for Isaac (v2). Whenever we put anything before God - career, children, ministry, reputation, wealth, pleasure - we commit the sin of idolatry, and we wound ourselves and the heart of God in ways we cannot imagine. From time to time, God is likely to create a situation that will expose the idolatry of our heart, and will cause us to return to God with all of our heart. Instead of finding our identity and worth in good things that God gives us, we are to find our identity and worth in God himself.
- When God tells us to let go of something or someone that brings great joy and meaning to us, it is very painful. He may instruct us to hand over a ministry that we have poured our lives into. He may call us to walk away from a person we love (never a married partner or a un-grown child however). He may command us to relocate, leaving behind family and security. When this happens, and it happens only a few times in our lives, take courage that God has your best interests in mind, though it may not make any sense at the time.
- An ethical question: how could God instruct Abraham to sacrifice his son? What kind of God would do this? Nowadays if anyone were to say, 'God told me to sacrifice my child' we could rightly say, 'That wasn't God - that was the devil' or 'You need psychiatric help'. After all, no where in the Bible does God tolerate human sacrifice, despite the fact that human sacrifice was tolerated and often encouraged by almost every religion at the time of Abraham. This event in history was an unusual, never-to-be-repeated one. Eaton writes, 'God's commands are appropriate to the age we live in, and we no longer live in the days of Abraham when child-sacrifice was thought of as great devotion to God'. In the commentary on verses 11-19, we will see that one major reason God did this was that he was foretelling the gospel of Jesus.

**God wants you to obey him radically.**

- We are called to obey God radically. Abraham serves as a powerful example for us. Let us draw inspiration and insight from him. Once Abraham was convinced that God was asking something of him, he radically obeyed. We learn eight things about radical obedience:
- He obeyed God *without delay*. He left 'early the next morning' (v3). Delayed obedience is, after all, a form of disobedience. We too need to act immediately when God speaks to us. We must not be like Lot who hesitated in the moment of obedience (see 19:16).
- He obeyed God *though it made no sense*. This instruction would have made no sense to Abraham. Why would God tell him to sacrifice the very son that he had received according to the promise? And yet God instructed him to do it, without explanation. This is often how God's instructions come to us - without explanation. We, like Abraham, must trust God, even when we do not understand him. 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding' (Proverbs 3:5).
- He obeyed God *very practically*. He loaded his donkey, took servants, and cut wood for the sacrifice (v3). In the same way, obedience needs to be worked out very practically in our lives. It is not enough to have an inspiring moment of resolution to obey - we need to 'earth' our obedience in practicalities.
- He obeyed God *perseveringly*. He took three days to get to the mountain (v4). During this time, he must have wanted to quit many times, and yet he persevered. Similarly, when God tells us to do something, often our obedience works itself out over a matter of time. It is not enough to start obeying, we need to complete our obedience.
- He obeyed God *as an act of worship*. Although he did not tell his servants what he was going to do, he did describe it as an act of worship (v5). In the same way, our obedience is really an act of worship to God. It is our response to who he is, and his grace in our lives.
- He obeyed God *without group support*. Abraham left everyone behind as he obeyed God (v5). It was just him and Isaac. Obedience is often something that we cannot do in a group, or even with the support and cheer of a group. It is often something that is done before God alone.
- He obeyed God *despite the great emotional pain*. Can you imagine the pain that Abraham endured as he was asked by his son what was really going on (v7), and as he bound his son (v9). Although not all obedience is painful, there are times when obeying God deeply hurts us.
- He obeyed God *completely*. 'Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son' (v10). God wants us to obey him fully and completely. It is not enough to obey him to a degree. Rather he seeks whole, radical, daring obedience from us.

### God richly rewards your obedience

- In verses 1-2, we saw that God will test how much you're willing to trust and obey him. In verses 3-10 we saw that God wants us to obey him radically. But is there any benefit for us in our obedience? These verses (v11-19) make it clear that our obedience will be richly rewarded:
- *We'll be rewarded with a deeper revelation of God.* To this day, one of the more well known names of God is 'Jehovah-Jireh' (which means 'God will provide'). Amazingly it is in this very act of obedience that Abraham has this revelation of God's name (see verse 14). Still today, as we obey God we are privileged with a deeper revelation of who God is - and one of the main revelations we have is that God is the one who gave us a substitute lamb to die in our place. We will more deeply appreciate the significance and power of the cross of Christ!
- *We'll be rewarded with a closer relationship with God.* Before the obedience God calls out a single 'Abraham' (v1). But once his obedience was certain, God calls out 'Abraham, Abraham' (v11). It is as though God has intensified his affections towards Abraham. This is also evident in the words that God uses, 'Now I know' (v12). Although this verse uses human language, it tells us that the bond between God and Abraham had been intensified.
- *We'll be rewarded with God's gracious interventions.* As Abraham obeys, so God intervenes with the sending of a ram. He learns that God is a God who will always provide for us as we obey him. The Bible is full of stories of how, at the moment of obedience to God, God graciously intervenes to rescue, provide, heal, save, or promote.
- *We'll be rewarded with the more powerful confirmations of God's promise to us.* Perhaps the greatest reward of all is how God finalizes the covenant he had been in the process of making with Abraham through the years. In verse 15, God swears by himself. In other words he adds an oath to the covenant he had been making. Without the oath, the covenant of promise was not totally secure. There was still the possibility that, if Abraham failed to trust and obey God in the future, that God could withdraw the promise over his life. We see God doing this, for example in the life of king Saul: God withdrew his promise of kingship because of Saul's persistent failure to trust and obey (1 Samuel 13:13-14). But Abraham at this moment gets God's final word: 'It's a done deal! Now, my promise to you will happen with absolute certainty. Nothing can stop it from being fulfilled. Nothing!' (Hebrews 6:13-18 comments on this oath-swearing moment.) Said in one sentence: God may change his mind on his promises to us, but he will never change his mind on a promise confirmed with an oath. Similarly, God may have made wonderful promises to us about his plans and promises for us specifically, but he may revoke them if we persist in disobedience and distrust. However, when we have persevered to trust and obey God for a long time, and despite some massive temptations to give up, there may come a time when God confirms some of his promises to us with an oath.

What a wonderful moment in the life of a believer when we can know with absolute certainty that God will not change his mind about his promises and plans for us.

- *We'll be rewarded with joy.* Though the text does not mention this, our imagination can easily fill in the blanks: Abraham, taking his boy to the mountains, would have left home with an earnest, serious expression on his face. But he would have returned with a big smile on his face. Meyer writes, 'Once he returned, the halo of Abraham's vision (as recorded in verses 11-18) lit up the ordinary places in his life, as it shall do for us when we turn back to the lowlands of daily duty from the mounts of sacrifice.' Obedience brings the glow of joy into our lives.

### **God loved the world so much that he gave his only son.**

- Fascinatingly, Abraham caught an advance glimpse of Christ's coming (see John 8:56). Probably this experience was the main way he got a glimpse of the coming sacrifice of Christ.
- 'For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but shall have eternal life' (John 3:16). So important is the gospel (that John 3:16 summarizes) that God foreshadowed the gospel in great detail 2000 years before it even happened in the story recorded in these verses. Let us look at nine details in this story that serve as prophetic glimpses of Christ's sacrificial death for us:
  - 1) *We see the pre-incarnate Christ intervening in this event.* It is interesting that 'the angel of the Lord' called out for Abraham to stop (v11). Many theologians believe the mentions of 'the angel of the Lord' to refer to the pre-incarnate Christ.
  - 2) *We see the location of Jesus' death.* Isaac's near-death happens on 'the mountain of the LORD' (v14). It was a mountain specifically chosen by God (v2). Amazingly this very mountaintop would later become the location of the Jerusalem temple (see 2 Chronicles 3:1). The temple would be the place where animals were sacrificed to atone for the sin of Israel against God. Sacrificial blood would flow from this place. This place of atonement would become the meeting place of God and man. In the same way, Christ would be crucified on a hilltop nearby. The cross of Christ would become the basis of humanity's atonement, the meeting place of sinful humanity with a holy God.
  - 3) *We see Jesus carrying his own cross.* Isaac carried the very wood that would feed the flame that would kill him (v6). In the same way, Christ carried his own cross to his place of execution.
  - 4) *We see Jesus co-operating with his father.* Isaac co-operated with his father. He trusted his father implicitly, and although he must have feared dying, he entrusted his life to his father's care. He did not resist or run (v9). In the same way, Christ, entrusted himself to the father's will in the garden of Gethsemane. Once he had discerned that this was what his father wanted, he neither resisted nor ran.
  - 5) *We see the Father's painful experience of Jesus' death.* Abraham did not spare his one and only son whom he loved (v2,12), although finally God did spare Isaac (v12). This is clearly a picture of Jesus who is described as 'God's one and only son' (John 3:16). Romans 8:32 uses the

precise language of verse 12: 'He did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us'. The desperate pain that Abraham must have experienced as he was about to plunge the knife into Isaac is a picture of the pain the Father experienced as his son was crucified for our sins.

- 6) *In contrast to Isaac, we see Jesus abandoned at his time of suffering.* Isaac was in pain at the prospect of his own death, but he was comforted by the fact that he could look into Abraham's eyes and know that he was loved. Similarly, Jesus experienced great pain (even sweating blood in mere anticipation of his death). However, he did not have the same privilege Isaac had - he lost sight of his father at his time of greatest suffering. He called out 'Why have you forsaken me?' Jesus was not spared at the last moment, but suffered until he breathed his last. In this time, his soul experienced his father's abandonment not his comforting love.
- 7) *We see God providing a substitute sacrificial lamb.* God provided a substitute for Isaac at the last second - a lamb (v13). God was giving us a powerful picture of how he would one day give Jesus, described as 'the lamb of God' (John 1:29), to be a substitute. He would take the punishment that our sins deserved. He died in our place. Mysteriously God put our sins on his son and punished them there.
- 8) *We see Jesus resurrected from the dead.* Hebrews 11:19 says, 'Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death'. Though God figuratively raised Isaac from the dead, he raised Jesus literally from the dead.
- 9) *We see Jesus' death accomplishing the blessing of salvation for the whole world.* God said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me' (v18). Isaac's near-death accomplished blessing for the world. Jesus' death has accomplished the highest possibility of blessing: salvation for all those who call on his name.

Read 22:20-24

**You will likely be tempted to go back to what God called you from.**

- The author puts these verses into the book of Genesis apparently for two reasons. The first one is to tell us of Rebekkah (v22), who will marry Isaac (in Genesis 24). But the second reason is that it suggests that Abraham was at this time tempted to return. For years he had been away from the country where he had spent most of his life - and then he heard of all the family that he had there. Yet, because of the promise of God over his life, he did not return. Hebrews 11:15, speaking of Abraham, says, 'If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.' Nothing, other than the promise of something that God calls us *to*, can help us overcome the temptation to return to what God has called us *from*. This is what enables us to keep moving forwards with God, rather than

backwards to the world that once defined us. Let us be ready to face these temptations when they come.

## Genesis 23

### ORDINARY LIFE UNDER AN EXTRAORDINARY PROMISE (23:1-20)

Read 23:1-2

- **Living under God's promise does not help you avoid the realities of your humanity.**
  - *Lots of time has passed.* It has been 25 years since the last major event of Abraham's life, that of God telling him to sacrifice Isaac. What happened in these 25 years? The answer is that Abraham enjoyed his life as an ordinary human: 'the tending of vast flocks and herds; the recurrence of birth, death and marriage amongst his slaves; the occasional interchange of hospitality with neighbouring clans; special days for sacrifice and worship' (Meyer). In the same way, the life of faith, though being adventurous at times, is also marked by extended times of ordinariness. We never graduate beyond the basics of our humanity.
  - *Abraham loses the love of his life.* In Abraham's absence, the wife that he has been with for a 100 years has died. He weeps over her. In the same way, the life of glorious faith in the God who promises to bless us and bless others through us, will be marked from time to time by the loss of loved ones. Our faith does not boost us beyond the realities of our humanity.

Read 23:3-20

#### **The promised land is yours.**

- God had promised Abraham land but he apparently never got any land, other than some wells, and now the burial site of his wife. The chapter highlights that Abraham, nearing the end of his life, had not experienced the fulfilment of God's promise to him that he would own his own land. The need for a burial site for his wife heightens Abraham's longing for God's promise of land to be fulfilled.
- In what ways did God keep his promise to Abraham that he would receive land? There are three answers to this question:
- 1) *The promised land referred to the land of Canaan only after he died.* Eventually, through leaders such as Joseph, David and Solomon the descendants of Abraham did own the land that was promised. It is for this reason that Abraham refused the temptation to bury Sarah in the land of her birth. He knew by faith that the day would come when his descendants would inhabit this land, and would visit the grave of their

ancestor, Sarah. The gravesite of Sarah would be a future nucleus around which his descendants would populate.

- 2) *The promised land referred to Abraham's eventual impact on the whole world.* Romans 4:13 speaks of Abraham and his descendants inheriting the whole world. It was not just Canaan that was promised to Abraham, it was that he would be a blessing to all the people in the world. Through his seed, Jesus, this has already largely been fulfilled.
  - As Christians we too can be encouraged that our tribe's gospel will go to all the nations of the world in the power of the Spirit and local churches will be born in its trail. Wherever the gospel has its impact, we can say that we, the gospel-people, have a share.
- 3) *The promised land referred to the new heaven and the earth.* Hebrews 11:9-10 says, 'By faith Abraham made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents ... for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.' Meyer writes, 'Uprooted from the land of his birth, the patriarch could never take root in any earthly country. His spirit was always on the alert, eagerly reaching out for the city of God, the home where only such royal souls as his can meet their peers and find their rest.' Like Abraham we need to be ready to acknowledge that we are merely 'foreigners and strangers' (v4).
  - We also are pilgrims passing through. We live in the world, but we do not live for the things of this world. We do not store up treasures on earth, which are so temporary. Rather we build our lives upon kingdom values, and we store up our treasures in heaven. We are not surprised that life in this world is difficult (1 Peter 4:12). Like Abraham, we still experience the temporariness of life and love (v1). We experience grief (v2). But our grief exists against the backdrop of hope. One day as believers we will receive new resurrection bodies that live gloriously in the new heaven and earth. The earthly promised land of Canaan is a mere shadow of a heavenly promised land, which is the destination of all those who trust in Christ.