

Source

THE BIBLE IN COMMUNITY

ABRAHAM

Welcome to Source

Our Source

The Bible is unquestionably the most important book ever written. Not only does it speak to the issues we struggle with today (i.e., wealth, poverty, work, conflict, love, sex, forgiveness, guilt, sin, time, youth, death), but it also gives us a picture of a God who created the universe and who has been orchestrating an incredible story throughout history. While we recognize its importance, we often stay away from the Bible because it often seems unapproachable.

For these reasons, we have designed Source studies to help you engage with the Bible in a meaningful and helpful way. First, we've included an **Introduction** to each book so that from the beginning you have a clear picture of where the author is headed. Second, we've added **Notes**, which help make the ancient backgrounds of the text accessible and approachable. Third, and most important, we've created **Discussion** guides for each section of Scripture that allow you to explore and apply the passages in the context of community. These elements come together to form a very simple format for each week:

1. Before each session, read the selected passages in your Bible, look over the text notes, and answer the discussion questions.
2. Come to your small group prepared to share and discuss your responses.

Abraham

While heralded as a patriarch of faith, Abraham's journey was filled with the messiness of life. Family quarrels, deception and manipulation, infertility issues... the list goes on and on. Yet, he chose to trust in the promises that God had presented before him, regardless of how distant and impossible they seemed. And so Abraham is for us an example of faith, and a reminder of what it looks like to trust God with the most important things in our lives.

Session 1 - Genesis 11:27-12:20

Session 4 - Genesis 18-19

Session 2 - Genesis 13-14

Session 5 - Genesis 20-22

Session 3 - Genesis 15-17

Session 6 - Genesis 23-25:18

Our hope is that this study will allow you to engage with the Bible in a way that incorporates the dynamics of a small group with the transformational nature of God's Word.

Genesis - Introduction

The book of Genesis is a book of beginnings: the beginning of the world, the beginning of its brokenness, and the beginning of God's plan of restoration through Abraham and his descendants. To generations of Israelites, this book explained, not only the origins of life and sin, but also why and how their nation came to have a special role in God's plans for all of humanity. Moreover, as the opening act in the grand story of the Bible, Genesis provides the foundational context for which all of its following scenes can be understood.

The book first describes how God created a world of order and harmony, and then how this order and harmony were shattered when people turned away from God. It traces the destructive consequences of human rebellion and pride, showing how these filled the world with brokenness, violence, and suffering. This led God to judge human wickedness through a great flood.

Genesis then narrows its focus down to one family. It describes how God promised to make one man named Abraham the father of a great nation, and to use this nation to bring people of all nations back to himself. God renewed this promise or "covenant" with Abraham's son Isaac, and with Isaac's son Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons, and one of them, Joseph, was able to save his entire extended family from perishing in a famine. He brought them to Egypt, where God had already preserved and protected Joseph through many difficulties.

As the book ends, a sequel is clearly in view. Abraham's descendants have not yet become a great nation, and being in Egypt, they must somehow make their way back to the land that God has promised to them. Consequently, Genesis leads naturally into the story told in the book of Exodus of how the nation of Israel emerged from its trials in Egypt.

Genesis is divided into twelve parts by eleven repetitions of the phrase "this is the account of " a certain person: meaning "this is what came from" that person. These phrases introduce sections in the book that describe the descendants of the person named. In some sections, these descendants are simply listed, but in others, their

exploits are traced in detail. The general pattern is that after briefly considering their siblings, Genesis focuses on those in each generation whom God is working through to fulfill his promises. This form of the book is appropriate to the book's story-telling function, as sibling rivalries drive much of the book's plot forward.

The book of Genesis was assembled from ancient materials that were preserved in a variety of forms. It contains several family lists, as well as poetic passages of varying lengths. It also includes explanations of how people and places got their names, such as Beersheba ("the well of the oath") or Israel ("he struggles with God"). It incorporates the records of legal proceedings, such as Abraham's purchase of a burial cave, and of military campaigns. The book also includes numerous stories that tell how particular things came to be (for example, "Why is there a rainbow in the sky after it rains?"). It weaves all of these materials together to document the origins of humanity, the cause of its brokenness, and the beginnings of the plan that God set in motion to restore the order and harmony of the world he created.

While we cannot know with certainty who wrote the book of Genesis, it is traditionally attributed to Moses. After leading Israel out of Egypt, he would have had opportunity and good reason to assemble a record of his people's origins and an explanation of their special role in God's plan. If this is the case, Genesis was composed during the wilderness wandering, sometime between 1450 and 1200 BC. Eventually, Genesis and the other "books of Moses" (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) became the foundation of the continuous storyline—God's redemption of humanity and the world—that runs throughout the Bible.

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Session 1 - Notes on Genesis 11:27-12:20

11:27

The story of Abraham begins with the words, “This is the account.” This phrase is used throughout the book of Genesis as a starting point for new narratives (Genesis 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10,27; 25:12,19; 36:1,9; 37:2).

11:29-30

Sarai, Abram’s wife, is unable to have children—a calamity and disgrace for a family in their time. For a couple to have no children meant there would be no one to care for them in their old age, no one to carry on the family name, no one to inherit land and livestock. For Sarai personally, it meant she would be looked down upon in her society and considered of lower status than women who were able to bear children.

11:31

Sometime after his brother Haran’s death, Abram, his wife, his father, and his nephew leave their home country of Ur, located in what is present day Iraq along the Euphrates River. They travel to the land of Canaan (modern day Israel) but settle in a place called Harran, a city located in modern day southeast Turkey.

12:1

In the book of Acts, Stephen states, “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran” (Acts 7:2). Thus, the calling of Abram in 12:1-3 occurred while he was still in Ur (“had said”). To pick up and follow God was no simple matter for Abraham. Leaving the land of his birth meant giving up his property and the people he knew and heading to a place that God would reveal along the way. Obedience would not only mean forfeiting a comfortable life, but also giving up his identity and control over his future.

12:2-35

After God tells Abram what he wants him to do, he promises to bless Abram above and beyond anything he could dream. God asks Abram to leave his country but promises, despite Sarai's infertility, to make Abram into a great nation. God asked Abram to give up his father's household and his identity, but promises to make Abram's name great. God asks Abram to leave his people, but promises that all people will be blessed through his life.

This promise was a centerpiece of God's plan of redemption for humanity. It was so important that God reaffirmed it to Abram five different times throughout his journey (12:7; 15:5-21; 17:4-8; 18:18-19; 22:17-18). He then repeated it to Abram's son, Isaac (26:2-4), his grandson Jacob (28:13-15; 35:11-12; 46:3), and to Moses (Exodus 3:6-8; 6:2-8). This promise is also mentioned in the book of Acts (Acts 3:12, 25) and in the book of Galatians (Galatians 3:8).

12:7

After Abram arrived in Canaan, God appeared and spoke to Abram, reaffirming part of his promise. Abram then built an altar to God, the first of several he constructed. Abram most likely constructed the altar from stones and earth. Altars such as this would have typically been used for animal sacrifice as a demonstration of worship to God. Altars were also erected to memorialize an event where someone had dealings with God. This altar marked the beginning of the worship of God in this new land. In building it, Abram acknowledged that Canaan, the "Promised Land," belonged to God.

12:8-9

After building the altar, Abram settled his family north of Jerusalem in the hills between Bethel and Ai. Bethel was the place where Jacob, Abram's grandson, would have his dream/vision in which God reaffirmed the promise to him (28:10-19). Again, Abram's construction of an altar in Bethel marked this land as set aside for the worship of his God. Abram moves his family again to the Negev region. Negev was the name for the southern desert region in the land of Canaan. It was a dry area, removed from any bodies of water. Therefore, the people of this region were completely dependent on the seasonal rains for their livelihood and survival. This region was known for droughts that could trigger famines.

12:10

The Nile River provided the Egyptians with a reliable source of water resulting in plentiful harvests and healthy livestock. These favorable conditions made it a very appealing place for Abram to settle down.

12:11-13

If Pharaoh knew that Abram was Sarai's husband, he would have had to kill Abram in order to add Sarai to his harem. So both Abram and Sarai lie about their relationship while in Egypt, displaying their lack of trust in God to provide for them.

12:14-15

Even at sixty-five, Sarai's poise, countenance, and dress could have contributed to her allure.

12:18-19

During this time in history, disease and sickness were seen as a consequence for displeasing a god or the gods. Sickness was seen as something divine, not physical. Pharaoh determined that Sarai's god was the god he had offended, and then apparently discovered how he had offended her god. To appease the god and end the suffering in his household, Sarai is returned to Abram with instructions for them to leave Egypt.

Session 1 - Discussion

Introduction

The book of Genesis opens as a grand epic. The first twelve chapters tell of the birth of the universe, the fall of humanity, a devastating flood, and the scattering of the nations. Then, as if all this were merely the prelude, the whole story shifts to focus on the life of a single, otherwise uninteresting figure by the name of Abram. And, for the next twelve chapters, we are invited to view the world and experience God through his eyes—a man who responded to God’s call on his life and who would never be the same.

Discussion Questions

1. Read Genesis 12:1. Abram’s story begins with God’s call to follow him. In what ways has God directed your life thus far?
2. God didn’t specify exactly where he wanted Abram to go, yet Abram stepped out in faith. Describe times when you stepped out into the unknown. How did you feel not knowing where the next step would lead?
3. God called Abram to leave his identity, his means of survival, his means of livelihood, and his comfort. Are you ready to follow God wherever he leads you? What would keep you from following God?
4. Read Genesis 12:2-3. God gave Abram an incredible promise, a promise almost too good to be true. Do you find it hard to trust that God has your best interests at heart? How has your life been blessed when you followed God?
5. Read Genesis 12:10-13. Abram and Sarai chose to lie to Pharaoh when they entered Egypt. When have you disregarded God’s provision to take matters into your own hands?
6. Can you think of a time in your life when you experienced God’s faithfulness despite decisions you made?

Think About It

Where might God be calling you to go? What might God be calling you to do?

What Will You Do?

What is your first step in trusting God with the direction of your life?

Changing Your Mind

The Lord said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people, and your father’s household and go to a land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” **(Genesis 12:1-3)**

Session 2 - Notes on Genesis 13-14

13:1-4

Abram, Sarai, and Lot travel with all the wealth they accumulated in Egypt, leave by order of Pharaoh and travel to Negev. The contrast between the fertility of Egypt and the famine of Negev was overwhelming. However, this dry place was part of the land promised to Abram and his offspring. They stopped in Negev for a short time before heading back to Bethel, the place where Abram built the second altar in the Promised Land. Their journey from Egypt to Bethel (Bethel is just north of Jerusalem) was about two-hundred miles.

13:5-7

Herds would have been the primary source of both Abram and Lot's wealth. They traveled together to higher regions during the hot, dry months to find water sources for their herds, and to the plains for grazing during the cold, wet months. For Abram and Lot to share water sources and plains areas was a struggle because the region between Ai and Bethel was not large enough to support them both. Arguments between their herdsmen over land and water were likely a constant source of friction since the survival of the herds meant the livelihood of Abram and Lot, and indirectly, the herdsmen.

13:8-9

In the Ancient Near East, the directional point of reference was the east rather than the north. When Abram offered Lot the left and the right, he faced east and referred to the area to the north (left) and the south (right). Abram offered the northern or southern portions of the land God had promised him to Lot. Lot, however, chose the area in the east, outside the Promised Land.

13:10

Abram and Lot stayed in the hills of Bethel during this pivotal time because the Jordan Valley and the northern part of the Dead Sea were visible from that point. The plain of the Jordan is located east of the Dead Sea, due to an abundant source of water. The Jordan Valley

was fertile due to the reference to its likeness to Egypt (which had the Nile) and Eden (a fruitful garden stated to have a river which ran through it [2:10]). The mention of Sodom and Gomorrah explained to readers that this described the region before God's judgment on the area (19:23-29). Today, the area around the Dead Sea is not conducive to raising flocks.

13:12-13

Lot's decision to live in the Eastern plain of the Jordan River was driven by economic motives. His desire for gain blinded him to the dangers of living in such a wicked place and set him up for disaster (14:11-12; 19:24-25). When he left the promised land of Canaan, Lot was essentially going his own way, apart from God's plan for Abram and his family.

13:14-17

After deciding to stay in the Promised Land, Abram hears from God again. This time God outlined his previous promises (12:2-3, 7).

13:18

Hebron is near the northern edge of the Negev Desert, about 19 miles southwest of Jerusalem and is where Abram and Sarai finally settle in the land of Canaan. Abram was buried near the trees at Hebron (25:8-9) along with his wife Sarai (23:1-2), his future son Isaac (35:27-29), and his grandson Jacob (49:29-32). Hebron is also the place where David is anointed king of Judah (2 Samuel 2:1-4). The altar built in Hebron, much like the altar in Bethel, served as an act of worship to God and as an acknowledgment that this land belonged to God.

14:1-10

Five kings (two of whom were the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah) and their people were subject to a king named Kedorlaomer. These five kings, who had been oppressed, decided to rebel against Kedorlaomer and the three kings with whom he was aligned. Though five armies fought against four, Kedorlaomer and those with him crushed the rebellion.

14:11-12

When Kedorlaomer and his allies' marched across the land, they made their way to Sodom and Gomorrah and took all the belongings, food, and wealth of the people there. Lot moved from living outside the sinful city of Sodom (v. 12), to living in the midst of Sodom at the time of the raid. Consequently, Lot and everything he owned was captured and carried away.

14:14-16

God abundantly blessed Abram. From his company of workers, Abram raised a personal army that was able to attack and defeat the four kings. Due to God's blessing, Abram saved Lot, reclaimed his possessions, and freed the people of Sodom. The contrast of Abram's character and wealth compared to Lot's at this point is noticeable. Lot took what looked pleasing, but found his choice to be the source of great trouble and loss. Meanwhile Abram, who placed his faith in God's promise to bless him, was indeed blessed. And he used this blessing to bless others.

14:17-20

The act of Melchizedek sharing an ordinary meal of bread and wine with Abram indicated his desire for an agreement of peace between himself and Abram—a political move on his part, considering Abram and his men were a force to be reckoned with. It would have been in Melchizedek's best interests to entertain Abram and recognize him as someone of importance. His choice of words declared Abram's God as the one true God, and recognized Abram as a recipient of God's blessings and power. The tenth Abram gives Melchizedek was a king's share—an acknowledgment of his kingship. It confirmed that the benediction was from God, and to illustrate that Abram would not be in debt to Melchizedek. Looking back on how Melchizedek seemed to function as both a king and a priest, the New Testament author of the book of Hebrews compares Melchizedek to Christ, who fulfills both offices (Hebrews 6:13-7:28).

14:21-24

Abram was entitled to the plunder he had recovered from Kedorlaomer; however, since much of it originally belonged to the people of Sodom, he refuses it. Abram desires that none but the God in whom he has placed his faith be the source from which he gains all things.

Session 2 - Discussion

Introduction

The grass always looks greener on the other side of the fence. While God had richly provided for Abram and Lot, when it came time for them to split up, Lot chose to move outside of the Promised Land to seek his fortune. As a result, Abram had to raise an army to rescue his nephew from an alliance of kings. Each day, we also have a choice to either seek fame and fortune on our own terms, or to trust in God's plan for us.

Discussion Questions

1. Read Genesis 13:8-13. When have you been captivated by the allure of something and made a choice that in hindsight was not wise? How did that experience allow you to see that things are not always as they seem?
2. On the flip side, when have you resisted the allure of something because you felt that it was not a part of God's plan? What did you learn about God and about yourself from that situation?
3. How can we evaluate the choices that are set before us? How do you know that this is the right job, the right house, the right college, the right person, or the right decision?
4. Read Genesis 14:14-16. In this narrative, Abram selflessly rescued Lot. When have you been able to help someone through the consequences of poor decisions? When has someone generously bailed you out of a poor choice? Is there anyone in your life that you are in a position to help?
5. What is our responsibility to those who are facing the consequences of their poor decisions? How can we be generous without enabling them to continue to make poor decisions?

6. Read Genesis 14:22-23. How did Abram show wisdom when dealing with the king of Sodom? How does your faith in God's provision allow you to walk away from lucrative opportunities that come with strings attached? How can we avoid unnecessary obligation and entanglements?

Think About It

In this passage, Abram is the picture of unselfishness and generosity, giving Lot the first pick of the land, and rescuing Lot from an invading army. This is set in relief to Lot's desire to gain what he could for himself. How about you? Do you truly believe that God will provide for you? How does this impact how generous you are to others?

What Will You Do?

How can you be generous and unselfish this week, trusting that God will provide for you?

Change Your Mind

All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring, forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust then your offspring could be counted. - (Genesis 13:15-16)

Session 3 - Notes on Genesis 15-17

15:1

After Abram's defeat of the four kings and his refusal to accept the spoils of war from the king of Sodom, God reassures Abram that he will reward this faithfulness. God promises to act as a shield to protect him from his enemies (including possible retribution) and to reward him in great abundance (even more than the reward he turned down).

15:3

During Abram's day, if a man had no heirs, he could choose to adopt one of his male servants. This was so someone would inherit the childless man's estate and wealth. Abram's reference to his servant Eliezer indicated his feeling of frustration at God for not having any children. He was beginning to give up hope that he would have an heir.

15:4-5

In Abram's world, there would have been nothing seemingly more numerous than the stars and the sand.

15:6

God responds to Abram's faith by declaring him righteous. Abram is considered the father of all who have faith in God and believe (Romans 4:11; Galatians 3:29).

15:8-10

God's response to Abram's request for a guarantee that he will indeed possess the Promised Land was to have Abram engage in an ancient Near East land-grant treaty. This was to be a sign that God's promise of the land to Abram will become a reality. The animals God asked Abram to bring him are the same animals that will be used in the sacrificial system (Leviticus 1-5).

15:17-20

God reveals himself as torch and a firepot (a piece of pottery used as an oven) passing between the pieces of the animals. In Mesopotamia, a torch was often used in night time purification rituals. Additionally, it was a common ritual in Abram's day for someone making a covenant with another to walk down a path made with separated animals (see Jeremiah 34:18-19 for another reference to this practice). In fact, the Hebrew word for "making a covenant" is literally "cutting a covenant" and most scholars think it comes from cutting up the animals as illustrated here. Through this ceremony, God formally committed to the covenant he had made with Abram.

16:1-4

At this time in history, Hagar, Sarai's servant, would have been viewed as property and considered an extension of Sarai. Culturally, it would not have been out of the ordinary for Abram to sleep with Hagar for the purpose of being a surrogate for Sarai. This act, on the part of both Abram and Sarai, displays their lack of faith that God would come through on his promises.

16:5-6

Because at this time in history, honor was attributed to women who married and bore children, Hagar's pregnancy would have given her more honor than her mistress and would have naturally caused her to despise her servitude to Sarai. Jealousy, as well as an attempt to assert authority over Hagar, was likely Sarai's motivation for abusing her servant.

16:7

The word translated "angel" normally means "messenger." In the Bible, angels appear as messengers sent from God to speak into specific situations on his behalf.

16:9

God's command for Hagar to return is not condoning Sarai's treatment of her. God "sees" (v. 13) and "hears" (Ishmael means "God hears", v. 11) Hagar's misery. And yet, he encourages her to return so that she and her son may take part of the blessing he will pour out on Abram. The blessing was intended to go through Sarai, but God will still bless all of Abram's descendants.

16:12

The wild donkey roamed the desert freely. Ishmael, as a man, would live outside of society enjoying the freedom that his mother desired. His descendants, the Ishmaelites, would be a nomadic people, who would often come into conflict with their neighbors (Genesis 25:13-18; 37:23-28; Psalm 83:1-8).

17:4-8

Thirteen years after Ishmael was born, God appears to Abram again to reaffirm the promise he made with Abram in chapter 12. Because names were very important during this time in history, when God changed his name from Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (“father of many”), it was a symbol that God had both marked him and designated Abraham as his.

17:9-14

God calls Abraham to participate in the covenant through the act of circumcision. Though other cultures sometimes practiced circumcision upon entrance to adulthood or marriage, none had adopted the application to infants on a widespread basis. The act of circumcision essentially set apart Abraham and his offspring under the rule of God. If they failed to perform this act, the covenant would be broken between God and the uncircumcised male. By going through the ceremony one was essentially taking the oath, “If I am not loyal in faith and obedience to the Lord, may the sword of the Lord cut off me and my offspring [see v. 14] as I have cut off my foreskin” (Barker, 33).

17:15-22

Abraham believes God will keep his word, but laughs in momentary disbelief at the idea that he and Sarah would have a son, an heir for themselves and to the covenant. Abraham requests that God bless Ishmael as he promises to bless Isaac; but it is clear Ishmael is not the one to be the heir to the covenant. However, God tells Abraham that Ishmael will be blessed in other ways.

Session 3 - Discussion

Introduction

It must have been frustrating for Abraham to receive these great promises from God, yet seemingly watch them grow further and further out of reach as the years passed. He and Sarah hatch a plan to help God, only to end up creating a complicated situation with lasting consequences. Not content with waiting for God's timing, we also chase after the things we think should be ours now, only to make the situation worse. Like Abraham, we need to learn to trust in God, knowing he will bring about what he has promised at just the right time.

Discussion Questions

1. Read Genesis 15:1-3. As this chapter opens, Abraham expresses his frustration to God that he doesn't have an heir. What desires do you have that have yet to be fulfilled?
2. "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (v. 6). Do you believe that God is true to his word? In what ways does this affect how you trust him with the details of your life?
3. Read Genesis 15:8. Abraham asks for confirmation and God responds with a ceremony affirming his commitment to Abraham. How has God confirmed or demonstrated his faithfulness to you?
4. Read Genesis 16:1-3. Despite God's display of faithfulness, Abraham and Sarah attempt to speed up God's timeline. Describe a time when you attempted to gain results in your own time. What was the result?
5. When have you intentionally decided to wait on God's timing? How did the situation work out?
6. Read Genesis 16:7-10. Hagar ran away from Abraham and Sarah but God called her back to them. Despite the fact that Abraham took matters into his own hands, God was still determined to be faithful to his promise, so he blessed Ishmael as well. How have you seen God redeem your circumstances after you've given him back control of your life?

Think About It

When Sarah (at age 90) and Abraham (at age 99) heard that they would have a son in less than one year, it seemed unbelievable. But there is truly nothing impossible with God. How can the knowledge of God's power help you to trust him when your options seem to be diminishing? Do you believe God does the impossible today?

What Will You Do?

In what situation do you need to trust God's timing? What is one thing you can do to show that you trust God in this situation?

Changing Your Mind

Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6)

Session 4 - Notes on Genesis 18-19

18:1-8

The Lord and two angels (19:1) appeared to Abraham as men. In the ancient world, hospitality was highly regarded and Abraham goes out of his way to display kindness to his guests. By washing their feet, preparing a generous meal (fresh meat was a delicacy and Sarah made an abundance of bread), and standing by to serve them, Abraham is hospitable in every way.

18:13-15

When Sarah realizes that these guests are aware of her thoughts and laughter, she is afraid. As long as the promise of a child was distant and far off, it was easier to believe. The fact that an exact date is set for the birth of the child is likely overwhelming. The impossible nature of her giving birth to a child would have definitely invoked a disbelieving laugh as well as fear. Sarah's descendants Mary and Elizabeth also experienced miraculous childbirths (Luke 1:34-37).

18:16-20

God's visit to Abraham's home and his consideration of Abraham in this situation (warning him that he was about to destroy the city in which Lot dwelled) showed the friendship that existed between God and Abraham (2 Chronicles 20:7; James 2:23; Isaiah 41:8). With Abraham at his side, God allows him a glimpse into his divine counsel and decision-making. He uses this opportunity to model justice and righteousness to Abraham, and thus his descendants.

18:22-33

The conditional "if what they have done" opens the door for Abraham to intercede on behalf of Lot. "Haggling is a part of all Middle Eastern business transactions. In this case, however, Abraham's determination of the exact number of righteous persons needed to prevent the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah provides a repeated demonstration of God's just actions. A just God will not destroy the righteous without warning or investigation. Even the unrighteous, in this early period, can be spared for the sake of the righteous. On the other hand, however, justice is not served by overlooking wickedness. The discussion of the number

of righteous people may concern not whether they can balance the wickedness of the rest but whether, given time, they might be able to exert a reforming influence” (BBC, 50).

19:1

The gate area in ancient cities served as a hub for local commerce and as the place where legal matters were settled by the local ruling council. The fact that Lot was sitting at the gate indicates he had become accepted in the community of Sodom as either a member of the judicial court or as a community businessman.

19:2

Every ancient city had at least one city square. A square would be an open space near the gate where public gatherings could be held. It was not a place where travelers would typically spend the night, but a place where travelers would go in hopes of finding someone to take them in for the night (Judges 19:15).

19:4-5

Homosexuality was widely accepted and practiced by the men of Sodom. The English word “sodomy,” comes from the name of this ancient city.

19:6-8

Part of ancient hospitality was to protect guests in your home at all costs. There is a similarly graphic story in Judges 19, where many men in a city raped a woman who was offered in exchange for a house guest—and she died as a result of the brutality.

19:10-13

Though God had assented to spare the city if ten righteous people could be found, this was not the case. With every man in the city at Lot’s door insisting on violence and wickedness, the fate of the city was sealed. The city was truly as bad as its reputation (Ezekiel 16:49). The contrast between the angel’s visit to Abraham’s humble tent and to Lot’s home is glaring.

19:15-22

It is uncertain why Lot hesitated and pleaded with the angels—perhaps he was considering the loss of his material possessions. Maybe he didn't really think the city was going to be destroyed—but whatever the reason, God is gracious to Lot. Even though Lot has immersed himself in a sinful city and hesitated in even saving himself and his family, God shows undeserved mercy to them because of his justice and love.

19:23-25

We can only speculate how God destroyed these two cities. An earthquake could have spewed up tar and asphalt, as well as igniting the salt spray that blows off of the Dead Sea. The mineral salts of this region include sodium, potash, magnesium, calcium chlorides, and bromide, which could have combusted to rain down fire on the land. Regardless of how God chose to destroy the cities, there remains to this day in certain areas near the Dead Sea, a sulfurous smell, bitumen-like deposits, and asphalt-like substances—perhaps from the sulfur and/or a violent earthquake. The area around the Dead Sea, once alluring and lush, was turned into an undesirable wasteland.

19:26

The disobedience of Lot's wife is often illustrated by the large salt-encrusted formations that come from the salt spray that blows off the Dead Sea. These served as landmarks that reminded later generations of the consequences of hesitating to obey God's commands (see Luke 17:32).

19:27-29

Abraham must have been shocked to wake up that next day and see the Jordan plain, the land resembling the Garden of Eden, completely annihilated. There had probably been times in Abraham's life up to this point, where he wondered if God listened to him or was mindful of his situation. By delivering Lot from such destruction, God showed Abraham that he heard his requests.

19:30-35

With no options left, Lot's daughters take matters into their own hands instead of trusting in God's provision. Obviously they had learned well from their father. The result of their incest was the birth of the Moabites and Ammonites, who were later to become the adversaries of Abraham's descendants, the Israelites (Deuteronomy 23:3-4; 1 Samuel 14:47; 2 Chronicles 20:1).

Session 4 - Discussion

Introduction

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is striking in its graphic depiction of society at its worst and serves as a vivid example of the consequences of sin. And yet in this story, we see evidence of both God’s mercy and his justice. He ultimately judges the sin of the people, but not before graciously allowing Abraham to bargain for its preservation—an act that illustrates how important he views the presence of the righteous.

Discussion Questions

1. God visits Abraham and delivers the news that he will be a father within the next year. God also delivers news of the pending judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. Do you typically associate God as a dispenser of blessings or a dispenser of judgment? How does this affect the way you relate to God?
2. God speaks of how “the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah” has reached him (18:20). How does it make you feel knowing that God sees everything that goes on? What are the things it seems like God turns a blind eye to?
3. Abraham bargains with God and God agrees that for a few righteous people he will spare the rest. What does this tell you about how God views the influence of the righteous? In what ways might this affect the way you view your influence in your community and culture?
4. Where do you feel like a righteous person in the midst of unrighteous people?
5. Lot doesn’t experience the repercussions of his greedy move to Sodom immediately, but eventually this one decision precipitates an avalanche of grief and loss in his life. How have you seen one unwise choice begin a series of unwanted consequences?
6. Lot’s life of inconsistency, greed, and hesitation leaves a legacy for his family. Alone and seemingly hopeless, his daughters make a disturbing decision. How have you seen the poor choices of one generation spill over into the next generation?

Think About It

The fact that God was willing to spare Sodom and Gomorrah for the benefit of ten righteous people causes one to pause and think. What if when God looks at your fraternity, company, neighborhood, team, and family and sees you, he thinks there is hope for your fraternity, company, neighborhood, team, and family? What if when we think, “God, why don’t you do something?” he thinks, “Why don’t you do something? Why do you think you are there?”

What Will You Do?

Lot’s poor decisions led him down a path that ended in grief and sorrow. What areas of your life are headed in the wrong direction? What do you need to do to change course?

Changing Your Mind

Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him. (Genesis 18:18-19)

Session 5 - Notes on Genesis 20-22

20:1-3

Abraham and Sarah journey south from Hebron back to the Negev. Gerar (modern-day south-central Israel) was one of the largest cities in southern Canaan at the time, located in the western portion of the Negev, in Philistine territory. Another trip south, and another instance in which Abraham lied in an attempt to protect himself (Genesis 12:10-20).

20:4-7

Abraham was the first person in the Bible to be called a “prophet.” In Abraham’s day, prophets generally reported messages from a deity. But here, Abraham is one who can also speak to God on someone else’s behalf.

20:14-18

The contrast of Abraham’s lack of remorse for his lie and Abimelek’s desire to set things right is striking. Abimelek gives Abraham (1000 shekels = 25 pounds of silver) more than anyone in that day could hope to earn in a lifetime. He wanted to assure Abraham that Sarah was untouched despite the fact that Abraham and Sarah put him in such a compromising position (note the sarcastic “brother” in v. 16). He also wants to pacify the deity with whom Abraham was apparently connected. God removes the plague of infertility in Abimelek’s household after Abraham receives his wife back.

21:1-7

God, showing great grace to Sarah and Abraham, gives them the son he promised them twenty-five years earlier. Isaac’s name, appropriately enough, means “he laughs.” Laughter of amazement has now replaced laughter of disbelief (Genesis 17:17; 18:12).

21:8-10

It was customary in the ancient Near East for children to be weaned when they were two or three. Because of the high infant mortality rate, the fact that Isaac had reached the point of weaning was a cause for celebration. Ishmael, in his late teens at the time, was apparently not participating in the feast celebrating his half-brother. Whether Sarah perceived Ishmael as a threat or because Ishmael's behavior was so offensive (Paul states in Galatians 4:29 that Ishmael "persecuted" Isaac), she tells Abraham to disinherit Hagar and Ishmael. This act went against the laws and customs of that time.

21:11-21

True to his word (Genesis 16:10; 17:20), God provided for Hagar and Ishmael. The Desert of Paran was in the central Sinai peninsula.

21:25-32

The Negev desert around Beersheba was dry, so water was a valuable commodity. It would have been common for herdsmen or farmers to have disputes over water sources. Since Abimelek wanted a treaty, Abraham agrees with the provision that he be given water rights. Beersheba could either mean "well of seven" or "well of the oath," tying together the oath that was sworn and Abraham's payment for the well (seven lambs).

21:33-34

A tamarisk tree grows in sandy soil and thrives in dry regions. By planting this tree, Abraham may have been symbolizing the fertile and prosperous future he and Abimelek would share.

22:1-2

In Abraham's day, the ritual of child sacrifice was not unheard of. In some regions, children were sacrificed to the god of fertility to ensure the continued blessing of that deity. Even with this precedent, this was to be the biggest test of Abraham's trust in and obedience to God. Since Ishmael had been sent away, Isaac was the only son Abraham had left. Abraham was committed to being obedient to the Lord (evidenced in his response when God called his

name), and he had circumcised Isaac as a consecration to the Lord. Abraham's confusion, fear, and anxiety must have been overwhelming as he heard God speak, knowing what it would cost him to obey.

Moriah has long been identified as the place where the temple was built in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 3:1). This spot is now occupied by the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim holy place. However, since "the wooded hills around Jerusalem would not have required the transport of firewood for the sacrifice, it is most likely a coincidence of the same name rather than a reference to the same place" (BBC, 53).

22:5

It is hard to know what Abraham meant when he told his servants "we will come back to you." He had to be struggling with the tension that he was going to sacrifice Isaac, and yet God had promised to give him descendants through Isaac (Genesis 21:12). Hebrews 11:17-19 suggests that Abraham believed God could restore Isaac to him through resurrection.

22:7-8

Again, it is impossible to know what Abraham was thinking. "The Lord will provide" is the theme of this story and, certainly, Abraham was pinning his hopes on God's continued provision.

22:12

This act confirmed Abraham's faith. Note how James reflects on this event: "Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. The Scripture was fulfilled that says, "'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend" (James 2:21-23).

22:13

This story of substitutionary sacrifice looks forward to the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29).

Session 5 - Discussion

Introduction

It wasn't always a smooth road. But ultimately, in placing Isaac on the altar, Abraham demonstrated that his faith was firmly placed in the God he had grown to trust. And so Abraham is an example for us of faith and a reminder of what it looks like to trust God with the most important things in our lives.

Discussion Questions

1. Read Genesis 21:1-5. Twenty-five years after God promised Abraham that he would make him into a great nation (Genesis 12:2), his son Isaac is born. What do you think it was like for Abraham to hold this child of promise? When have you seen God's provision manifest itself in real and tangible ways in your life?
2. Why do you think God tested Abraham with the command to sacrifice Isaac? What do you think Abraham was thinking as he heard God's command?
3. Why do you think tests like this happen in our lives? Do you feel like you've ever been tested by God?
4. What do you learn about Abraham from the events in chapter 22? What do you learn about God?
5. What are the things that are most important to you? Would you be willing to remove them from your life if God asked you to?

Think About It

Do you trust God? Do you believe that he will provide you with everything you need, when you need it?

What Will You Do?

What would it look like for you to trust God in all areas of your life this week?

Changing Your Mind

... So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided." (Genesis 22:14)

Session 6 - Notes on Genesis 25-25:18

23:4

Abraham lived in temporary dwellings for most of his life. But Abraham's reference to himself as a "foreigner and a stranger" in a land where he has lived for some time was not necessarily a statement of his status among the Hittite people, but an acknowledgment that he was not yet a resident of the permanent home God promised him.

23:7-9

It would have been difficult under any other circumstances for Abraham to obtain land from the Hittites. In order to gain another's property, you had to either be kin to the landowner to purchase the property, or inherit the land as an heir. But if the village leaders interceded for a potential buyer not meeting this criteria, a landowner could be persuaded to sell his land. But this land came at a high price. Though Ephron feigned generosity with his first offer, he ended up asking an outrageous price. Ten shekels a year would have been a good wage at this time; so four hundred shekels would have been an extremely inflated price for the land/tomb. It seems Ephron takes advantage of Abraham's grief and immediate need for a burial site for Sarah by insisting that Abraham take the whole lot; considering Abraham would not have time (or probably the energy) to engage him in the traditional bargaining process.

23:17-20

In the ancient Near East, people were buried with their families or in their native lands. Canaan was neither to Abraham. By burying Sarah in Canaan, Abraham was staking his own claim to Canaan as his homeland because of God's promise to him. This tomb became the resting place not only of Sarah, but of Abraham (25:8-10), Isaac (35:29), and Jacob (49:29-32). This was a common practice, as caves were often used as burial places for multiple generations. A body would be placed on a shelf and then moved to another chamber or into an ossuary box when the next member of the family was buried. This piece of land that Abraham acquired is also the first fulfillment of God's promise that he and his descendants would possess the land.

24:2-4

Traditionally, Abraham would have chosen a wife for Isaac, but because of his age and perhaps failing health, he entrusted this important decision to his senior servant (most likely Eliezer from 15:2). Canaan was a melting pot of ethnicities. Because God was creating a distinct nation, Abraham sought a wife for Isaac from his homeland and household in carrying out God's promise of a great nation from his seed (Genesis 12:2).

24:5-9

Abraham was also adamant that Isaac and his future wife be citizens of Canaan. This land was promised by God to the nation which was to come from Isaac. By swearing an oath in the name of God, the servant put himself under divine and human punishment if he failed to keep his oath.

24:10-14

The servant begins his long journey to what is now known as Northwest Mesopotamia. Wells were generally located outside the city. For protection, the women in the village often went in groups in the cool of the evening and morning to draw water. Abraham's servant would have expected a group of women to arrive at the well in early evening, but he would have no idea which girl would be a relative of Abraham or which girl would be the best choice to be the mother of a nation.

24:15-27

It would have been proper etiquette for a traveler to ask permission before drinking water from a village well and for a villager to offer a traveler a drink. However, for Rebekah to take the time and energy to water ten thirsty camels would have been well above and beyond the call of duty. Just one thirsty camel can drink up to twenty-five gallons of water in one session, and up to five or six gallons in one minute—and she watered all ten until they had finished drinking (w. 19, 22) with a jar holding no more than three gallons. Rebekah's kindness must have led the servant to believe she was the one the Lord had chosen. Before discovering she was from his master's household, he gives Rebekah an expensive amount of jewelry that may have been symbolic of a marriage contract. The servant is then overwhelmed when he realized that Rebekah was not only from Abraham's native land, she was from his household as well.

24:33-54

Abraham's servant probably recounted the story in detail so that the family would have confidence in sending Rebekah far away from their protection. As well, the gifts given to Rebekah's family displayed the wealth of the family Rebekah was marrying into—also intended to gain their confidence.

24:66-67

Since her passing, Sarah's tent would have remained empty. By marrying her in his mother's tent, Isaac indicates that Rebekah is now the mistress of the household.

Session 6 - Discussion

Introduction

Even when our time on earth comes to an end, the stories being told through our lives doesn't stop, because our stories are a part of God's story—the same story that has been written from generation to generation. As Abraham passed on his faith to Isaac, so it went to the next generation, until ultimately it came to us. Four thousand years later, we represent a legacy of faith.

Discussion Questions

1. Who is someone who has influenced you through his or her life of faith?
2. When you think about your life, what do you hope to be remembered for?
3. Read Hebrews 11:8-12. What was Abraham remembered for?
4. Abraham continued to demonstrate his faith by having Sarah buried in the land that God had promised him. Though he had only begun to see the promises fulfilled, he still had faith in them. What allows you to keep looking forward and to have faith in the things that have yet to be?
5. When Abraham's servant went out to find a wife for Isaac, he was drawn to Rebekah because of her act of extraordinary kindness. When have you seen someone go out of his or her way to serve someone else? Where in your daily routine do you have the opportunity to go above the call of duty to serve someone else?
6. Rebekah was a woman of faith. She courageously left her home and her family to go to the Promised Land, much like Abraham had done many years before. Is there an opportunity in your life where God is calling you to step out in faith? What would it look like in your life for you to follow the examples of Abraham and Rebekah?

Think About It

Even though Abraham's life ended, God's story continued. Abraham never saw the grand fulfillment of God's promises, because God was telling a story bigger and grander than the life of Abraham. What if God is telling a story so amazing and important that you probably will not see the extent of God's purposes in your life? Would you respond to life's blessings and difficulties differently? How might your decisions and choices be affected?

What Will You Do?

What can you do to leave a legacy of faith to those who come behind you?

Changing Your Mind

Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master... (Genesis 24:27a)

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