

ABRAHAM

An All-In Life

Celebrating God

Devotional

Genesis 16-18 & Genesis 21

Ever since God promised the woman's seed would crush the serpent in Genesis 3:15, we have been sitting on the edge of our seats waiting for this child to appear. At first we suspect that Cain is this offspring, but his murder of Abel makes it clear he is not the one (4:1–16). Next we hope blameless Noah will vanquish Satan (6:9). Although he is important in the Lord's plan of redemption, Noah is soon disqualified as the promised son (9:21). When the narrative shifts focus to Abraham, we expect the Lord to keep His word. But the suspense only intensifies. The patriarch jeopardizes his family (12:10–20), fathers a son who will not be his heir (chap. 16), and then finally risks having Sarah mothering a son with a man other than himself (chap. 20). It is as if Moses wants us to join Abraham and ask: "Lord, are you ever going to keep your promise?"

Genesis is not only artfully crafted literature, it also reports actual history and confirms the faithfulness of the God of creation. In today's passage there is finally a break in the tension when we read that the Lord, after years and years of waiting, "visited" Sarah and did as promised (21:1). To make sure we do not miss the point of this sentence, Moses tells us Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in their old age (v. 2). The Almighty has done the impossible; the elderly patriarch and his barren wife, who in themselves had no hope of having a son of their own, birth the one who will inherit the promise and pass it on to Abraham's greatest Son (Matt. 1:1–17). This momentous event proves, as John Calvin says, that God "never feeds men with empty promises, nor is he less true in granting what he has promised, than he is liberal, and willing, in making the promise."

Though it has been many years since the patriarch first met Yahweh, the Lord's salvation now begins to bear real and everlasting fruit in Abraham's life. As we wait on God to complete His good work in us today (Phil. 1:6), we too may have to endure what may seem like an eternity before He acts. But as Matthew Henry comments, "though [the Lord's] promised mercies come not at the time we set, they will certainly come at the time he sets, and that is the best time."

CORAM DEO

Our God is trustworthy, and He will surely fulfill all of His promises even if we may have to wait for the resurrection to see His kingdom in all its fullness. Our Father is faithful today to work in you and cleanse you of sin and to supply you with everything you need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). Know that like He did with Abraham and Sarah, God will come through for you and will complete the good work He has begun in you (Phil. 1:6).¹

¹ Devotional by Ligonier Ministries found @ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/just-promised/>

Open it

1. What is the best gift you have ever given or received? What makes it so special?

Read it

Genesis 21:1-7

Explore it

2. What did Abraham and Sarah name their son?
3. What did Abraham do after their son was born?
4. How old was Abraham when all this takes place?
5. What is the response of Sarah after giving birth?

Apply it

FLASHPOINT

Genesis 21 brings us to the culmination of years of waiting and struggle. For 25 years Abraham has waited but has not seen the fulfillment of God's promise. As a result of their impatience Abraham and Sarah sought to circumvent God's plan and decided they would use Hagar to address what they thought God could not overcome. What happens because of their sin is the birth of Ishmael, family discord and a fight that has waged for centuries. Now with Ishmael entering his teenage years and Abraham and Sarah well beyond childbearing years God shows up and keeps his promise. **Before we can celebrate the gift of Isaac let's rewind and walk this long road of heartbreak and struggle and learn some lessons about delays and disappointments that would make the events of chapter 21 so sweet.**²

6. **How do hardships and struggles in life make the good moments in life so much sweeter? If adversity can bring such joy, why are we so quick to avoid it?**

The twenty-five years that Abraham and Sarah had to wait on God were filled with difficult and even turbulent times. Some of these were as a result of God's providence while others were as a result of foolish and sinful decisions which they were wholly responsible for.³

7. **How do we determine why we may be experiencing difficult times? Is it worth even trying to know the reasons for the hard times of our lives? Why or Why not?**

² Study notes by Tim Badal

³ *ibid*

THE GOOD WIFE??? (Genesis 16)

Although God had promised Abraham a son, the years had passed, and no son had been given. Verse 1 tells us that Sarah had "borne him no children." What do you do when God has promised something, but the fulfillment has not taken place? Some people might give up on God, but Abraham was too strong a believer simply to walk away from the promise. Yet Abraham now is about 85 years old and Sarah is 75. Both are so far past normal childbearing years that it is simply not feasible to believe a child could come through the normal means. But perhaps God intends them to be creative. If so, Sarah is certainly up to the task.

As strange as this may sound to modern ears, it apparently was not unusual at all in those days. The NIV Study Bible calls this "an ancient custom ... to ensure the birth of a male heir. Sarai would herself resolve the problem of her barrenness." Well, now, Sarai certainly gets high marks for creativity and boldness. She also scores well for facing the problem resolutely. Moreover, Genesis 16 tells us that Abraham immediately agreed with Sarah and when she brought Hagar to him, he slept with her. That raises an interesting question. Why did Abraham agree to Sarah's scheme?

- He wasn't getting any younger
- God didn't seem to be moving very fast
- God hadn't said who the mother would be
- This was a common practice.
- It was Sarah's idea!⁴

8. When have you allowed impatience to cause you to make an unwise decision? Looking back, what would you have done differently?

God is strangely absent from verses 1-6. He is given the credit (or blame) for preventing Sarai from conceiving, and His name is invoked to justify her point of view (16:5). But He is never sought. Abram didn't bother to ask the Lord whether this crucial decision, which would affect the rest of his life and the rest of human history, was God's will.

Please observe that the Lord didn't stop Abram from doing this. All He would have had to do was say, "Abram, don't do it!" But God was silent. In fact, the biblical record indicates that God didn't talk to Abram again for 13 years (compare 16:16 with 17:1). Why didn't God stop Abram? The only answer I know is that Abram didn't bother to ask the Lord for His counsel. God won't step in and prevent His children from making some serious mistakes if they don't seek Him.⁵

9. God often guided and protected Abraham. Why does God at times protect us from harm and at other times seem to allow us to run headlong into harm's way?

⁴ Sermon excerpt entitled "Doing The Right Thing In The Wrong Way" by Ray Pritchard found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/doing-the-right-thing-in-the-wrong-way/>

⁵ Sermon excerpt from Steven Cole entitled "Why We Have Family Problems" found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-33-why-we-have-family-problems-genesis-16:1-6>

10. It seems that the decision to use Hagar was solely Abraham and Sarah's idea. Why didn't they ask God for guidance? What would God have said had they asked him?
11. One of the greatest offenses of this chapter is the blatant disregard for Hagar. How can our selfish desires cause others pain and sorrow? How can we keep from being blinded for our misuse or hurt of others as we seek our own well-being?

EARLY EDITION (Genesis 17)

In Genesis 17 we see a couple of episodes take place. First, God shares with Abraham the command and covenant of circumcision. This physical ritual would be an ever present reminder of God's promise and Abrams commitment to obedience. Second, God speaks once again about fulfilling his promise of giving Abraham and Sarah a son who would be named Isaac. In fact this time God says it is only one year away!!! The chapter ends with Abraham and all the men in his household being circumcised. This chapter reminds us that waiting is never a stagnant process but one that demands obedience.⁶

12. Why does God keep reminding Abraham about the promise? What things does God remind us about and what should those reminders do for us?

⁶ Study notes by Tim Badal

Circumcision was a painful and deeply personal step of obedience for Israelite men that God would use throughout biblical times. It was a way for them to set themselves apart from the rest of the world. New Testament Christians are no longer under the Old Testament Law, and circumcision is no longer required. In fact Paul clearly states in Galatians, circumcision does not aid either salvation or sanctification in Christ. While the practice of circumcisions may not be binding on the Christian, the principle still applies: Faith empowers obedience.⁷

13. How could the physical act of circumcision produce a closer walk with God for Abraham? Likewise, how can the physical act of sacrificing financially produce a closer walk with God?

God tells Abraham that He will bless Sarah greatly in the days to come. Many believe that this is supposed to encourage her after her foolish scheme surrounding Hagar and the subsequent emotional distress that it brought her.⁸

14. When has God encouraged and blessed you after you have been foolish and sinful? What does this say about God?

THREE'S COMPANY (Genesis 18)

Abraham, led of the Spirit of God through many difficulties and trials and after years of wandering in a state of alternating victory and defeat, has come into the fullness of the circumcised life. In Chapter 18, we shall see the results of this in terms of practical experience. Here is a very homey scene, what we might call kitchen-sink religion. It is faith-in-overalls, a combination of grace and groceries. These few verses center around three persons. We first see God in disguise, then Abraham in haste, and finally, Sarah in doubt.⁹

15. God makes a personal visit to reiterate and remind Abraham and Sarah that His promise would soon be realized. They would see first-hand that God keeps his word. Why can it be difficult for us to commit to things, especially long-term? What role does doubt play in our hesitancy to commit?

⁷ ibid

⁸ ibid

⁹ Devotional excerpt from Ray Stedman entitled "When God Comes To Dinner" found @<https://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/genesis/when-god-comes-to-dinner>

16. Upon hearing the news from the tent in verses 9-15 Sarah laughed to herself. Why did she do it and why do you think she then lied about it?

17. In what area of your life do you most often doubt God's power? Why is that aspect of your life most susceptible to a lack of faith? How can our All In initiative give God an opportunity to "show up?"

ALL IN THE FAMILY

God isn't in a hurry. He didn't have a problem waiting for a quarter century before allowing Abraham and Sarah to conceive. Who knows why He waited that long? It was His call; His timing is perfect. Personally, I believe Abraham would not have been ready any earlier. After all, there was more at stake with this promise than a single baby boy. God established a covenant with Abraham as the first step in a plan of cosmic proportions— a comprehensive, predetermined strategy through which He will redeem the world from sin and evil. This involved multiplying Abraham's descendants into a nation, blessing them with provision and protection, and then settling them in the Land of Promise. Abraham needed spiritual maturity, so the Lord waited.¹⁰

18. God waited to unleash his blessings on Abraham until he had reached a certain spiritual maturity. In what areas do you lack spiritual maturity today? How might you be missing out on God's blessing as a result?

¹⁰ Swindoll, Charles R.. Abraham: One Nomad's Amazing Journey of Faith (Kindle Locations 2610-2615). Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

19. Take a moment to read Genesis 21:6. Why is this such a joyous moment for Abraham and Sarah and why does she mention laughter? When has God made you eat your words or laughs by doing something you thought was highly unlikely or even impossible?

The journey to celebrating with God is one filled with ups and downs and far too many foolish detours along the way. Yet the only constant along the way is a faithful and loving God who forgives and corrects as well as guides us back to Him. We will never fully realize the great good that bumpy journey is until we see God's promises fulfilled in the end. ¹¹

20. Knowing that God is in control and has a great future in store for our church what things might God do in the days to come that we might have thought impossible? What steps of obedience will he ask of you in the meantime?

¹¹ Ibid

Note: This study was compiled and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.church/smallgroups