

# BLESSED TO BE A — BLESSING

LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM



## INTRODUCTION

# Blessed To Be A Blessing

The story of Abraham has had a greater impact on the world than we could ever hope to quantify using current methods. Cherished by three of the world's major religions, the impact of Abraham and his family continues to shape the world as we know it. Conflict and peace have been brought about by differing interpretations as to what his life really meant.

For Christians, Abraham holds a special place as the starting point of the community of true faith that was called out and created by God. Genesis makes it clear that the God who called the world into existence also called both Israel and the church into existence. The story of Abraham is an origin story for CrossCulture and all of Christ's church.

That Abraham "believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6) is a Gospel summary that echoes into the New Testament and in the hearts of those who trust in Jesus for salvation. It was the call of God and the faith response of Abraham that found him righteous in God's sight - not his personal goodness. Here we are reminded that to be a part of the church is a result of God's grace and love. Abraham did not deserve to be blessed by God and neither do we. Like Abraham, we are also deeply flawed, fallen and in need of God to act in our lives. He calls us to turn to him in faith just as he called Abraham.

The story of Abraham did not end with only his family being blessed by God. If it did, we wouldn't be here worshipping Jesus today. Instead Abraham is "blessed to be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2). His blessing was for the purpose of blessing others.

Walter Bruggemann states in his commentary on Genesis that "the purpose of the call is to fashion an alternative community in creation gone awry, to embody in human history the power of the blessing."<sup>1</sup> In a world inundated with chaos, the faith community was to be a shining light of goodness to the world, communicating through the love expressed in its

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<sup>1</sup> Bruggemann, Walter. Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (p. 105). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

very being that God indeed was repairing the damage done by his fallen creation. In this, we find a future and an identity for the church as much as we find an origin story. We too are blessed to be a blessing. Through the creation of the faith community who worships Jesus, all of the nations of the world are to be blessed. Jesus says, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). We look to the story of Abraham to sharpen our understanding and conviction around God’s purposes for his people, not to be an exclusivist group for an elite portion of humanity, but to be the vessel through which God displays his glory, love and provision of redemption to the world.

What does it mean for us to have faith, to trust the promises of God in the face of life’s longevity and disappointment, to see promises fulfilled and to be a part of the new community that he has made to be a blessing to the world? We hope to explore this and more in this six-week series drawing from the life of Abraham and Sarah. May God bless you, challenge you and pour his love for people into your hearts as you study his word together.

*“The call to Sarah and Abraham has to do not simply with the forming of Israel but with the re-forming of creation, the transforming of the nations. The stories of this family are not ends in themselves but point to God’s larger purposes.”<sup>2</sup> - Walter Brueggemann*

## **Recommended reading**

1. Salvation Begins: Reading Genesis Today
2. Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching

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<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (pp. 105-106). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

## The Call of Abraham

The story of Abraham begins in Genesis 11, but his pivotal role in the Biblical Narrative becomes unmissable in chapter 12. Abraham is a landless, childless wanderer whose life is dramatically changed by the call of Yahweh. Essentially, this is not only the creation of Israel, but also the church. Abraham obeys the voice of God and believes the promises God makes to him. Likewise, we too have been called to respond to God's call with the same kind of faith.

### Context

Read Genesis 11:1-32.

1. Humanity quickly spirals into deeper expressions of evil (Genesis 3-11). What backdrop can help us understand why God might call Abraham (11:1-9)?
2. Is there anything special about Abraham at this point? What does this say about God's choice of us?
3. How does the detail in Genesis 11:30 contribute to the trajectory of Abraham's story?

### Observation

4. What promises are made to Abraham (12:1-9)?

5. Abraham is 75 years at this time. How would you react if God made these promises to you at that age?

## Meaning

6. What might Abraham's turning to Egypt indicate about him (12:10 onwards)?
7. Just like Abraham, Christians are called in different ways. How does God's calling to holiness impact our ability to be a blessing to others?

## Application

8. Abraham steps out in faith not knowing where he is going and is commended in Hebrews 11:8. What step of faith do you currently need to take?
9. Abraham regularly fails to live up to the character of the God who calls him. How should we see our failures as we try to live up to God's calling for holiness in our lives?

## Righteousness by Faith

After certain things have happened (Genesis 13-14), God reassures Abraham's safety (15:1). God also promises to make the 85-year old Abraham into a great nation through a son as the nation's first member. Abraham's trust in God is counted to him as righteousness (15:6). This is the gospel of grace in the Old Testament, just like what we see in Romans 4:1-5.

### Context

1. Why does God tell Abraham "Fear not, Abraham, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great" (15:1)? What might Abraham be fearful of (14: 13-24)?
2. What does God promise Abraham? Who is responsible to fulfil it? What does God require of Abraham?

### Observation

3. What is the meaning of "and he (God) counted it to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:1-5)? How does Abraham's life change because of his faith (Genesis 15-22)?
4. What does this passage reveal about God, humankind and yourself?

## Meaning

5. Having just trusted God completely in battle (Genesis 14), why does Abraham doubt God (15:2-3)? Does questioning God mean a lack of faith?<sup>3</sup>
6. How does God react to Abraham's question (15: 4-5)? What does this teach us about faith?
7. Compare Galatians 3:2-9 and Genesis 15:6. How can we be made right with God?

## Application

8. "Fear not" (15:1) appears over 200 times in the Bible. What does this say about the relationship God wants to have with us? What do you fear most in life? How is God a shield to you (Romans 8:31)?
9. Have you ever had to take God at His word without knowing the details? How did that affect your relationship with God?
10. How does this passage encourage you to live a life of faith?

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<sup>3</sup> Other people who questioned God in the Bible include Gideon (Judges 6:36-40), David (Psalm 13, 22, 55 and 60), Zechariah (Luke 1:11-20) and Mary (Luke 1:29-38).

## Taking Matters Into Our Own Hands

Abraham is promised by God that he will have a son at some point. However, it does not take long for Abraham and Sarah to try fulfilling that promise their own way. When we attempt to interpret and fulfill God's promises our own way, we end up facing negative consequences. In this passage, we also see God's faithfulness despite human compromise.

### Context

1. What promise (Genesis 15) pushes Sarah to make her decisions (Genesis 16)?

### Observation

2. What assumption does Sarah make about God (16:2)? How is she creating her own predicament?
3. In what two ways does Abraham also fail (16:1-6)?

### Meaning

4. What attitudes push us to take matters into our own hands?



5. What should have happened in this story?

6. What does God's care for Hagar tell us about his character (16:7-14)?

## **Application**

7. Sarah's decisions are partly based off assumptions about God's intentions. How can we avoid making similar mistakes?

8. How can we grow more patient in waiting for God's promises?

## Mercy Or Justice?

Often we experience a tension between mercy and justice. As human beings, our standards flux and change depending on what side of the issue we're on. When those we care about are facing the consequences of their actions, perhaps we long more for mercy than justice. But when evil people carry out their plans on others, we long for someone to bring justice to the situation. However, a perfect standard for mercy and justice can only be delivered by a perfect being whose character is unchanging.

In this next chapter of Abraham's life, we see glimpses of God's mercy and justice displayed in both Sarah's life and in God's dealings with Sodom. How we respond to God's acts of mercy and justice is influenced by whether or not we really align our hearts and ideals to who he really is.

### Context

1. What leads to the change of Sarah and Abraham's names (Genesis 17)?
2. How does Sarah view her situation (16:2)?
3. Genesis 13:13 describes the inhabitants of Sodom. What other detail in chapter 13 leads Abraham to care about them?

## Observation

4. How is Sarah's possibility of getting pregnant (18:11-12)? What does Sarah's response tell us about how she views her situation?
5. Why does God disclose his plans for Sodom to Abraham (18:16-19)?

## Meaning

6. Abraham bargains for the lives of Sodom's citizens. What does this say about his standards of justice and mercy?
7. God engages with Abraham's pleading. What does this indicate about God's nature?
8. We cry out for justice in our current world. What might it mean for us to be caught up in the justice of God?

## Application

9. How do we challenge unbelief in our hearts towards the promises of God (Mark 9:24)?

10. In what way do we share Abraham's struggle with the justice of God?

11. How might we speak to a non-Christian about God's decision for Sodom?

12. What hope does Christ provide when we stare at the impending justice of God?

## Promises Fulfilled

1. Share a moment when you took matters into your own hands, even though someone had told you to wait or not to do it.

### Context

In Study 3 (Genesis 16:1-18), we have learned that Abraham and Sarah take matters into their own hands to deliver God's promise - resulting in Ishmael being born through a slave, Hagar. In this passage, we witness the miraculous birth of Isaac. After a long wait (about 14 years since the promise was given), finally Sarah has given birth to a son, a true heir to Abraham's name. As much as he is happy for Isaac's birth, this will complicate a few things in his household. Still, we will see God fulfilling his promise to Abraham.

### Observation

2. Why is Isaac's birth humanly impossible (Genesis 11:30, 17:17)?
3. We see Ishmael mocking Isaac (21: 8-13), which angers and leads Sarah to force Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. Surprisingly, why does God tell Abraham to grant Sarah's cruel request?
4. Why does God rescue Hagar and Ishmael (21: 14-21)?

## Meaning

5. Ishmael and Isaac's births are completely different to each other. What does each birth signify?
6. What is the consequence of Ishmael's birth?
7. Why does God promise Abraham that Ishmael will become a great nation?
8. Two promises are fulfilled in this chapter - the birth of Isaac and the protection of Ishmael. What do we learn about God's character and promises?

Paul refers to this story (Romans 9:7), including the role of Hagar and Ishmael (Galatians 4:21-31). For him, the all-important point is that Isaac was born following God's promise. It anticipates the Gentile believers in God's plan. Ishmael, who was born through human contrivance, is a forerunner of the Jews who sought salvation through works of the law.

9. What greater promise does Isaac foreshadow?

## Application

10. God will fulfill his promises, but on his own terms. As a life group and/or individuals, what do you need to submit and patiently wait for God to fulfill his promise?

## Providing A Sacrifice

1. Have you ever had to follow a command or request that didn't make sense?

### Context

After enduring the painful separation from Ishmael, Abraham is witnessing Isaac entering his early teenage years. God calls to and commands Abraham an unthinkable task, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

At this moment, Abraham does not know that God is testing him. All he knows is that he needs to go to Moriah and offer Isaac as a burnt offering.

### Observation

God is very specific with his words and command to Abraham (22: 1-2) - fully aware of the magnitude of His command.

2. What do Abraham's actions reflect (22: 3-4)?
3. Why does Abraham ask his two servants to stay (22:5)?
4. Why is Abraham's answer to Isaac's question a little ambiguous or even untruthful (22:7-8)?

5. Given that he is stronger and fitter than Abraham, Isaac has the criteria of an appropriate sacrifice. It is possible that Isaac eventually realises that he is the sacrifice. What aspect of his character and behaviour is reflected on verse 9?

Just as Abraham is about to kill Isaac, an angel of the Lord stops him (22: 11). Finally, God reveals the reason for his command. God then provides the offering of a ram as what Abraham has told Isaac earlier.

6. God reaffirms to Abraham (22: 15-19) the promise He has made in Genesis 15:5-6 and 17:2-8. Compare and contrast these three passages. Why is this reaffirmation important after the test of faith?

## Meaning

7. What are the similarities and differences between God's test and worldly or Satan's test?
8. Why does God give such a harsh test to Abraham?
9. Why does an omniscient (all-knowing) God test his followers' faith?



10. Isaac points forward to story of Jesus. What are the similarities and differences between Isaac/Abraham and Jesus/God the Father?

## **Application**

God tests our faith to keep us humble. Just like in the Bible, time after time God performs miracles (like the birth of Isaac) and challenges our faith, so that we will not lean on our own understanding and strength. Rather, our complete devotion to God - casting out all our idols and selfish ambitions - will lead to glorifying and being completely satisfied in him alone.

11. God will never test beyond what you can bear. Do you have an “Isaac” in your life that you need to let go of before God? Pray with your life group or prayer partner that God will enable you to do so.