

Study Guide



Introduction:

Abraham is a prolific character in the Bible. His story begins with a call from God and soon leads into a covenant between God and Abraham that promises God will do amazing things through Abraham. Abraham's life after this is littered with examples of doubt, fear, and sin as he struggles to understand and trust in God. His faith, or lack thereof, would not only have an effect on his relationship with God but also on a number of other relationships with those around him. In our weekly messages we'll be surveying Abraham and his relationships but in our study guide we're going to be taking a passage by passage look at the life of Abraham and what we can learn from his journey to find faith in God and live that faith in his everyday life.

Preliminary Events

Before we can walk through the events that Abraham went through in his story we have to learn a little bit about who Abraham was and what happened in his life and lineage prior to God calling him. Abraham was called by God when he was 75 years old so a great number of things happened in Abraham's life before his calling from God. We'll walk through a few of those things below.

Author of Genesis

The explanation taken below is from the ESV study Bible. It contained a longer discourse about other potential interpretations for the date and authorship of Genesis but ultimately concludes that the most reliable and widely accepted authorship for Genesis is that this book was written by Moses.

"Traditionally Genesis, like the rest of the Pentateuch, has been ascribed to Moses. The other books of the Pentateuch relate Moses' life and his role in bringing Israel to the borders of Canaan, and parts of these books are expressly said to have been written by Moses (e.g., [Num. 33:2](#); [Deut. 31:24](#)). Genesis is clearly an introduction to the books that follow, so it is natural to suppose that if Moses was responsible for their composition, he must also have been the author of Genesis."

Abraham's Timeline

Abraham was born sometime around the year 2090 BC. We cannot hold to that exact date, but we know it was sometime around this. We do know the totality of his life was 175 years so the range of his life was sometime around 2091 BC - 1915 BC. His story starts with his calling by God and would be placed sometime around 2015 - 2016 BC. the majority of the events depicted about his travels, wars, and struggle with God's promise take place between the times when he was 75 up until his son Isaac's marriage when he was 140.

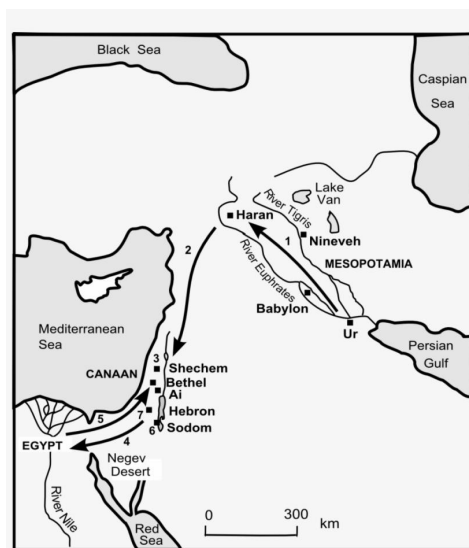
His Ancestry

Genesis 11 concludes with a rather long list of the genealogy of Shem. This genealogy carries down multiple generations from when Shem stepped off the ark with his other two brothers down to Terah. And we learn that Terah fathered three sons when he was seventy, Nahor, Haran, and Abram (later known as Abraham).

Terah and his family were settled in the city Ur located in the lower portions of Babylon. There are different views on this as being a Mesopotamian city located somewhere closer to the west but most evidence lends towards this Ur of the Chaldeans being the city in Babylon. Terah and his three sons spend the first part of their lives here in this city. It was there that Haran had a son named Lot and then passed away. Abram and Haran both took wives there and then Terah led his family away from Ur North West towards the land of Canaan.

The family did not make it to Canaan though as they stopped in Harah (not the son Haran but the city Hara) and stayed there. Some believe this departure from the plan came because of the health conditions of Terah and others think it was simply because they found a place they liked and decided to stay. Either option could be viewed as valid but the family of Terah, now consisting of Abraham, Sarai, Lot, Nahor, Milcah, and Iscah, stayed in Haran.

It is in this place we see God speak to Abram and begin to take Abrams' life in a very different direction. It is here that we will see the events unravel that bring about a man so influential in the scripture that he is mentioned over 250 times between the old and new testament. It is here we find Abraham, the father of faith.



The Call of Abram (12:1-9)

As Abram and his family lived in Haran, Genesis 12 opens with a phrase that will become very familiar in the Old Testament, "Now the Lord said."

This type of transitional statement is common in the Old Testament to show something new is happening. In the text we've moved from one focus to another. We start here with God saying this to show us this call of Abram signifies a new part of the story. God speaks to Abram and says to him, *"Go from your country and your kindred and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed"* (Gen 12:1-3)

God's call for Abraham is that he should do the following.

1. Leave Haran the place where he is currently living.
2. Leave his kindred or his extended family.
3. Leave his father's household - heritage.
4. Go to the land God will show him.

Abraham is in other words called to leave everything but his immediate family behind and go to a random place that God will eventually make clear to him. He didn't know where this land was or what it would be like but Abram started by showing great faith in that he did answer God's calling with very little info about what this would look like and what he was headed into. This is similar to God's previous call to Noah. When God called Noah he did not give much of an explanation (Gen 6:9-22). Noah admittedly got more detail than Abram did but when compared to the warning that God was going to flood the earth Noah wasn't given a great deal of explanation. Both men were called and they had to have faith in God for his instruction and promises.

This can be encouraging to believers today. Often God will make requests of us or we find ourselves in situations where following his will doesn't make the most sense. For example when we see others lie, cheat, and steal to get ahead it can feel discouraging to realize we are called to live differently. When it seems like we are running the same race but with a different set of rules than others. God calls us to follow and to trust that his plan is greater than our understanding. Like Noah building an ark or Abram leaving his home for a land unknown, sometimes God calls us to trust him and follow.

The reward to Abraham in his faith was given by God immediately following. He tells Abram he would experience the following things in his obedience and faith.

1. God will make a great nation of Abram.
2. God will Bless Abram and make his name great.
3. God will bless those who bless Abram and curse those who curse him.
4. God will bless all Families through Abram.

This promise, more commonly referred to as the “Abrahamic Covenant” is the first of three times that God will make these promises to Abraham about his future and what God has in store for him. Each of them a more emphatic reminder about the severity and the security of what God has promised to Abram.

In verse four we see Abram begin to show his faith and leave his home as God had asked of him.

“So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy five years old when he departed Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan.”

Abram and his family begin to move from Haran towards the place God had called them towards. They travel South West parallel with the Mediterranean Sea towards Aleppo and Damascus.

One important note to make here is that Abram takes his family and possessions which is not against what God had asked of him. He even brought the servants that he had hired while he lived in Haran. Yet included in the list of people brought with Abram is his brother’s son, Lot.

Haran, who had passed in Ur before the family started their journey came with Abram and joined him on his journey. Abram was instructed by God to leave his family and to leave his father’s household. Bringing Lot with him was a clear violation of this call. Lot will go on as we read the story to create major problems for Abram that will continue to distract him from God’s calling. This was a part of Abram’s life that God didn’t intend for Abram to bring with him. It was something he continued to carry with him that God wanted Abram to let go of in his new journey.

When we decide to follow Jesus we may have to let things go. Abram was called to leave his past behind but you might be called to leave a passion or an addiction or an unhealthy habit behind. When God calls us, it sometimes requires us to leave something behind. What we’re leaving behind is usually something that would keep us from or distract us from God’s plan for us.

Some people will argue that Lot was supposed to be there. Haran had died and so Abram was taking Lot as his adoptive father. In some ways this would make sense. You wouldn’t want to leave an orphan alone and abandoned in Haran because he was not your biological child. However, statements in the text seem to contradict this idea.

First, time seems to suggest that Lot was old enough to be considered a man. Only a few years after this departure we learn that Lot had his own possessions, servants, and it was a fairly decent amount. It was so much so that Lot’s livestock and Abram’s livestock could not have the large field they had settled in together. While Lot did not necessarily have this much wealth

when they departed Haran, for him to own this much he would have to have been at least of age enough to be established and on his own.

Second, Lot is clearly identified here as being the “son of Haran.” If Abram had adopted Lot he would no longer be known as the son of Haran but as Abram’s son. Lot then, being Haran’s son still, and having amassed the wealth he had, was more than likely not an orphaned child, but was older when his father passed away. He went with his family to Haran and when Abram departed Lot chose to come with him. Abram was instructed to leave his family and father’s household so this was the first failure we see in Abram to uphold and keep what God had commanded.

Abram and his family, along with Lot, arrive in Shechem and set up camp at what was known as the “Oak of Moreh.” Shechem is located west of the sea of the Jordan River between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. This was a land occupied by the Canaanite people. Throughout the majority of the Old Testament the Canaanite people were a problem for the Israelites. God however, had promised this land to Abram and so there at the Oaks outside Shechem in Moreh God appeared once again to Abram to clarify and specify what land Abram and his descendants would inherit. “To your offspring I will give this land” God promises to Abram and so there in that moment Abram builds an altar to God.

Abram Leaves this place and stops again in Bethel. There he creates another altar to call out to God. Then he and his family continued to journey southward towards Negeb which was the dry land located to the southwest of the Dead Sea.

For all the good and bad we see in Abram when God first calls him, he did have the faith and courage to go. He left (almost) everything to start a new journey God was calling him to. Today, take a moment and think about what God has called you to do. Do you feel like you’ve courageously stepped into that and left everything behind in pursuit of it? Or like Abram are you carrying something with you that God didn’t intend for you to?

Abram in Egypt

As Abram and his family had settled in the land on Canaan a major famine comes across the land. Abram was headed toward Negeb from Bethel and Negeb was known for being a dry and harsh area. This wasn't a desert area but it wasn't the greatest place for growing crops. There were some things that could grow there but your options were limited.

As a famine came into the land, the harsher areas in and around Negeb would have definitely been affected more. So as famine increases we see Abram and his family move south west into Egypt to find safety during the famine. With Abram moving as a nomad in the land, moving would not have been a major ordeal, but complications do arise when Abram and Sarai end up in Egypt.

Before we talk about their time in Egypt and all the ensues there, we have to mention the issue with Abram leaving Canaan in the first place. God had called Abram to be in the land of Canaan. We see no indication that God told Abram to leave and go to Egypt, just that things grew difficult and they decided to go there. Egypt will continue in the Old Testament to represent our dependence on things other than God. Moses here went to Egypt in hopes that he would find comfort but God had called him to be in Canaan. Israel would on numerous occasions go back to Egypt for all manner of reasons and all of those stories show a lack of faith in God's promises.

We tend to, in the same way, prefer the immediate fix before us. Egypt was an easy option for Abram as the famine increased. It was logical. It only made sense. Yet to do so meant to leave the place to which God had called him. When we decide to follow after something other than God those options often look nice. They make sense. It seems like an easy route to take. Yet is it the route God has called us to. Abram and Israel constantly fell back on the support of Egypt instead of trusting God. What things do you fall back onto for comfort? What are you trusting more than God?

So Abram and Sarai made it into Egypt but before they arrived there Abram made a request of Sarai. He asks her to tell the people of Egypt that he is her brother and not her husband. He is afraid that because she is beautiful the men there will kill him and take her as their own. There was no evidence something like this might happen but it was nonetheless something that Abram was afraid of happening.

The weird part about this story that we are not made aware of until later is that Sarai really is Abram's half sister. The two were both children of Terah but by different mothers. So Abram was not telling them something untrue when he said she was his sister, but he was misrepresenting and leaving out very important information. I'm sure the argument he made to Sarai was that it wasn't exactly a lie. What he was saying was true, but not the whole truth. He wasn't spreading misinformation, he just wasn't sharing all the information.

I think our culture tends to do this a lot. Whether it be a biased piece in the media, a company's leadership shaping stats to mislead the stockholders, or a spouse keeping something from their partner we all have experienced and seen this justification of misleading actions. We tell ourselves it isn't exactly a lie, but it is definitely misleading and bearing false witness. We're not being honest. Whether our dishonesty is in omission or commission we are still being dishonest.

This part of Abram's story should show us clearly that sometimes we can have great faith in God. We can have enough to move our family and head to an unknown area and follow God's rather vague call. Yet we can also succumb to fear and doubt when we see famine and tumultuous circumstances. The two are not mutually exclusive. Great moments of faith can be followed by great moments of doubt and vice versa.

Abram was right about Sarai's beauty, it did call attention. The Egyptian priests who met them made such a big deal of her beauty that Pharaoh heard about it. He wanted to meet this beautiful woman. She was taken to Pharaoh to be part of his court and because of all this Pharaoh dealt well with Abram. He gave Abram treasures and livestock and had him pretty set considering the regional famine. From the information given it seems like Abram was ready and willing to hand over his wife for some treasures and move on without her as the Pharaoh took her as part of his court.

After Sarai has left and is with Pharaoh we see that the entire Egyptian house begins to suffer from plagues. God protects Sarai in a way Abram was unwilling. Pharaoh and his house realize this is because of Sarai, they confront Abram, and he is thrown out of the land. He is allowed to keep everything he acquired and was gifted him in the land.

Just about everything Abram did in this story was deplorable. He doubted God's promise and fled the land God told him to stay in. He lied about his wife and made her go along with the lie. He traded his wife off for goods and even when she was taken into Pharaoh's house as part of his court Abram refused to come to his wife's aid (from the mess he got her into). He was finally kicked out of Egypt because of all his actions. Yet when he left he was able to keep all the wealth and gifts he had been given. He wasn't killed for lying. His wife was saved and protected. God showed up in a major way and it had nothing to do with Abram's faithfulness. On the contrary, God was faithful even when Abram clearly wasn't.

We may fail. We may have doubts. We may have moments of confusion or times when we've made bad decisions. Yet in these moments while we may be less faithful God is still constant. He is secure. He is faithful regardless.

Abraham and Lot Separate

Abraham acquired a great deal of wealth from his time in Egypt. As Pharaoh kicked him out, Abraham went back to the region of Negeb. He went back to the rigid and dry land where God had lead him before everything in Egypt took place. He was back where he started. Wounds and embarrassment from everything that transpired were still there, but he was back where God had promised. It was a reset.

Ofentimes in our life we've got to go back where God called us. Decisions can lead us off the path where God intended us to be and the only way to start making it right is to go back where he called us to be in the first place. That may not be where we end up, or even stay very long, but we've got to be humble enough to go back.

In Revelation, Jesus was talking to the church at Ephesus. He told them that they had done so many great things but his problem was that they had left their first love. In other words, their hearts had gone astray after other things, their priorities were mixed up, and God's remedy for this was simple; go back to what you did at first. Hit the reset. Take it back to the place where you knew things were right and start there. This sometimes means hard choices. In Abraham's choice it meant going back to the dry and rough land of Negeb to make it right. In our own circumstances it might mean ending a relationship, it might mean changing habits, or it might mean giving something up. Yet for us to find our way back sometimes we have to go back.

As far as our sanctification, we are justified, forgiven, and free in Christ. Yet while we may have the eternal consequences of our sins covered in Christ, there is still natural law and civil law that we must adhere to while we are alive. For example, a murderer may accept Christ through prison ministries. Though his sins are great the death and resurrection of Christ have covered his sins and he is justified. There is no condemnation in Christ for that murderer. Yet in this life he must still face the consequences of his actions. He will still stand trial. He will face life and prison or possible execution. He must face his victim's family and do his best to make retribution. He is free in Christ, but there are still consequences of his choices.

Abraham made terrible mistakes in Egypt. He came back where he knew God wanted him to be. That is a beautiful thing. Yet there were still consequences for everything he did. His marriage, as we will see in sections to come, suffered because of this. His faith suffered. His family suffered. At the onset of this story we see two great truths. Be careful with the decisions you make. While we are forgiven in Christ the burden of our decisions here is still very real. If you have lost your way and you realize you have made bad choices you've got to go back.

When Abraham and his family get back to Negeb problems develop between Abraham and Lot. Abraham has been, this entire time, taking Lot and his tribe with him everywhere. This was, as we saw earlier, in direct opposition to God's command to leave his fathers house and his previous life in Haran behind. Bringing Lot was clear doubt and disobedience. This is the first of many problems it causes.

The entire family travels from Negeb north to Bethel. Abraham and Lot's shepherds and livestock are too large to fit in the field they've both occupied and it's created such a problem that Lot and Abraham have to get involved. The two meet to discuss and Abraham makes Lot an offer. If Abraham goes left Abraham will go right. If Lot goes right, Abraham will go left. Abraham submits to Lot knowing as long as he is in the land God promised him then it would be okay. Lot evaluates both directions and decides to go to the Jordan Valley near the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham is then forced to move south east further towards Negeb. He was given the lesser of the two options. He went there, honored his commitment to both Lot and God. Moving east meant he would allow Lot to have the area he wanted and it also meant finally honoring God. He had left behind the last bit of his previous life. It wasn't the best business decision. It was not the wisest decision through almost any lens. Yet to follow God's lead, it was the best choice he could have made. This decision was solidified by God appearing again to Moses to reiterate his promises. Abraham took his family and moved to Hebron. This move was to the north west left of the Dead sea. It was a better land than he could have imagined when he moved further into Negeb. But he was faithful, He listened to God's promises, God blessed him because of it.

Abraham Rescues Lot

After Lot and Abraham separate the two never actually speak again. Abraham is faithful to his commitment to God. This is the first of a few instances where Lot's decisions will cause problems for Abraham, but to Abraham's credit we have no knowledge of the two ever actually interacting again after they separate.

In the beginning of chapter 14 we find a historical recount of a war between a number of kings. The story here is pretty interesting about a group of city kings that rebel against a larger ruler only to be humiliated in battle. Sodom and Gomorrah were two of these rebelling cities whose defeat cost them and their people dearly. The enemy came and took from their cities riches and people for slaves. Included among the people taken by the enemy from Sodom was Lot and his family. Someone comes to inform Abraham about Lot's capture and Abraham, along with his allies go to rescue Lot.

There are a few things to note about this. First, when Abraham prepares to go to war it says he calls his 318 trained men. These men were born in his household. They had been trained for war. This moment was expected. Maybe these exact details were not the ones he expected, but Abraham knew there would come a time when he would need to defend himself and those he loved in Canaan. He prepared for this day.

There is nothing wrong with preparation. The scripture encourages it. It tells us to be ready; ready to answer, ready to defend, ready to be generous, ready to forgive, and ready to provide. The scripture encourages stewardly preparedness.

However, it does discourage hoarding, greed, and idolatry. It warns us against trusting our own plans more than God. It warns us against keeping for ourselves when we see our neighbors in need. It warns us that we cannot serve God and money/possessions. Abraham had seen God be faithful and he trusted God. The 318 men were not a show of doubt, but a sign of preparedness.

Second, as Abraham goes north to defeat this king, save lot, and everyone else with them, Abraham and Lot are never recorded speaking. We actually don't see the two connect at all. Abraham protected Lot. He went to war for him. Yet he did not speak to him. He wouldn't break the command God had given him to leave his father's household behind. What this shows us is that letting someone go doesn't mean growing callous to their condition. We can pray for those who leave. We can still be generous to their causes. We can still help and show love, without allowing them back to the same place in our life. Keeping boundaries is often confused with anger or bitterness but Abraham is a great example of that not being true. He could not allow himself to be around Lot anymore. He would not however sit back and watch as all these people were carried off into slavery.

So Abraham, his 318 trained men, and his allies went to war and brought everyone back.

Abraham blessed by Melchizedek

After Abraham and his armies return they are met by the failed king and another leader. Melchizedek the priest/king joins the king of Sodom to greet Abraham and begin talking about the spoils of war that Abraham had received.

Melchizedek is an interesting character that creates so many questions for the audience. He is a priest of "the LORD, God Most High" and he blesses Abraham by this God. While there are many questions about this moment, what Melchizedek's role was in God's redemptive story, he is nonetheless someone Abraham clearly respected. Abraham gives an offering to Melchizedek (a tenth) from everything they had gathered from war. While we won't have much time here to dig into this character, reading Hebrews will also shed some light on who Melchizedek was and his role.

After this the king of Sodom offers Abraham to keep all the remaining good but to give him back the people. This can be seen as a humble act for the king of Sodom, but ultimately it was a selfish one. Allowing Abraham to keep the riches he had attained through the war would give the king of Sodom the opportunity to claim some responsibility in helping Abraham get where he was and take away from God's credit.

Abraham wisely responds that he would not take anything, but instead only what his men had eaten and what was rightly his. The allies who came with him could take their share if they wanted it as well.

There was nothing "wrong" with taking the spoils of war. It was definitely unwise though. Abraham saw that and made the right choice. Instead of using the filter "is this wrong" Abraham decided to think about "is this wise?"

Billy Graham's ministry was hugely successful. Over decades of time thousands of speaking engagements lead thousands of people to Christ. In all those years of ministry there were no reports of scandals. No events that need to be explained or covered up. This was because Billy Graham didn't ask if something was right or wrong, he asked if it was wise. One example of this is that no man and women were allowed to be alone in their administration. They knew it wasn't wise. If no man and woman in the administration were ever alone together there was no room for accusation. This can sound like legalism if not executed properly, but in this case it worked because it was understood that just because something is not wrong, that does not make it wise.

In Abraham's discussion with the king of Sodom he chose to take the wise path. He decided that, I'm sure despite grumbling and confusion among his men, that he would do what was wise.

God's Covenant with Abraham

While the text does say where Abraham went after he defeated the kings and met with Melchizedek, it's safe to assume that he went back to Hebron. While he was there the text tells us that the "word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision."

Abraham has just shown great faith and obedience in the way he handled Lot. He had separated himself from Lot and even when he went to rescue him from captivity Abraham honored God's request and was no longer associated with Lot. In response to Abraham's faithfulness God appears to Abraham to repeat his promise.

"Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be very great."

God starts by encouraging Abraham that the promises he made before when he first appeared are still ever true. Not only is God protecting Abraham as his "shield" here, but he is also promising Abraham that the reward for trusting God will be very great.

Sometimes we need the reminder. We need God to remind us that he is with us. We need him to reprise his promises and encourage us that they are still true. We need assurance, we need confidence, we need comfort in the midst of our fear and doubt.

In the New Testament Jesus talks to his followers about the Holy Spirit. In John 14 he begins explaining that he will send a "helper" or a "comforter." Jesus says that he would be leaving but when he sends this Comforter to us that the comforter would "bring to remembrance all that I have said to you." (John 14:26)

In other words, today, those who know Jesus have been gifted with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's role, among other things, is to remind us of everything that Jesus promised us. His role in our comfort is constantly bring back God's promise. In the midst of our suffering, in the midst of our pain, and in the midst of our doubt he reminds us that God has promised us and He is faithful.

God reminds Abraham in chapter 15 of the promises that he has made but Abraham doubts. "How shall I know" Abraham asks. And God then makes a covenant with Abraham in that moment. This covenant was one that declared as long as God lived he would keep his promises and he would fulfil his word. He promises Abraham that his descendants will be held captive before they inherit the land (egyptian slavery in exodus) and that God will judge their captors (the plagues in exodus) and that his people would come back here to inhabit the land God had promised.

He makes a statement that is important. Abraham had to wait and so did his people because the "sins of the Amorites" were not yet "complete." He tells Abraham that he cannot judge the Ammonites and take away their land because their sin has not come to that point yet.

There is so much at this point of the promise to encourage us about God's justice and his timing. He knew that Abraham's descendants would suffer in Egypt, and that they would be persecuted but he knew it was their good. One commentary explains that nomadic people groups like the Hebrew people would have quickly been wiped out in the open of Canaan. These tribes would have seen an impending threat and destroyed them. So instead we see the Hebrew people move into Egypt, fall into slavery, and the small nomadic tribe grows into a mighty nation of people under the protection and umbrella of the Egyptian empire. God knew they needed this to not only grow but also to appreciate what God was doing for them in the Promise Land.

Again, the sins of the Ammonites were not "complete." God tells Abraham that although his longer plan is judgment on the Ammonites because of the sins he knew they would ultimately commit and live in, he would not bring that judgment now because they had not committed that sin yet. God's timing and justice work out perfectly here and he protects the Hebrew people so they can grow and come back to Canaan as God's people. He brings judgment on the Egyptians for their evil and wicked ways. He does all of this while waiting out the sins of the Ammonites so that he can be just in his judgment.

God makes his promise to Abraham, giving a brief explanation of the timing, and then God walks through the sacrifices in the form of a flaming torch and a smoking fire pot. The fire pot represented the work and slavery the Hebrew people would experience working as clay makers under Egyptian tyranny. The flaming torch would represent the pillar of fire that the freed Hebrews would follow in their journey back to the land God had promised them. For more details on this sacrifice you can watch the first week of this series. To quickly explain, God was showing Abraham, in a way Abraham would understand, that no matter what God would be faithful to his promises and that he would fulfill his covenant.

Sarai and Hagar

Probably one of the lowest points in Abraham's life is the whole chain of events that come with Hagar. Hagar was a young woman, more than likely a teenage girl, that got wrapped up in the lack of faith that Sarai and Abram expressed. Her needless suffering was a major consequence of their actions.

Sarai was older in age and didn't expect she would be able to have children. God had already promised that Abraham and Sarah would have a child, but after a few years doubt had set in. There was a vicious cycle here of the two of them making terrible decisions because they doubted God's promise and provision. So Sarah, doubting she would be able to give Abraham the son he was promised, devises a scheme to help make this happen faster.

"Go into my servant" Sarah encourages her husband, "that I may obtain children by her."

This is the beginning statement of what turns into a truly tragic story in Abraham's journey. Abraham doesn't disagree with his wife but instead agreed and sleeps with her servant, Hagar. Abraham and Hagar are married and this teenage girl is forced to marry and bear a child for this 80 year old man. This clearly is not Biblically okay, but at the time there was no law, no scripture, and only God's spoken word. Abraham was not justified in his actions and they were not okay, but at this point he had not technically "broken" any of God's laws. Yet the thing he and Sarai had orchestrated would clearly cause problems.

While at this point in scripture polygamy has not been banned, every story in scripture where one person takes more than one wife it only creates problems and issues. By the time we make it into New Testament Theology we see that God's plan and design for mankind is monogamy. In the qualifications for leadership in the church the deacons and elders but he the husband of "one wife" implying that polygamy by this time was clearly an antithesis to what God wanted.

After Hagar conceives she begins to look down on, and pity, Sarah who cannot. This creates a greater problem in their dynamic because Sarah sees this disdain/pity and it enrages her. Hagar was not Abraham's wife as well but she was not equal to Sarah in favor or in power as we'll see in the verses to follow.

Sarah confronts Abraham blaming him for this whole situation. Although the entire idea was Sarah's suggestion she now places the complications and hurt that has come from this arrangement at the feet of Hagar. And when approached about the insult and disdain Hagar now shows for Sarah, Abraham's response is to hand Hagar's future and treatment over to the scorned feelings of Sarah.

We don't know the details of how Sarah treated Hagar. We're only told that Sarah dealt with her harshly. It was so much so that Hagar fled her home, her husband, and wound up alone in the wilderness. It was there that the angel of the Lord found her, comforted her, and encouraged her to return and submit. God promises her there that he will care for her and for her son.

Abraham at this point has failed both of his wives. His failure with Sarah started when he handed her over to Pharaoh. God had to show up and plague Pharaoh to save Sarah. Abraham failed Hagar when he first agreed to this foolish plan. He failed her again when he refused to defend and protect her. He failed again when he handed her treatment over to Sarah. Again in this situation God shows up to save those who the unfaithful have hurt and abandoned.

Hagar returns, has her child, and God is faithful. In the midst of this story we see the very worst in both Sarah and Abraham. Yet in their terrible acts and in their faithlessness we see a God who continues to be faithful, and care for the innocent.

Abraham the covenant of Circumcision

After another moment of weakness from Abraham in the way he handled Sarah and Hagar, God shows up one more time to reinforce his covenant with Abraham. This time the covenant becomes even more serious as God institutes commitments from Abraham and his descendants to remind them of their covenant with Him.

God reiterates his promises to give Abraham a nation of descendants. He promises again to give his descendants the entire land of Canaan. Lastly he promises again that through Abraham all nations would be blessed. (17:1-14)

What's comforting about this is something we've seen before. Abraham failed to have faith in God. His actions with Sarah and Hagar were deplorable. Yet still in probably his lowest moment, God is faithful. God does not abandon Abraham in his sin and failure. He shows up. He is faithful to his promises. Even when Abraham is not, God stands him back up and sets him back on the right path.

In this instance circumcision is instituted for Abraham and all of his descendants. All the men of his household, whether born or brought in through servitude, would need to be circumcised. This circumcision would represent two things. First it would be a constant physical reminder of the covenant made with God. This covenant was one to "walk before God" and to be "blameless" as his people. This would be more developed in the future under the leadership of Moses. As the people would journey back from Egypt into the Promise Land, Moses would write the first five books of the Bible called the Pentateuch. This would include the books of law that would explain the mandates and requirements of being blameless before God.

While believers today are not held to the same standard and the levitical Law, we are still called to be "above reproach" in the way we live. We're called to live in such a way that accusations of sin would seem so far-fetched that if there were ever made against us our character and integrity would cause those hearing who know us to doubt them.

The question that this raises for believers today is one of accountability and integrity. Does your life remove accusations. If you were accused at work of stealing thousands of dollars would people assume you did it or would your character and behavior make them doubt the accusation?

Abraham learns here, after another failure before God, that being given a promise from God comes with responsibility. It comes with an obligation to live up to the calling and the promise you've been given.

At this moment God also changes Abraham's name from Abram to Abraham. Abraham would no longer be known as "father" but now would be known as father of many nations. This transliteration of his name often leads many to believe Abraham may have been known by another name and that over time his name was replaced with Abram and Abraham to simplify the story and give the reader an easier understanding of his role in it. Whether this is true or not

it does not change the emphasis of the story that God changed Abraham's name. He establishes ownership and authority over Abraham by changing his name.

We see examples of this in the Old Testament as it was common practice to name things when you had authority over them. An example in the same book comes from the creation story with Adam. After God put Adam in the garden and gave him dominion over it, Adam was then commissioned to sit and name everything in the garden. This was a command from God but it was also a form of authority.

God renaming Abram to Abraham was God showing his authority and his ownership of Abraham. This is expressed later in God's marriage language towards Israel showing their commitment and ownership and even carries over into the New Testament when those of us who are in Christ as claimed to be adopted and given citizenship in Heaven. Both of this imply ownership, authority, and the commitment due in this relationship with God.

Isaac's Birth Promised

After God tells Abraham about this covenant and circumcision that he and his descendant would now be responsible to adhere to, God goes deeper into his promise to give Abraham a son.

Some would break this passage up into two different events. The use of "And God said" in verse 15 can oftentimes represent a new event or circumstances. In this passage, while this verse does represent a break from the previous one, the content, lack of context, and new audience would indicate that this was not another event or occasion, but as God changed his conversation from a conversation to Abraham to a conversation about Abraham and Sarai the dynamic of the conversation changes explaining verse 15's use of a transitional statement.

God starts by telling them that Sarai will have a new name. The same authority, ownership, and responsibility that God gave to Abraham was also now given to Sarah. She is elevated here, in both her position before God and before her position with Abraham. She is the one whom God will use to make this great nation. God's same language for the way he will bless Abraham is now used to describe the way God will also bless Sarah. She is elevated and included in the promise of God.

The greater irony here is that upon hearing this, Abraham falls to the ground laughing. He doubts and does not believe that God would ever use Sarah to bring about his nation. He even goes so far as to beg God to use Ishmael, his son by Hagar, to fulfill this promise. He tells Abraham that he will indeed bless Ishmael still, but God's promise will be fulfilled through Sarah.

Abraham has the men of his family circumcised. He follows God's command and does so diligently. This is a huge step in the right direction for Abraham. The last time we see him given a directive by God he follows but only partially. He brings Lot in his pilgrimage to Canaan. This time however there is no deviation from doing exactly what God had commanded.

Abraham and God

In chapter 18 we receive a story of God showing up, not long after the faithfulness of Abraham in circumcision to remind him of the promise he made to him concerning Sarah and their children.

Three men show up, one of them being God in physical form. Abraham sees these men coming from afar off and he hurries to prepare for them.

The three men could mean multiple things. Some believe this is a foreshadowing of the Trinity. God in three persons shown before Abraham generations prior. Some believe that the three men are God and two heavenly beings. While the text is not clear on how this dynamic worked, we do know God appeared before Abraham and Abraham's reaction shows he valued, respected, and appreciated the opportunity to be before God in this form.

God sits with Abraham in a tent and the two discuss his promise regarding Sarah. As God tells Abraham that Sarah will conceive in her old age, Sarah is listening outside and begins to laugh.

God hears the laughter and confronts both Abraham and Sarah. To Abraham he reassures him of his promise despite Sarah's doubt. To Sarah he asks her about her laughing and because she is afraid she denies that she laughed at all. God calmly corrects her, "No, but you did laugh."

God then moves with Abraham and leads him to view Sodom and Gomorrah. This is the place where God is about to bring his judgment and it is the place where Abraham's nephew, Lot, is still currently living. God tells Abraham that he is about to go view the city and decide his impending judgment.

This might have been a test for Abraham. He clearly struggled to let Lot go and hearing the news that God was about to bring judgment on the city, Abraham had to be tempted to run there and protect his family. Lot was an area of weakness and disobedience before, and some think God told him this to test his faith in spite of the amazing provisions and promises God had given him.

After this passage we will see Abraham, instead of running to protect Lot, going before God to intercede for his long left family.

Abraham Intercedes for Lot

Abraham hears from God that He plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Although the text does not explain and tell us the reason for Abraham's concern, it's easy to assume it is because of Lot. The area God is preparing to destroy is where Lot and his family still reside.

As God and the two who were with him begin to leave, Abraham stops God and begins to speak with him about the upcoming of judgment. "Will you indeed swipe away the righteous with the unrighteous?" Abraham asks. He wants to know that if there are 50 righteous men in the city would God truly destroy the city? God and Abraham begin a cyclical dialogue that leads God to agreeing that if there are just 10 righteous people in the city God would spare it.

There are two things to notice here. Scripture tells us that none are righteous, no not one. (Rom 3:10) So the expectation that there would be ten righteous people is not realistic. In this instance, its better to understand righteousness in the same manner as Abraham's righteousness. God saw Abraham's faith and counted it as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6/Romans 3:4). So Abraham was asking God, if there were just 10 people in Sodom and Gomorah would God save it? God agreed to save this but in the next chapter God's destruction of those cities lets us know in two major cities, God could not find that few of people who believe. That means the entire time Lot lived there believe in God he had not been able to influence and share his faith with even 6 people.

The second thing to notice is, even though God is faithful, just, and righteous, Abraham was adamantly concerned that God might destroy the righteous. He goes round after round with God trying to convince God not to do the unjust by killing and punishing the righteous.

Some consider this one of Abraham's last moments of doubt before he sees God do the unimaginable in Isaac. Abraham doubted God's decree and judgement. He assumed, and wrongly so, that God would do something contrary to his nature. His assumption and questioning of God could easily be seen as an insulting critique of what God has planned. And yet in this instance God answers Abraham and listens to his concerns.

This is humbling and comforting for the believer today. It lets us know God is big enough and gracious enough to hear our concerns. We know from scripture that all things work together for good. (Rom 8:28) We know that God is good and that He is holy, but there are times when we question. There are times when we don't understand. This story of Abraham taking his concerns to God is an example to us that we can take our concerns to Him. Its encouragement as well that even when we do not understand or do not see God working, He is.

God saves Lot and his family from Sodom before he brings judgment. God could not find 10 righteous people there in the cities but he was not going to destroy those who believed. God brought Lot and his two daughters out of the city and saved them.

Lot and his daughters.

When Lot is brought out of the city his wife does not survive. She turns to look back against God's command and is turned into a pillar of salt. Lot then alone with his two daughters. They lived in the hills of Zoar because Lot was afraid of the people of Zoar.

While living there alone from everyone else, Lot's daughters realized there was no one for them to marry and there was no one to carry on their father's heritage. So his daughters conjure up a plan to get their father drunk and sleep with him so that they could have children and carry on his name. On the first night the older daughter sleeps with her father and on the second night they do the same thing and the younger sleeps with her father. Both girls are impregnated and their sons go on to be the leaders and fathers of Moabites and the Ammonites. These nations were at war with Israel for a huge part of Israel's history.

This is important because it plays a huge part in the story of Lot and Abraham. Abraham was told to leave Lot behind in Haran. He was unfaithful in bringing Lot and it caused him a number of problems. Abraham would have to go to war over Lot. He would have to live longer in Negeb over Lot. He would argue with God on Lot's behalf. Lastly Abraham's descendants would have generations of conflict and problems. All of this coming back from Abraham's decision regarding Lot.

The scary part for us is the reality this brings to our choices. The implications of what we choose can have drastic consequences on those connected to us. If Abraham would have been faithful in God's call by leaving Lot behind, none of these things would have happened.

What areas in your life are you struggling to find faith? What complications do you see from that struggling faithfulness? Lastly, what can you do to trust God more in those areas?

Abraham and Abimelech

After Abraham's discourse with God about Sodom and Gomorrah, he moves back toward Negeb and ends up staying in the land of the Canaanite people. There he meets with the Canaanite leader Abimelech. He tries to play a familiar trick on the king and convinces Sarah to once again claim they are brother and sister.

Just like last time, Abimelech sees how beautiful Sarah is and asks her to be his wife. He takes her and brings her into his court. Yet before he can consummate the marriage God shows up and stops Abimelech. He tells Abimelech about Abraham's lie and lets Abimelech know that if he stops and returns Sarah that there will be no consequences. Abimelech, surprised and shocked by Abraham's scheme, agrees to return Sarah and asks for mercy from God by pleading ignorance of the relationship.

Abimelech takes this a step further when he and Abraham meet again letting Abraham know that he would give him riches to verify and testify of Sarah's sanctity. He also tells Abraham that he can take residence anywhere he wants to in the land of Canaan. God sees this generosity and after Abraham prays over Abimelech, God heals him and the women in his court.

Abraham has tried this before and it did not work then. It did not work here either. Again, Abraham showed his lack of faith in God by trusting his own deceit over the people instead of God's provision and protection. He also insults and judges the people of the land when he claims there was on fear of God in them and that's why he made up this half truth about Sarah. Yet the people's response to God's revelation and their generosity on top of it show that they were not the wretched people Abraham accused them of being.

Abraham had a long history up to this point of failing to trust God. Abraham seems to constantly doubt God despite God's constant provision and care. He struggles to believe God will provide in spite of God's consistent history of providing and caring for Abraham.

Sometimes our struggles in faith last for a while. It would be much easier if our doubts and fears and struggling faith was resolved overnight. Abraham struggled for years though. He struggled through phases of life to trust God. Yet what we'll see in the next section is that ultimately God proved himself faithful. Abraham doubted at times and struggled at times but God still counted him faithful and still kept his promises.

You may be struggling. God's still faithful. Even if your doubt lasts through seasons, God is faithful.

The Birth of Isaac.

Abraham's faith journey up until this point has been shaky at best. If we decided to chart out his life it would look, up until this point, like a constant fluctuation of highs and lows. One moment Abraham does something amazing that shows overwhelming faith. He goes to battle, he moves his family based on God's command, and he builds altars to commemorate God. Yet in between these instances and the repeated promise of God, Abraham also shows moments of great weakness and doubt. He runs to Egypt. He gives his wife away to Pharaoh. He takes a young slave girl as his wife trying to force God's plan. He debates God believing God might hurt and destroy the righteous. He falls back into his initial failure by offering his wife to Abimelech and God had to save her.

All the while God had made a promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a promise. While God had been faithful in so many other ways, the delay in fulfilling this promise led to constant doubt and disbelief. The birth of Isaac in chapter 21 represents a turning point in Abraham's life. From this point out we see a different Abraham. We see a man who trusts God. We see a man who doesn't understand everything that God asks, but faithfully obliges him. This moment where Abraham and Sarah see God fulfil his promise proves to be the catalyst in their faith and trust in God.

One beautiful part of Abraham's story for us is the promise and proof of God's faithfulness. You might be waiting to see God's promise come to fruition. You maybe longing for him to do something and the delay is creating greater room for doubt. What Abraham's life shows us and what all of scripture shows us is the testimony, track record, and reliability of God's promises.

Abraham and Sarah waited so long for this. God was faithful. After that moment both of them saw their faith change. You may still be waiting for God to move but knowing he was faithful in scripture and in the lives of these real people can be the encouragement, the added strength, and support for faith that the God who was faithful and is faithful will continue to be faithful.

God will move. We can wait to trust him until after he has proven it, or we can rest in the assurance now that he is faithful.

Ishmael sent away

As we saw earlier, Abraham's decision to have multiple wives has already caused him problems. The marriage with Hagar and the resulting child Ishmael cause more problems with Sarah. When Isaac is weaned from his mother Sarah sees Ishmael laughing or better translated mocking Isaac. This frustrates Sarah who immediately goes to Abraham. She wants Ishmael and Hagar kicked out of the family. Sarah even says that Ishmael should have no shared inheritance.

Abraham is admittedly concerned about doing this but God tells Abraham, to do as Sarah has requested for God will care for Ishmael and Hagar. Abraham gives Hagar provisions and then does as he has been told, sending Hagar and Ishmael off into the wilderness.

Hagar travels until the skin had emptied its water. She was worried for her life and the life of her baby. She could not stand to watch Ishmael die of thirst so she sits him under a tree and goes just a ways off. It is there that she cries out to God and he hears her. He promised to take care of her. He promises to care for Ishmael as well. It was then that Hagar saw a stream of water where she was able to refill her skin, care for her son, and both were safe. They lived in the wilderness as the boy grew. He became talented with a bow and eventually Hagar, the Egyptian woman took an Egyptian girl to be Ishmael's wife.

One important thing to note here and throughout the Old/New Testament is the mentioning of wandering in the wilderness. The wilderness is often a foreshadowing or even an expression of trials that lead to God's blessing. Egypt would wander in the wilderness. John the baptist would be out in the wilderness before the arrival of Jesus' ministry. Many prophets and old testament kings would experience their own journey into the wilderness. The wilderness was the unknown time before God had answered and fulfilled his promises.

We all go through the wilderness in our life. Sometimes the wilderness is due to job instability. Sometimes its when sickness creeps up and you didn't expect it. Still sometimes sickness is a marriage you want to be better, but don't know how to get there. The wilderness comes and like it was for Hagar the wilderness can often be a scary place with consequences greater than we could imagine. Yet its in the wilderness that we most closely cling to God's promise that he will provide. It is in the wandering that we feel the dependency and necessity of God's protection. Its when we're lost in the wilderness that we are most aware of our need for his direction. Its was there that Hagar heard from God and in our wandering we experience the same.

You may be in the wilderness. But that is only part of the journey. Ishmael grew strong and healthy and God provided. Egypt made it to the Promise Land. John the Baptist saw Jesus empowered and confirmed by the Holy Spirit. You may in the wilderness, but know that God will help you find a way.

Abraham's Treaty with Abimelech

Abimelech, king of the Philistines approaches Abraham about a treaty. He says that he has seen that God is with Abraham and he wants to make sure the two men remain on good terms. So they decide there to make a treaty together that they will not deal falsely with each other.

The first important thing to notice here is that Abimelech saw that Abraham had followed God faithfully. He was protected by God and God was with Abraham so Abimelech wanted to be connected and on good terms with Abraham. His testimony and God's work in his life made Abimelech want to work with Abraham.

When it comes to your testimony and the way people see you, does your faith cause people to want to work with you? Does your integrity and honesty make people want to align with you? Does your faith and the God you put your faith in cause people to want to be on your team?

Abraham was not a perfect person but people had heard about God moving in his life. You may not be perfect either, but is there evidence of God moving in yours? Is there something about the way you live and the faith you carry that calls people to work with you and be around you.

This small passage seems oddly placed and uncomfortably placed into the narrative. What this shows us though is a man who was growing. The same king he lied to before was now a king who knew his name, knew the man he had become, and now wanted to work with him. It showed the name Abraham had built for himself and it also showed the name and reputation garnished for God because of Abraham's faithfulness.

Would you say people think more highly of God because of the way you live? Do people at your work, or in your family, or in your neighborhood have a softer heart to God because of the relationship they have with you? Abraham started in bad terms with Abimelech but because of his reputation and God's consistency, Abimelech wanted to be connected.

Are people drawn to you that way? Are people drawn to God because of you?

Abraham Sacrifices Isaac

This is one of the strangest passages in Abraham's life. We see God test Abraham. Its not often in passages that we see God testing his people. We see passages about Him purifying them, cleansing them, or strengthening them, but testing is a rarer thing. In this passage though its clear God is testing Abraham. We learn from the end of the passage that God's conditional promises from Genesis 12:1-3 are on the line here as if Abraham shows himself faithful God will not only continue with those promises but they will now be unconditional. God will fulfill them because of Abraham's faithfulness here.

The passage opens with God telling Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on the mountain region of Moriah. Moriah is close in location to the Biblical location for Jerusalem. So God tells Abraham to go there and bring his son Isaac so that Abraham may present his son as a burnt offering to God.

Abraham has been sent a number of big faith decisions in his story. He was told to leave everything and did. He was told to trust God with Ishmael and Hagar and he did by letting them leave. He trusting God when he finally cut off Lot and moved in. He has shown great moments of faith but he has also shown his doubt.

Abraham lied about his wife in Israel and in Philistine. In both those instances God had to save Sarah because Abraham was too afraid and too selfish. Abraham showed his doubt when God called to him leave everything behind but he brought Lot instead. Abraham showed his doubt when he listened to his wife and took Hagar as his wife, trying to force God's hand. He doubted God when he debated God about the righteous in Sodom. He showed great moments of doubt that cost him and his family greatly.

In this instance God put in front of him another one of those moments where he can either believe and move in faith or he can doubt and try to do things his own way. "Take your son, your only son..... And offer him as a burnt offering." Words that the beginning of Abraham's story would have shaken him to his core, in this passage seem to not even phase him. Abraham gets this command from God and it says the next morning he gathered everything he needed including his son and a few servants and they travelled where God had told them to go. They arrive and Abraham prepares to burn his son for God.

What is beautiful about this passage in the midst of the crazy idea that God actually asked this, was the level of Abraham's faith.

This command by God to sacrifice his son was a direct contradiction to everything God had promised Abraham. This son was supposed to be a great nation. This son was supposed to have descendants greater than the stars of the sky. This son was the promised one from God but Abraham was being asked to sacrifice him? It didn't make sense. It wasn't at all what God had promised. This seemed to undo everything God had said he would do for Abraham. How could Abraham go through with this knowing it would hurt so badly?

Abraham arrives and before he leaves to take Isaac up the mountain he says something extremely profound. He tells his servants that He and Isaac are going up but "I am the boy will go over there and worship and come to you again."

Abraham didn't know what was going to happen. He didn't know how all this was going to work out. The top of the mountain was a mystery he wasn't able to wrap his head around. He did have a promise though. He had a promise that God was going to provide. He had a promise that God would make a great nation of Isaac. He had a promise from God and at this point in Abraham's life that meant he could have faith.

Abraham walks Isaac up the mountain and as he prepares to sacrifice his son, God stops him. And as Abraham looks into the distance he sees the ram he needs to make a sacrifice to God. So he does. He and the boy return, and they worship God there.

You may currently be struggling. You may currently not see where all this will lead. What you can know without a doubt is that God will remain faithful to his promises. We are called with a purpose. We will win in the end. God will make good of everything in this life.

Abraham trusted God, even when he didn't see the way through. He trusted God to make a way.

Abraham and Sarah's Death

Genesis 23 and 25 share the death of Abraham and Sarah. Sarah dies first and Abraham cares for her final resting place. In chapter 23 we see Abraham work to obtain a place to bury Sarah. Symbolically this carries some significance because the land he obtains is the first land he actually owns in the land which God promised would all be his. Outside of this though there is nothing special about this. It says they died and tells about their children after them.

This can be easy to read right past and miss the major point this makes. The story isn't about any of us. Abraham is such a huge part of the story in the Old Testament and even into the New Testament Yet when he dies the world doesn't stop, the story didn't end, but instead God's greater story continues.

Its easy sometimes to feel overwhelmed by our own circumstances. It's easy to see our part of the story as the whole story itself. We move our side stories, our smaller stories to center stage in our mind and easily forget that God's story is greater.

The quick way the story moves past Abraham is a humbling reminder that all of this isn't about us. The story is greater than us and in light of the eternity God is writing, our life is just a vapor. We can waste our life on temporary things in our life that will be gone in the blink of an eye or we can pour our life and story into God's greater story that lasts long beyond us.