

Abraham's Faith, a Strange Vision and the Birth of Ishmael (Genesis 15-16)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Genesis

I. Recap from the Previous Lesson

- a. Abraham was just getting started at age 75. Be encouraged that many times in Scripture God waited until people were older, mature and refined before beginning their greatest work.
- b. Jesus is foreshadowed by Melchizedek, whom Abraham encounters after the battle to rescue Lot. We can see Jesus as the great High Priest, from a priesthood greater and more ancient than one descended from Abraham and Levi. He is both the king of peace (Salem), and the king of righteousness, the one who offers the bread and wine on our behalf.

II. Abraham Believed God (Read Genesis 15:1-6)

- a. Abraham's lament: he is childless, no heir.
- b. God takes Abraham outside: "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them...So shall your seed be" (**Genesis 15:5**)
 - i. Read **Hebrews 11:12** (Regarding Abraham's faith, believing God's promise to him) "Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude - innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore."
 - ii. **Regarding the stars.** When Abraham looked up to the sky, he saw a picture that represented the future. Each of the uncountable thousands of stars he saw off in the distance, overwhelmingly too many to ever count, represented those who were yet to come. One of those stars he saw on that night represented you: one of many lights shining in the darkness.
 1. Daniel uses the similar imagery to describe us. In **Daniel 12:3** the prophet describes those to come who will seek wisdom and God: "Those who understand shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and some who are righteous like the stars of heaven forever and ever."
 2. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called his followers to be the light that shines in the midst of a dark world. He said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." (**Matthew 5:16**)

3. Paul admonishes us in **Philippians 2:14-15** to do all things without complaining and disputing, “that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world”.
- c. Abraham’s faith in trusting God: a great example for us today.
- i. **Genesis 15:6** “And Abram believed God...” This is the first place in the Bible where the Greek word translated “to believe” or “to trust in”, is used in Scripture (here, in the LXX of the Old Testament). Same word is very important for us, since it is used extensively throughout the New Testament. A study on ‘faith’ or ‘saving faith’ can begin with this passage.
 - ii. Abraham is held up for us as an example to imitate, in **Hebrews 11:8-19**. Paul says in **Romans 4:16** that Abraham is the father of all of us (Christians) who now believe.
 - iii. The Sermon on the Mount contains the core teachings of Jesus regarding the kingdom of God and the way of life in his kingdom. It contains many challenging teachings on the high standard of righteousness in areas such as: oaths, hatred, lust, permanence of marriage, forgiveness and nonresistance. However, one of the most challenging teachings of all is what Jesus said there about truly having faith in God, the kind of faith that Abraham displayed: trusting God to handle the future for us.
 1. Abraham really did trust that God would be his shield (protection) and reward: God had his front and back covered.
 2. Read **Matthew 6:25-34**. Jesus calls us to have the same attitude toward God. Worry and anxiety are the fruit of faithlessness.
 3. Jesus commented throughout his ministry on those who showed great faith (trust in God to deliver and take care of them), and those who showed little faith. Examples include:
 - a. The centurion (Gentile with great faith) in **Matthew 8:5-13**
 - b. Jesus’ disciples in the boat in the storm (rebuked for lack of faith) in **Matthew 8:23-27**
 - c. Peter, when he tried to walk on water to Jesus but feared the storm (little faith) in **Matthew 14:28-32**

- d. Canaanite woman seeking help for her demon-possessed daughter (commended for great faith) in **Matthew 15:21-28**
- e. To the disciples who saw the fig tree withered (challenged to have great faith and do greater things) in **Matthew 21:18-22**
- f. After teaching about perseverance in prayer, Jesus wonders in **Luke 18:8**, "When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"

4. Read **Philippians 4:4-6**

- a. Living by faith and trusting in God: present all of our concerns to God in prayer, then trust that God will take care of them. Live at peace.
- b. Abraham let God know about his concerns directly (and God answered him directly, too).

5. **Conclusion:** Living a life with anxiety is disobeying what Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount. Take inventory of your own life in comparison to what Jesus and Paul taught on this. Imitate Abraham, who lived a life trusting that God would provide for his future, and would be his "shield and great reward." Repent of being faithless regarding God's ability to handle your future and the challenges (financial or otherwise) you face.

- d. Famous statement: "And Abram believed God, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." (**Genesis 15:6**)
 - 1. Quoted twice in **Romans 4**.
 - 2. Quoted in **Galatians 3:6**
 - 3. Also quoted in **James 2:23**
- e. Many influenced by Protestant Reformation theology point to passages like these in **Romans 4** and **Galatians 3** to say that just like Abraham, all we need to do is believe, and God will credit it to us as righteousness. He will impute Christ's righteousness to us if only we believe. We can be saved without having to repent and live righteously. But is that what Paul is saying?
 - i. Theme of Romans: From **Romans 1:17**, "The righteous (just) shall live by faith" (*as opposed to* living by the Law of Moses). Here Paul quotes from **Habakkuk 2:4**.

- ii. Major issue in the New Testament church was to what extent people still needed to follow the Law of Moses, including dietary requirements and religious observances, and to be circumcised, in order to be right with God.
 - 1. This was a problem for Peter in the conversion of Cornelius (a Gentile), discussed in **Acts 10 & 11**.
 - 2. This was the focus of the Council in Jerusalem, in **Acts 15**. (where it was decided that Gentile believers need to follow four specific things from the Law of Moses, but not the rest of it).
 - 3. This issue (are Christians still bound to follow the Law of Moses; how do you unite Jews and Gentiles into one church) also is addressed in **Romans, Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians**.
 - 4. A major problem for us today is that those who follow Protestant Reformation theology tend to read passages from these books out of context, not appreciating the problem that they faced then (which we generally don't experience today).
- iii. Let's take a look at **Romans 3-4**, where the passage from Abraham is quoted twice by Paul to make an important point.
 - 1. Paul's letter to the **Romans** was not written for the purpose of explaining to individual unbelievers how to become Christians (unfortunately, many Protestants try to use it that way). It was written to Christians, largely to explain why we no longer need to follow the Jewish law and circumcision. It deals with the basis for unity of two groups of people: the Jews and the Gentiles.
 - 2. The issue: Jews were still relying on following the works of the Law of Moses rather than simply faith in Jesus Christ. (Of course *saving* faith involves believing as well as obeying and persevering, as pointed out in **Hebrews 10-11, James 2** and elsewhere.)
 - a. **Romans 2:3** "Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law..."
 - b. **Romans 2:25** "For circumcision is profitable if you keep the law..."

- c. **Romans 3:21** “But now a righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.”
- 3. Paul makes the point that even Abraham, the father of the Jews and through whom the covenant of circumcision came, was justified by faith (apart from circumcision and apart from following the works of the Law of Moses).
 - a. Read **Romans 4:1-3**
 - b. Read **Romans 4:9-12**
 - i. Abraham was justified before God before he was circumcised. Foreshadowing that justification would come by faith, without circumcision.
 - ii. Abraham was called justified in **Genesis 15**; the covenant of circumcision was introduced later, in **Genesis 17**.
 - c. Read **Romans 4:16-22**
 - i. Abraham was convinced that God had the power to deliver on everything He had promised. That was regardless of the bleak circumstances (childless at the age of almost 100)
 - ii. Abraham is therefore the spiritual father of all who have the faith that he had, whether circumcised or not.
 - iii. When Abraham looked up and saw the uncountable stars in the heavens, he was seeing a representation of all of us, his spiritual offspring!
- iv. The **Galatians 3** reference to Abraham believing God “and it was accounted to him for righteousness”.
 - 1. Read **Galatians 3:1-14**
 - a. The issue was the same one as in Romans: are we justified by faith in Christ, or through works of the Law of Moses and circumcision.
 - b. We who have faith are Abraham’s true sons. (**Galatians 3:7**)

- c. God preached the gospel to Abraham, in advance, when he said, “in you all the nations shall be blessed”.
(Galatians 3:8)
- 2. Read **Galatians 5:1-12**
 - a. Clearly, the issue here that Paul is concerned with is that Christians in the church in Galatia did not revert to following circumcision and the Law of Moses.
- 3. Unfortunately, in an over-reaction to legalism, control and ministries driven by man-made rules (whether in Catholic, Protestant or other circles), many have clung to statements about ‘freedom’ in Galatians to throw out all of the laws of Jesus and the kingdom!
 - a. Read **Matthew 7:21-23**
 - b. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began by saying that our righteousness would need to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (**Matthew 5:20**). He then proceeds to lay out the laws of his own kingdom, a higher moral standard than the Law of Moses.
 - c. (Read **Matthew 7:21-23**). Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount by warning that many would believe (and even call him Lord); yet He would say to them, “*I never knew you; depart from me you who practice lawlessness*”.
 - d. We are justified by faith. We no longer need to follow circumcision and the Law of Moses. However, we must follow the laws of the kingdom of Jesus, our Lord.
- v. The **James 2** reference to “Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness”.
 - 1. Read **James 2:14-24**.
 - 2. The example from Abraham’s life is from the sacrifice of Isaac in **Genesis 22**, where Abraham’s faith was made complete (perfect) through what he did (works/action).
 - 3. In **James 2:23** it says “the Scripture was fulfilled” when Abraham offered up his son Isaac (quoting from **Genesis 15:6**, when Abraham looked up to the sky and believed). So in some way Abraham’s faith (belief in the beginning) was made perfect or complete later by what he did (obedient response) when put to the test.

4. There is no conflict between James and Paul regarding what they taught regarding faith, works and Abraham's example. In **Romans** and **Galatians**, Paul is talking about works of the Law of Moses (which cannot save us). However, in **James chapter 2**, James is talking about works of obedience to what God is now calling us to (which are essential for us to be justified, to make our faith complete).
 5. Going back to Abraham's faith, belief that was fulfilled or made complete through obedience, James absolutely demolishes the idea that belief alone (without obedient response) can save us.
 6. It is no wonder that Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation and reformation theology, disparaged the book of **James!**
- f. Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* (c. 180 AD) wrote regarding Abraham, "His faith and ours are the same: for he believed in things future, as if they were already accomplished, because of the promise of God; and in like manner do we also, because the promise of God, behold through faith that inheritance (laid up for us) in the (future) kingdom." (*Against Heresies*, book 4, ch. 21, ANF v.1, p.492)

III. A Strange Vision, and a Great Covenant (Read **Genesis 15:7-21**)

- a. After God tells Abraham that he will have many descendants (and Abraham believes God), God promises that Abraham's descendants will inherit the land of Canaan. (**Genesis 15:7**)
- b. Abraham asks God for something to confirm this promise that his descendants would inherit the land. (**Genesis 15:8**)
- c. The sign: what I would call 'a corridor of death'
 - i. Three animals, each three years old, cut in half, with the pieces arranged opposite each other. (Something important about the number 3 here?).
 - ii. Two birds also, but these were not cut in half
 - iii. At sunset, Abraham falls into a trance. "A horror and great darkness fell upon him." (**Genesis 15:12**)
- d. The message for Abraham
 - i. His descendants would be strangers in another nation, serving them, and afflicted and humbled there for 400 years.
 - ii. God would judge the nation under which they would serve.

- iii. Abraham's descendants would come out of that land with great possessions.
 - iv. Abraham's descendants would return to Canaan "in the fourth generation", waiting until the time when the sins of the Amorites had reached its full measure.
 - v. The promised inheritance would extend all the way from the Nile River in Egypt to the Euphrates River (up through modern Syria), land that had been possessed by many other pagan nations.
 - vi. (Obviously all of this is fulfilled in the **Exodus** story, where the Jews would be delivered from bondage in Egypt)
- e. Concerning the time of Israel in Egypt that was foretold to Abraham:
- 1. Question: How long were the Israelites in Egypt?
 - a. Answer: See **Exodus 12:40-41**. It was 430 years.
 - 2. Question: But didn't God tell Abraham it would be 400 years?
 - a. Possible Answer: Was the number 400 just a round number, an approximation? Perhaps. However...
 - b. Another Possible Answer: God did not say in **Genesis 15** that Abraham's descendants would be *in another nation (Egypt) for 400 years*. He said they would be in another nation, and *afflicted for 400 years*. When first in Egypt, with Joseph in favor with Pharaoh, the Israelites were well-treated. Later on, as it says in **Exodus 1:8-13** a new king would arise who did not know Joseph; then the 'honeymoon in Egypt' was ended and the time of affliction began.
- f. The strange sign to confirm this promise. What is that all about?
- i. The sign provided to Abraham
 - 1. Dreadful darkness, after the sun goes down
 - 2. Flame (light, fire) and smoke (oven) passing between the divided pieces, through this 'corridor of death'.
 - ii. Anything that would come later that this might foreshadow? Thick darkness, corridor of death, with fire and smoke passing through the midst of it?
 - 1. Reminds me of the 9th and 10th plagues in Exodus, right before God delivers his people from slavery in Egypt.

2. **Exodus 10:21-23** describes the 9th plague, the plague of darkness, as “a thick darkness” and “a darkness that could be felt” that descends upon the land.
3. The 10th plague is plague of death of the firstborn, described in in **Exodus 11-12**.
4. The people were led out of Egypt by “a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night” (**Exodus 13:21-22; Exodus 14:19**).
5. The crossing of the Red Sea in **Exodus 14**, through another ‘corridor of death’ with a wall of water on each side, took place at night. It says “there was such darkness and blackness” that the Egyptians did not come near the Israelites all that night. (**Exodus 14:21**). The pillar of cloud and fire passed through the corridor as well (**Exodus 14:19-24**), but death came to all the Egyptian army that tried to pass through (**Exodus 14:26-28**)
 - a. The ‘corridor of death’ with the divided animal bodies reminds me of the Red Sea corridor, which brought death to the Egyptians.
 - b. The smoking oven or fire pot, with flames of fire that passed thorough the corridor reminds me of the pillar of cloud and fire that led the Israelites to the Red Sea and then passed through that corridor as well.
 - c. (The above is just what this vision of Abraham makes me think of; you may not see it the same way, but I am offering for your consideration – God may have been showing to Abraham the exact sign of how he would deliver his people. The Exodus story also of course foreshadows Christ’s sacrifice as the Passover lamb and our own deliverance when we are born again of the water and spirit, alluded to in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**)
- g. Moses would later on remind God of the promises he made in **Genesis 15**, at Mount Sinai at the time of the golden calf, when the Lord threatens to wipe out all of Israel and start over with Moses.
 - i. In **Exodus 32:12-14** Moses appeals to the Lord saying, “Turn from Your fierce wrath and be merciful to the wickedness of Your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Your servants, to whom You swore by Yourself and said to them, ‘I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven for multitude, and all this land I spoke about

to give their seed, they shall inherit unto the ages'. So the Lord granted mercy for the harm He said He would do to His people.”

- ii. Lesson for us: Pay close attention to all of God’s promises. And it is acceptable to remind God of them at times, as well, when we petition the Lord.

IV. Birth of Ishmael to Hagar (Read **Genesis 16:1-16**)

- a. Sarah’s idea to give her maidservant Hagar to Abraham as a wife, to raise up offspring on her behalf.
- b. Abraham goes along with his wife. Although many today criticize Abraham for doing this, the Scriptures do not appear to. Having more than one wife was allowed at that time. Polygamy was later effectively prohibited by Jesus in **Matthew 5:31-32** and **Luke 16:18**, who taught that marriage to a second person is considered adultery against the first spouse.
- c. Hagar conceives Ishmael.
 - i. Pregnant Hagar despises Sarah. Sarah appeals to Abraham. Abraham says “your maid is in your hand; do with her as you please” (**Genesis 16:6**).
 - ii. Sarah treats Hagar harshly; Hagar flees.
 - iii. Angel appears to Hagar in the wilderness, tells her to go back and submit to Sarah. Promise is made that the son she is to bear will have many descendants. He will be a rustic man, and shall face conflict with others.
 - iv. Hagar returns, gives birth to a son. Abraham (age 86 now) names him Ishmael.

V. Recap of This Lesson

- a. Abraham believed God when told as an old, childless man that he would have descendants ‘as the stars in the heavens’. He believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.
- b. Abraham captured a vision of us in the future, a multitude of stars shining in the universe. Too many to count. We need to live up to that vision, carried forward by Daniel, Paul and Jesus, to be stars that shine brightly in a dark world.
- c. Imitate Abraham’s trust that God would take care of the future, and would be his “shield (of protection) and great reward”. We are called to trust in God as Abraham did, to repent of faithlessness that causes anxiety in this life.

- d. Paul explains in **Romans** and **Galatians** that as in the case of Abraham, our righteousness comes through faith, not by following the works of the Law of Moses.
- e. As James points out in **James 2**, while Abraham's faith in believing God's promise was credited to him for righteousness, it was later made complete through his works, his obedient response, when he later was called to sacrifice Isaac.
- f. Abraham was told that his descendants would inherit Canaan, but would return only after 400 years of hardship and affliction in a foreign land. This was confirmed by a strange night-time encounter with a smoking oven and flames of fire passing through a corridor of sacrificed animal, possibly a foreshadowing of the exodus from Egypt.