

The Gospel in Abraham's Story: Walking by Faith

From Genesis 12-25, Galatians 3-4, Romans 4, Hebrews 11, and John 8

What's Included

For each passage in *The Gospel in Abraham's Story: Walking by Faith*, you will find the following:

- Outlines for each passage to help you understand their meaning and flow, designed to be enhanced and elaborated upon through your personal study and preparation
- Teaching helps embedded within these outlines to guide you as you teach classes or facilitate groups
- Questions for each passage to assist you with enabling class and group discussion

Commentaries

Teacher-friendly commentaries for *The Gospel in Abraham's Story: Walking by Faith* include:

- Tremper Longman III, *Genesis: The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016.); Expositional commentary for Genesis passages
- Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham*, 2nd ed. (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2015); Theological and pastoral reflections on Genesis 12-25
- Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *The True Story of the Whole World: Finding Your Place in the Biblical Drama*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020); Lay-level overview of the overarching Biblical narrative
- Tim Keller, *Galatians for You* (The Good Book Company, 2013); Expositional study guide for Galatians passages
- Tim Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You* (The Good Book Company, 2014); Expositional study guide for Romans passages
- Michael Kruger, *Hebrews for You* (The Good Book Company, 2021); Expositional study guide for Hebrews passages
- N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone* (SPCK, London, and Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, KY, 2014); Expositional study guide for John passage

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 Adult Discipleship Ministries
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Genesis 11.24-30 - “Introduction”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 11:24-30 [5 minutes].

2. Discuss introductory issues in Genesis [10 minutes].

- Abram: oldest son of Terah, grandson of Nahor; Sarai: wife of Abram and without child
- Authorship and date: traditional view—Moses (along with the rest of the Torah); other views—assortment of writers, editors; no specific author named in Genesis itself; debate on whether written in time of Moses or during/following Babylonian exile
- Some commentators: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived in 1st quarter of 2nd millennium BC
- Genre and style: mostly history with a theological emphasis, with some distinctions between Genesis 1-11 and Genesis 12-50; both sections have an omniscient third-person narrator

3. Discuss the structure, setting, and context of Genesis in general and Genesis 12-25 in particular [15 minutes].

- Three-part division held by many: 1) primeval history with creation account in Genesis 1-11; 2) patriarchal narrative in 12-36; 3) sons of Jacob story, focusing on Joseph, in 37-50
- “There are many signals that Genesis 1-11, though theological history and thus making claims about the past, speaks of events in a nonlinear and imprecise fashion... When we come to the beginning of the *toledot* of Terah (11:27; the beginning of the patriarchal narratives), we do not have a dramatic shift in genre. The narrator continues to speak of the past with a theological focus. But narrative time slows down and the focus narrows... There is less figurative language and less interplay with ancient Near Eastern mythology (though ancient Near Eastern texts often inform us of relevant social customs). The author thus signals an interest to communicate actual events in a more precise manner as the narrative turns to events which form the foundation for Israel.” (Tremper Longman III, *Genesis: The Story of God Bible Commentary*, p. 8)
- Word “toledot” (“account” NLT; “generations” ESV) marks significant divisions within book
- Tells the following story of the person mentioned’s descendants (helpful to note: person mentioned often less important than descendants)
- Full “toledot” references in Genesis: 2.4 (heavens and earth); 5.1 (Adam); 6.9 (Noah); 10.1 (Noah’s sons); 11.10 (Shem); 11.27 (Terah); 25.12 (Ishmael); 25.19 (Isaac); 36.1 and 36.9 (Esau); and 37.2 (Jacob)
- Terah’s “toledot” significant in Scripture as it concentrates on Abraham’s journey with God

4. Discuss the studies ahead [15 minutes].

- Will look at Genesis 12-25 as the primary text for Abraham's story
- Will spend significant time as well in New Testament understandings and applications of Abraham
- Selections include Romans 4:1-25, Galatians 3:6-29, and Hebrews 11:8-12
- Choose one passage to read aloud and review/discuss briefly to set the stage for what is to come regarding the New Testament understandings of Abraham

5. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Briefly read Genesis 11:24-30. What is the lineage? When do Abram and Sarai make appearances? What is communicated about both of them?
- How does Genesis 1-11 compare with Genesis 12-36 and 37-50 in focus and style? What stays the same? What changes as you move through the end of Genesis 11 into 12?
- Read the quotation from Tremper Longman III and discuss how his insights help with studying Abraham's story in Genesis: "There are many signals that Genesis 1-11, though theological history and thus making claims about the past, speaks of events in a nonlinear and imprecise fashion... When we come to the beginning of the *toledot* of Terah (11:27; the beginning of the patriarchal narratives), we do not have a dramatic shift in genre. The narrator continues to speak of the past with a theological focus. But narrative time slows down and the focus narrows... There is less figurative language and less interplay with ancient Near Eastern mythology (though ancient Near Eastern texts often inform us of relevant social customs). The author thus signals an interest to communicate actual events in a more precise manner as the narrative turns to events which form the foundation for Israel." (Tremper Longman III, *Genesis: The Story of God Bible Commentary*, p. 8)
- "Toledot" is often translated as either "account" (NLT) or "generations" (ESV) and is used to introduce a new story line in Genesis. Please note the full list of "toledot" references: 2:4 (heavens and earth); 5:1 (Adam); 6:9 (Noah); 10:1 (Noah's sons); 11:10 (Shem); 11:27 (Terah); 25:12 (Ishmael); 25:19 (Isaac); 36:1 and 36:9 (Esau); and 37:2 (Jacob). How does an understanding of "toledot" help you notice the stories of emphasis within Genesis? How does this structure set up Abraham's story as being particularly important? Why do you think Abraham's story is worth this emphasis?
- Pick one of these passages to read: Romans 4:1-25, Galatians 3:6-29, and Hebrews 11:8-12. How does the passage you choose emphasize the story of Abraham and Sarah for our consideration? What can we learn from Abraham and Sarah regarding Christian living in the 21st century?

Genesis 11:27 – 12:9 - “Abram’s Call”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 11:27 – 12:9 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from the introductory lesson [5 minutes].

3. Discuss the account of Terah in Genesis 11:27-32 [5 minutes].

- Genesis structured according to generational accounts and stories (called *toledot* in Hebrew)
- Before now, structure also found in Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; goes until 25:12
- Three children: Abram, Nahor, and Haran
- Terah leads family away from Ur, but stops and stays in city of Haran

4. Discuss the call of Abram in Genesis 12:1-3 [20 minutes].

- Abram called by God to go to as of yet unnamed place in radical separation from family
- If he responds with faith expressed through obedience, then the following will happen
 1. First, God will make a “great nation” (v. 2, NLT) of him and his descendants; requires both descendants and land
 2. Second, God will bring blessing and fame to him so he and his descendants may bless others
 3. Third, as God blesses him, God will also curse those who dishonor him
 4. Fourth, all peoples on earth will be blessed through Abram
- Repetition of “bless” and “blessing” significant: impact upon the entire world
- Seen by some as “second creation” story: God starting afresh to set aside a people for Himself
- Abram’s story of faith and doubt is foundational to the biblical gospel of grace through faith
- Plays out in multiple ways in the New Testament, such as Romans 4:1-25, Galatians 3:6-29, and Hebrews 11:8-12
- “Abraham is a model for us, and we will soon see he is far, far from perfect. He will be an encouragement for us to hold on as he did, because we too are far, far from perfect.” (Tremper Longman III, *Genesis: The Story of God Bible Commentary*, p. 163)

5. Discuss Abram's move to Canaan in Genesis 12:4-9 [10 minutes].

- Brings wife Sarai, nephew Lot, and “all his wealth—his livestock and all the people he had taken into his household at Haran” (v. 4, NLT); appears to be a person of means, and this status will increase as time goes on
- God affirms Canaan is the place (v. 7) as Abram makes several stops and constructs altars to God: Shechem at the oak of Moreh; near Bethel and Ai; and in the Negev:
- Abram off to a good start, but challenges will soon develop in his story

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Review the plot of Genesis 11:27—12:9. How does the story unfold?
- God seems to be narrowing down His focus to one man and one family as we move to the start of Genesis 12. How is this new development a “restart” after chapters 1-11 of Genesis?
- What is striking or unusual about God's call to Abram in Genesis 12:1? When have you seen or experienced God working in a similar fashion in your life?
- What does God intend to do with Abram and his family in Genesis 12:2? How does this intent play itself out in the Old Testament? In the New Testament? Briefly tell the story.
- Genesis 12:3 opens the entire world to Abram's blessing. How do we share in it today?
- How does Abram exercise his faith in Genesis 12:4-9? How does his example define what faith truly is? How does his example help us as we exercise our faith today?
- How does our day misunderstand the nature and meaning of faith? How is faith more than an intellectual exercise? How is faith more than simply “having faith in faith”?

Genesis 12:10-20 - “Abram and Sarai in Egypt”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 12:10-20 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from Genesis 11:27 – 12:9 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss Abram’s fear-based plan when they arrive in Egypt in Genesis 12:10-13 [5 minutes].

- Famine in the land, causing Abram and Sarai to travel to Egypt for support, initiating common historical pattern of Semitic peoples seeking refuge in Egypt (Genesis 37-Exodus 15; Matthew 2)
- Abram anticipates problem regarding Sarai’s beauty: Egyptians will kill him to take her
- So Abram devises a ruse: Sarai and Abram are sister and brother; partial truth, but hiding most important truth of marriage
- Respond with faith or fear? Thus far, fear overrides faith for Abram in both going to Egypt and in the scheme he devises for when they arrive

4. Discuss the results of Abram’s fear-based plan in Genesis 12:14-16 [15 minutes].

- Events transpire as Abram expects: princes of Egypt praise Sarai’s beauty to Pharaoh
- Pharaoh responds as ancient Near Eastern despots ordinarily do: takes Sarai into his palace as one of his wives
- Must be clear: Pharaoh not accepting Sarai as new friend; Sarai expected to be in sexual relationship with Pharaoh at some point (text does not indicate one way or the other whether the relationship has been consummated)
- Worse, Abram receives wealth from Pharaoh (“And for her sake he [Pharaoh] dealt well with Abram,” v. 16a); “brother” to negotiate marital proposal for “sister” in ancient Near East
- “By making Sarai act this way, he [Abram] treats his wife like property; indeed he uses her like he is her pimp, hoping to benefit from her sexual favors. Even further, he puts the promise of descendants at risk. If she has a child with Pharaoh, then that would compromise her status as the matriarch.” (Tremper Longman III, *Genesis: The Story of God Bible Commentary*, p. 169)

5. Discuss God’s intervention in Genesis 12:17-20 [15 minutes].

- In early foreshadowing for Exodus deliverance, God makes a way for Abram and Sarai via “terrible plagues” (v. 17, NLT)
- Pharaoh surprised by developments: While Pharaoh not blameless, Abram the one at fault

- Note at Pharaoh's insistence, Abram and Sarai leave now with all possessions; afraid God's judgment continues if Pharaoh keeps anything
- While Abram acts in fear, God still acts to preserve the covenant; God's faithfulness, not Abram's, triumphs (continuing lesson for us today regarding God's faithfulness and our mistrust)
- Connection with New Testament: Exodus pattern continues with God's rescue of His people through Jesus Christ, saving people from sin, guilt, and death (see Iain Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham*, "Genesis 12 and Jesus Christ," pp. 21-23).

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Review the plot of Genesis 12:10-20. Describe the who, what, when, where, how, and why.
- What is the problem that causes the detour into Egypt? What Biblical story does this trip to Egypt begin to mimic? Scan briefly through Genesis 37—Exodus 15 and note the high points.
- What is Abram's plan to head off an anticipated problem? How is Abram's plan based more on fear than on faith? How are our responses often more fear-based than faith-based?
- How does Abram's plan play out? How is Sarai mistreated in the course of it? What problems for the long-term viability of God's plan for Abram do these results potentially cause?
- How does God intervene in vv. 17-20? What do His actions say about His covenant keeping?
- What lessons are taught by God about His faithfulness to Abram and Sarai? What lessons about God's faithfulness do we need to be reminded of?
- What gives you the most fear today, and how can living by faith address it?

Genesis 13:1-18 - “Abram and Lot Separate”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 13:1-18 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from Genesis 12:10-20 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss Abram’s return from Egypt in Genesis 13:1-4 [15 minutes].

- Abram cuts through the Negev toward Bethel from the shame of Egypt
- As he retraces his steps, he stops between Bethel and Ai where Abram previously built an altar and worshiped, and worships again
- “Here, then, is the key test of the faith you have: does your failure drive you away from God or toward Him? If your faith is in the power of your faith, failure will drive you away from God... The reason is simple: your failure exposes the emptiness of your claim to stand before God on your own merits... But if your faith rests in God and what He does for your ability to enter His presence, then your failure won’t destroy you. It will drive you back to square one, back to the altar where you started, so that you can repent and call upon the name of the Lord.” (Iain Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham*, p. 29)

4. Discuss the solution to conflict Abram devises in Genesis 13:5-13 [10 minutes].

- Abram wealthy with livestock, silver, and gold (in part from Pharaoh); Lot also wealthy
- So much growth in both Abram and Lot’s holdings that the land can’t handle both Abram and Lot; strife between herdsman; potential point of conflict between Abram and Lot
- Instead of worrying over getting the best piece of land, Abram offers choice to Lot: “If you want the land on the left, then I’ll take the land on the right. If you prefer the land on the right, then I’ll go to the left.” (v. 9, NLT)
- Abram not showing signs of self-protection or manipulation, but trusting in God’s provision
- Lot chooses territory that looks the best on the surface: the Jordan valley to the east
- Hints of what is to come regarding Lot and his choice in vv. 10,13

5. Discuss God’s reassurance to Abram in Genesis 13:14-18 [10 minutes].

- God speaks to Abram after Lot departs, restating covenant promises in affirmation of Abram’s response to the handling of the situation
- Land as far as Abram can see is to be his, and descendants “as dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring can also be counted (v. 16, ESV)
- Encouraged to walk length and breadth of land; settles by the oaks of Mamre at Hebron and builds another altar to worship God

- Years later, Mamre becomes the setting for the three angelic messengers and their announcement about the promise's fulfillment in Genesis 18

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Review what happened in Genesis 13:1-18. Tell the plot twists and turns.
- Abram doesn't return from Egypt triumphantly, even though he has become wealthy. What does he do in his return journey? Why is it significant?
- When we face spiritual reversals, failures, and defeats, what options do we have for response? Does failure drive us away from God or toward Him? Describe your experience if possible.
- How does Abram react when conflict arises between his camp and Lot's camp? How does his reaction differ from what we might ordinarily expect?
- Affluence provides its own set of temptations, doesn't it? How do we keep trusting God first rather than in our own abilities to work the system and to protect/provide for ourselves?
- What choice does Lot make? On what basis does he choose? Historically speaking, how does his choice play out? What lessons may we learn from his example?
- God reassures Abram about the promises made to him. How would this encourage Abram? How does God's reassurance encourage us as we walk by faith? What encouragement have you received from God (or through one of His people) lately?

Genesis 14:1-24 - “Abram Rescues Lot and Encounters Melchizedek”

OUTLINE

- 1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 14:1-24 [5 minutes].**
- 2. Remind the class of the insights from Genesis 13:1-18 [5 minutes].**
- 3. Discuss the set of ancient rivalries in Genesis 14:1-12 [10 minutes].**
 - Genesis 14 at first blush appears to be an interruption between Genesis 13 and 15; hard to tie up the historical strands; battles between kingdoms fighting over territory
 - Big name alliance associated with significant larger kingdoms from the east: Shinar (another name for Babylon—yes, that one), Ellasar, Elam (near modern day Iran), and Goyim; Opponents are local alliances resisting subjugation: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Bela (or Zoar)
 - Lot captured in Sodom in the aftermath of the larger alliance’s victory
- 4. Discuss Abram’s surprising rescue of Lot in Genesis 14:13-16 [10 minutes].**
 - Abram told of Lot’s capture; proceeds to form a rescue army with his trained men
 - Small number—318—to go against tested battlefield armies, although undoubtedly true that armies may have been more like raiding parties rather than national armies
 - Abram’s small army takes the initiative, drives armies out toward Damascus, and frees Lot
 - Small size of army points out that supernatural ability and strength is given to Abram by God, making clear he is indeed blessed by God; often done in Old Testament battle reports (example: Gideon and 300 men against the Midianites, Judges 7)
 - Abram, one to whom the land truly belongs in God’s timing, usually lives a nomadic life: but in unusual circumstances, he takes on military and political success
- 5. Discuss Abram, the King of Salem, and the King of Sodom in Genesis 14:17-24 [15 minutes].**
 - Abram encounters two distinct and quite different kings in the Valley of Shaveh
 - Melchizedek is both priest and king of Salem, the precursor to Jerusalem (note the name similarity); identified in the passage as “a priest of God Most High” (v. 18, ESV)
 - Somehow Abram recognizes Melchizedek not only as a worshiper and priest of the true God, but as something more: receives a blessing from Melchizedek, as an inferior receives from a superior, and presents Melchizedek a tithe (10 percent) of his goods and possessions
 - Melchizedek one of most enigmatic figures: Hebrews 5-8 uses Melchizedek as a type or figure for high priesthood exercised by Jesus, but probably not as a theophany of Jesus Himself

- King of Sodom, however, is of an opposite type: ungrateful and evil: Abram denies any formal ties with the King of Sodom, noting he will not take anything, “not so much as a single thread or sandal thong from what belongs to you” (v. 23, NLT)

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Review what happened in Genesis 14:1-24. Work through the machinery of the plot of the actions between kings and kingdoms.
- Lot is captured in Genesis 14:12. How and why does Abram mount a campaign to free him?
- What surprises you about Abram in Genesis 14:14-16, based on what we have witnessed about him thus far in Genesis? How does Abram’s victory reveal that God is at work?
- In today’s world, how and when do surprising things happen when we are serving God?
- Another surprising turn comes when Abram meets Melchizedek, king of Salem. How does Abram react? Where else in the Bible do we read about Melchizedek? How does Hebrews 5-8 help us understand a little better why Abram acts as he does?
- You most often receive a blessing from someone superior to you in status, character, or ability. When have you received a meaningful blessing upon your life? From whom? How did it impact your life?
- Abram is very careful to separate himself from any connection with the king of Sodom. Why? When we are to disassociate ourselves from evil people or practices? When are we “to eat with tax collectors and sinners” as Jesus did?

Genesis 15.1-21 - “Abram Trusts God”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 15.1-21 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from the previous passage, Genesis 14.1-24 [5 minutes]

3. Discuss Abram’s questioning about the covenant in Genesis 15.1-4 [10 minutes].

- Unclear how much time has passed since the events in Genesis 14, but evidently significant
- God communicates with Abram in a vision, but Abram responds: “O Sovereign Lord, what good are all your blessings when I don’t even have a son? Since you’ve given me no children, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth” (15.2 NLT).
- Why Eliezer? Possible way forward: Abram to adopt Eliezer and leave everything to him (foreshadows other ideas to arise later in Genesis about finding an heir)
- God’s reply: not anger, but accommodation to Abram’s weakness, with a reminder (v. 4)

4. Discuss Abram’s response of faith in Genesis 15.5-7 [15 minutes].

- Must be careful not to hear Abram as knowing and saying more than he actually knows and says: he trusts that God will be true to His promise from Genesis 12
- In v. 5, God chooses a vivid way to emphasize the scope of His covenant promise; Abram responds in v. 6
- Abram not simply assenting to a series of facts and propositions about God, although such information has its place; response is deeper, affirming God’s character and trustworthiness, without knowing the details on how God will express His faithfulness through the centuries
- Often expressed in English as the distinction between “belief” and “faith,” as described by John Walton: “This is what impressed God about Abraham. He did not simply believe. In taking God at His word, he embraced faith. That is not to say he adopted a faith system—he simply had faith in God” (*Genesis: NIV Application Commentary*, Zondervan, p. 441).
- In return, God pronounces or “counts” (ESV, NLT) Abram as “righteous” (i.e., in a right relationship with Him) through this faith (v. 6) and then reaffirms the basic relationship (v. 7);
- Not because Abram deserved it (will explore next meeting how Romans 4.1-16 portrays this)

5. Discuss the ritual of reassurance in Genesis 15.8-21 [10 minutes].

- Abram asking for a sign, a representation of God’s commitment

- God responds again not with anger, but accommodation, with covenant ceremony common to ancient Middle East: two parties walk between prepared animal halves with understanding that if one of the parties betrays agreement, then your fate will be like the slaughtered animals
- Important to note only God walks through the ceremony, pledging His fidelity; Abram asleep
- Smoking firepot and flaming torch both use fire as a sign of God's presence; common in Old Testament (burning bush, fire and smoke from Mt. Sinai, pillars of smoke and fire in wilderness)
- Timing not immediate, but long term, including slavery in and exodus from Egypt, and eventual judgment upon pagan peoples in the territory (but not now—Abram will not see it)

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Review Genesis 15.1-21. How does the plot unfold? How would you outline it?
- Time has passed since the events of Genesis 14. How is Abram holding up in Genesis 15.1-4?
- Abram is troubled and worried. What do we do when our lives do not unfold as we want, and we face obstacles, challenges, or suffering? What are faith-honoring ways to respond?
- What does God tell Abram to do in v. 5? Why is this significant? How does Abram respond in v. 6? How does God respond to Abram in vv. 6-7?
- Most religious systems connect a person's good works, effort, and obedience to a relationship with the Almighty. How is Abram's experience different? What are some implications of this?
- How would you describe the distinction sometimes drawn between "belief" (defined as assent to facts and propositions) and "faith" (defined as trust in God's character and promises)? How does this distinction help us as we go step-by-step in our walk with God?
- What does Abram ask for in v. 8? How does God reply in vv. 9-21? What does this say about God's patience with Abram? With us?
- What is the significance of the smoking firepot and flaming torch passing between the halves of the carcasses? How does God affirm His commitment to the covenant through this action?

Romans 4.1-16 - “Justified by Faith”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Romans 4.1-16 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from the previous passage, Genesis 15.1-21 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss how Abraham did not earn his relationship with God in Romans 4.1-8 [15 minutes].

- Paul continues to emphasize righteousness that comes through faith, “justification by faith”
- If Abraham was justified (i.e., made right with God) through what he did, he could boast (v. 2); runs counter to the Scriptural evidence about Abraham (v. 3; Genesis 15:6)
- Distinction between wages we earn and gifts we are given (v. 4) important to remember
- Forgiveness, at the heart of being justified (made right), is God’s doing; not something we earn (v. 5)
- Quote from Psalm 32 (vv. 6-8); David, most renowned king in Israelite history, concurs
- “Paul wants Jewish Christians to grasp that his gospel of justification by faith is no novelty, having been proclaimed beforehand in the Old Testament, and he wants Gentile Christians to appreciate the rich spiritual heritage they have entered by faith in Jesus, in continuity with the Old Testament people of God. Abraham and David show that justification by faith is God’s one and only way of salvation, first in the Old Testament as well as in the New, and, secondly for Jews as well as for Gentiles. It is therefore a mistake to suppose either that in the Old Testament people were saved by works and in the New Testament by faith, or that today the Christian mission should be limited to Gentiles on the ground that Jews have their own distinctive ground of salvation.” (John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World*, p. 122)

4. Discuss how Abraham’s observances did not earn God’s favor in Romans 4:9-12 [10 minutes].

- Circumcision a primary “identity marker” for Jews; sign of God’s covenant with them (4:9)
- But historically, Abraham circumcised after God’s acceptance and declaration of righteousness (4:10-11a)
- Abraham the spiritual father of those who believe and counted righteous through faith both with/without circumcision, but only if they exhibit this same sort of faith as Abraham (4:11b-12)

- The counterpart of justification by faith is justification by works (good deeds, religious observances, etc.); Romans points out with strong force that not even Abraham, the Father of the Jewish people, is not justified in this way

5. Discuss how Abraham did not obey the Law sufficiently in Romans 4:13-17 [10 minutes].

- Revisiting the Law's insufficiency to save in 4:13-15 through its own nature and purpose
- Elaboration of the characteristics of faith in 4:16
- Misreading of Abraham's story to understand that he fulfilled the Law in order to earn standing with God
- Implication: If this is true for Abraham, then think how true this must be for the rest of us!

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Review Romans 4.1-16. Describe how Paul's argument unfolds.
- Paul lifts up Abraham as someone from whom we might learn about being in a relationship with God. What are aspects of Abraham's life that may prove helpful in this regard?
- What proposed method of being made right with God, or "justified," does Paul eliminate from the start in 4:2-8? Why is this method so unhelpful?
- Religious observance makes the list of options Paul eliminates as well in 4:9-12. What particular observance does he use for illustration? What is its significance? How does Paul rework that significance for his readers?
- How does the Law fall short of what is needed for Abraham as Paul tells it? What does Paul insist is the only way Abraham is truly made right with God? Why does this have any bearing on how we may be truly made right with God?
- Is "justification by faith" or "being made right with God by faith" something that belongs only in the New Testament? Why or why not? Why might it be significant if justification by faith belongs in the Old Testament as well?
- "Human effort or work" is the default human answer to the question of "How does a person have a relationship with God?" What are versions of this answer in today's world? Why does Christianity challenge this default answer so strongly? How can we communicate it well?

Genesis 16.1-16 - “Sarai and Hagar”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 16.1-16 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from Genesis 15.1-21 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss Abram, Sarai, and Hagar the concubine in Genesis 16.1-4a [15 minutes].

- Situation unchanged: Sarai unable to bear children, mark of shame in ancient world (v. 1)
- So yet another “plan B”: Sarai suggests (note her initiative: Abram not the only one with doubts regarding the promise of a child) that Abram have sexual relations with Hagar to produce a child; also note Abram’s agreement
- Hagar: from Egypt; probably brought into household when Abram and Sarai visited Egypt in chapter 12
- Time frame: 10 years after arriving in Canaan and receiving the promise
- Some scholars: descriptive language in v. 3 deliberately echoes language of the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3.6
- Attempt of end-run around God and His promise, in light of His evident failure, to create an heir by some other means (yet another “Plan B”)

4. Discuss Hagar’s flight to the wilderness in Genesis 16.4b-6 [5 minutes].

- Hagar conceives and the landscape changes for her relationship with Abram and Sarai
- Everyone experiences difficulty here: Hagar looks upon Sarai “with contempt” (ESV); Sarai complains to Abram about Hagar, and Abram frees Sarai to “do to her as you please” (ESV); note Abram’s passivity
- Miscalculation by Hagar of Abram’s affection; Proverbs 30.21-23 is helpful commentary

5. Discuss the angel of the Lord’s interaction with Hagar in Genesis 16.7-16 [15 minutes].

- Hagar flees for wilderness along the road to Shur (returning home: road from Canaan to Egypt)
- Angel finds Hagar there and counsels her to return to Abram and Sarai, promising many descendants of this child
- Name to be Ishmael, meaning “God hears”; also he “shall be a wild donkey of a man” (NLT)
- Hagar: revised relationship with God, calling Him “the One who sees me”
- Hagar changes her plans, returns to Abram/Sarai, and bears Ishmael; Abram 86 years old

- Much scholarly discussion over the identity of the angel: Hagar's later remarks seem to indicate it is actually God and not just an angel

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- What's the story of Genesis 16.1-16. Describe the plot line.
- What problem arises anew in v. 1. What new person is introduced in v. 2. How does Sarai seek to solve the problem in vv. 3-4? How does Abram respond in v. 4?
- Why do you think Sarai is now the one to come up the next "Plan B"? What is at the heart of Sarai's doubt?
- Why is "Plan B" (defined as our plan in opposition to God's plan) a perennial favorite of people all the way to our day? What is so seductive and appealing about Plan B? How can we resist the temptations offered by Plan B?
- Describe the actions of Hagar, Sarai, and Abram in vv. 4b-6. How does each person take a role in the collapsing of Sarai's grand strategy for a child?
- What happens when Hagar leaves to return home via the road to Shur? Who intervenes in her escape? What is Hagar told about her unborn child?
- The one to be named "Ishmael" will exhibit notable traits. How will these traits play out over time? Look up the times Ishmael is mentioned in concordances and cross-references, and review them. What do these verses reveal?
- Hagar perceives God differently after her time in the wilderness. What is her name for Him? How is this name insightful? How does this name of God make sense in your relationship with Him?

Galatians 4.21—5.1 - “Allegory on Sarah and Hagar”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Galatians 4.21—5.1 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from Genesis 16.1-16 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss Paul’s initial question to the Galatian Christians (and why it’s a big deal) in Galatians 4:21 [10 minutes].

- Paul helped establish the churches in region of Galatia, but now wrestling with them over their “following a different way that pretends to be the Good News but is not the Good News at all.” (Galatians 1.6b-7a NLT; also Galatians 3)
- Problem? Galatians under the influence of those insisting that in order to be a Christian, especially if coming from a Gentile background, you must keep all the laws, practices, and rituals of 1st century Judaism, despite the early Christians’ different decision (see Acts 15)
- Paul seeking to bring awareness to Galatians of how damaging this is to salvation by grace through faith by asking if they really know what the law actually says
- Ever-present human tendency to emphasize “rules and regulations,” not a dynamic relationship with the God we know in Christ, with practices and ethics a result of the relationship

4. Discuss the allegorical teaching of Sarah and Hagar in Galatians 4.22-31 [15 minutes].

- Sums up story revealed in Galatians 16 and 21: two sons of Abraham, one from Hagar (“slave wife” NLT) and the other from Sarah (“freeborn wife” NLT)
- Also summing up of increasing tendency with Abraham and Sarah to go to “Plan B” of their devising rather than to trust in God’s sovereign faithfulness (v. 23)
- Paul then uses typical ancient rabbinical method of unpacking Scriptural teaching: “now this may be interpreted allegorically” (v. 24 ESV); narrow, focused way of looking at the story
- Hagar represents works-oriented covenant (Abraham and Sarah’s Plan B, referring to Law and Mount Sinai), Sarah represents faith-based covenant (God’s original promise and intent for Abraham and Sarah, referring to righteousness via faith)
- Controversy: in reality, Hagar is a victim, with Sarah actively disbelieving in promise of God
- Ishmael’s persecution of Isaac (Genesis 21) alluded to here as allegorical of persecution of Christians by those insisting upon the Law as means of salvation

5. Discuss Paul’s reaffirmation of the gospel’s freedom in Galatians 5.1 [10 minutes].

- Galatians 5.1 a transitional verse from Paul’s doctrinal teaching to practical application
- Been set free by the gospel to live in freedom from bondage to the Law

- Moral law continues to provide guidance in living a Christ-honoring life (see the Ten Commandments, for example), but obedience is not what keeps one in relationship with God
- Saying: “The gospel that saves you is the same gospel that sustains you”

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Read Galatians 4.21—5.1, and review Galatians 1.6-7 and Galatians 3.1-25 for background. What is the problem Paul is addressing? Why must Paul address this immediately?
- The human tendency for millennia has been to emphasize works-righteousness over grace. How is this true even today? Even among Christians?
- What aspect of the basic problem does Paul bring up in Galatians 4.21? How does this question challenge the Galatians with regard to the false teaching in mind?
- In verses 24-26, Paul uses Hagar and Sarah as allegorical illustrations of two ways of beginning and sustaining a relationship with God. What way does Hagar represent? What way does Sarah represent? Why would these two illustrations be especially important to use in countering the emphasis upon keeping the Law as a means of salvation?
- Ishmael and Isaac also become allegorical representatives, according to verses 28-31. What does each of them illustrate for Paul here?
- How does Galatians 5.1 bring home Paul’s point about gospel and law? How are we free in Christ? How can we not “submit again to a yoke of slavery”? (Galatians 5.1 ESV)
- Sometimes we think the gospel is what first saves us, but then we move on past the gospel to lives of obedience and holiness. How is it true in your life that “the gospel that saves you is the same gospel that sustains you”?

Genesis 17.1-27 - “Circumcisions and Name Changes”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 17.1-27 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from Galatians 4.21—5.1 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss God’s reassurance (and renaming) of Abram in Genesis 17.1-8 [10 minutes].

- How many have passed since Genesis 16? Thirteen years, as Abram is now 99 years old
- God reappears before Abram and reminds him of the certainty of the covenant, for He is “El-Shaddai,” most often translated “God Almighty” (ESV, NLT, NIV, NRSV)
- God appears to Abram and announces a name change: Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (“father of many nations”); new name represents God’s multinational purpose with Abraham
- Covenant promise a reaffirmation of Genesis 12.1-3 regarding both descendants and land; Abraham lives in land now as foreigner and sojourner, but will be in their long-term possession

4. Discuss the sign of the covenant in Genesis 17.9-14, 23-37 [15 minutes].

- Abraham’s response to God’s gracious covenant is to obey and serve Him
- Sign of covenant was not a Hebrew invention; Egyptians, for example, would have those set apart to work in temples to be circumcised
- Important to note that all males in Abraham’s household, including servants, included, not just blood relatives, as befitting multinational, multiracial nature of covenant promise
- “Circumcision was not merely a random, painful test of Abraham’s spiritual commitment. Its significance could not equally have been conveyed by Abraham’s piercing his ear or lying on a bed of nails for a week. Circumcision was a covenant sign, a sign that involved cutting, just like the cutting up of the animals in Genesis 15. There the curse of the broken covenant was symbolized by animal carcasses... In Genesis 17, however, the sign of judgment was applied to Abraham’s organ of reproduction. This was the source both of the hoped for, promised seed and also of Abraham’s failure involving Hagar. Turning the sign into reality would merely mean applying the knife a little more extensively, cutting off Abraham’s seed. If Abraham failed to keep the covenant, his seed would be cut off.” (Iain Duguid, *The Gospel According to Abraham*, p. 86.)
- Long-standing connection of circumcision and baptism in Reformed and Presbyterian circles

5. Discuss Sarai’s renaming and Ishmael and Isaac’s destinies in Genesis 17.15-22 [10 minutes].

- Sarai renamed Sarah: both mean “princess”... good possibility for distinction is Sarah is in Canaanite, or west Semitic, pronunciation; Canaan is her home for good
- By now, Ishmael is 13: Abraham hopes still that the fruit of earlier “Plan B” (see Genesis 16, Galatians 3-4) is valid
- God restates the primary importance of Isaac (“he laughs”), still to be born, as the recipient of the covenantal relationship; Ishmael to be a strong nation, but not the covenantal nation

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- What is the plot of Genesis 17.1-27? Review and discuss.
- Thirteen years have come and gone since Abram last encountered God. What was the state of his faith as the passage begins? How would you describe your faith journey when you have experienced profound periods of waiting or a perception of distance from God?
- How is Abram’s new name (“Abraham”) symbolic of God’s covenant with him? What aspect of the covenant does the new name most emphasize?
- Why do you think circumcision is the particular sign chosen by God for His covenant with Abraham? What about this sign expresses the covenantal relationship well?
- Many in the Presbyterian tradition see a strong connection/correlation between circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament. Do you agree? Why or why not? Describe and discuss.
- From “Sarai” to “Sarah” appears to be only a change in pronunciation from “east Semitic” to “west Semitic.” How and why might this subtle distinction speak volumes regarding Sarah’s relationship with God?
- Abraham still desires a role for Ishmael (v. 18). Why? How does God respond? (vv.19-22)
- What do you note as you read vv. 23-27? Who receives the sign of circumcision? What does this say about the affirmation of God’s original covenant with Abraham (12.1-3)?
- Revisit the question about the state of Abraham’s faith as you come to the resolution of the passage. How would you describe your faith journey when God “shows up”?

Galatians 3.1-25 - “Faith and Law”

OUTLINE

- 1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Galatians 3.1-25 [5 minutes].**
- 2. Remind the class of the insights from the previous passage, Genesis 17.1-27 [5 minutes]**
- 3. Discuss the gospel we never move beyond as Christ’s disciples in Galatians 3.1-5 [10 minutes].**
 - Paul shocked at how the Galatians have been led astray on the significance of Christ’s death; taught to them as clearly “as if you had seen a picture of his death on the cross” (v. 1, NLT)
 - Question to get them thinking: Received the Holy Spirit through obeying the Mosaic Law? No! Received the Holy Spirit through trusting in Christ alone, not through obedience
 - So why are they attempting to achieve Christian perfection by human effort? Makes no sense
 - God gives the Spirit and expresses His power not because the Galatians have achieved so much, but because they trust the good news of salvation through Christ
- 4. Discuss how Abraham illustrates this gospel in Galatians 3.6-9 [10 minutes].**
 - Paul uses Abraham’s trust in God as an example of the gospel
 - “So what does it mean that Abraham’s faith was ‘credited to him as righteousness’? Of course faith in God’s word and promise results in righteousness! If we believe God exists, and that we owe Him our obedience and worship, then out of that will flow righteous living. But here we have something more; something unique, and counter-intuitive. This is faith *counted* as righteousness. When the Bible tells us God credits Abraham’s faith as righteousness, it means that God is treating Abraham as if he were living a righteous life. Many commentators have resisted the remarkable implications of Genesis 15:6, and argued that we are being told that Abram’s faith is itself a form of righteousness that pleases God; that his faith was an act of obedience that merited God’s favor, a kind of righteousness. But the text doesn’t say that his faith *was* righteousness; rather it was counted as (ie: as if it were) righteousness.” (Tim Keller, *Galatians For You*, p. 72)
 - Abraham’s spiritual heirs: those trusting in God through Christ alone, Jewish or Gentile
- 5. Discuss how Abraham shows law and gospel intersect in Galatians 3.10-25 [15 minutes].**
 - Curse of the Law: no one can be saved by the law, so Christ takes on Himself our curse from the Law on the cross (“hung on a tree,” v. 13 NLT)
 - Covenant with Abraham preceeds the giving of the Law to Moses

- So why the Law? Designed to reveal our sins so we can see our need for redemption in Christ
- “Is there a conflict, then, between God’s law and God’s promises? Absolutely not! If the law could give us new life, we could be made right with God by obeying it. But the Scriptures declare that we are all prisoners of sin, so we receive God’s promise of freedom only by believing in Jesus Christ.” (vv. 21-22 NLT)
- Several images about the Law as it shows us our need for forgiveness (vv. 23-25), with most telling one describing the Law as “guardian” (NLT, NIV, ESV)

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Review Galatians 3.1-25. How does Paul’s argument unfold? How would you outline it?
- How do the Galatian Christians receive the Holy Spirit, according to Paul? How and why is this doctrine an important part of Christian living?
- Why do we often think we start with the gospel, but then we put the gospel aside to live in our strength, plans, and attitudes? How may we help each other struggle against this tendency?
- Abraham is a key example for Paul regarding the power of living by grace alone through faith alone. What in Abraham’s story in Genesis leads Paul (and us) to this conclusion?
- Can obedience to the Law give spiritual life? If so, how and why? If not, why not? What does this mean for the Galatians? For us?
- What role(s) does the Law have for us today as we come to Christ and as we follow Christ?

Genesis 18.1-15 - “Abraham, Sarah, and Unexpected Company”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 18.1-15 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from the previous passage, Galatians 3.1-25 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss the arrival of three unexpected visitors to Abraham and Sarah's home in Mamre in Genesis 18.1-5 [10 minutes].

- Verse 1 prepares us that God will appear again to Abraham in the passage that follows
- Hottest part of the day, often a time when one did not attempt to travel
- Abraham sees three men standing nearby (noteworthy that their walking up to the tent is not described, but only that they seem to appear, standing nearby); addresses them with respect
- When does Abraham recognize he is talking to God? Some debate. Many note that the phrase translated “my lord” in v. 3 can be translated “the Lord,” but seems early to some interpreters for Abraham to recognize; regardless, question clearly answered by v. 13
- Abraham graciously offers rest, water, and a meal; visitors accept

4. Discuss the extravagant hospitality shown to the visitors in Genesis 18.6-8 [10 minutes].

- Inferred strongly Abraham recognizes something is up through the urgency and hurry referenced throughout this section
- First Abraham runs into the tent and instructs Sarah to bake, then runs out to the herd to select a calf to be prepared for the meal
- Meal consists of bread freshly baked from extravagant amount of grain (3 seahs=22 liters), choice calf freshly prepared, yogurt, and milk; incredibly lavish meal on such short notice
- Abraham serves the visitors himself, not eating with them; such hospitality meant to serve as a counterpoint to the atrocious hospitality to occur in Sodom later in chapter 19

5. Discuss the incredible fulfillment of God's promise of Isaac in Genesis 18.9-15 [15 minutes].

- Visitors ask Abraham personal question: “Where is Sarah, your wife?” (v. 9 NLT); would have been considered rude if asked by a typical guest; Abraham says she is in the tent

- Question sets up what comes in v. 10 from one of the visitors—most probably the Lord—in a year, he will return, and Sarah will have a son in fulfillment of divine promise
- Sarah is listening in on the conversation and laughs “silently to herself” (v. 12 NLT)
- Abraham and Sarah well past child-bearing age; had probably stopped sexual relations, based on use of the word translated “pleasure” in v. 12 (NIV, NLT) that has sexual connotations
- So Sarah not just responding in amazement to the prospect of having a child, but also in amazement to the prospect of having the sexual relations needed to produce a child
- Then God, knowing Sarah’s thoughts, asks Abraham why she laughs at the coming fulfillment of His promise to them; Sarah is frightened and denies it, but God confirms it
- Important statement: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (v. 14 NLT); rhetorical question with answer, “No, nothing is too hard”; see Jeremiah 32.27; Matthew 19.26; Luke 1.37

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Review Genesis 18.1-15. What are the main actions and actors within the passage? What surprises grab your attention as you observe what’s going on?
- Who shows up unexpected and uninvited at Abraham’s house? When does Abraham get the sense that something unusual is going on? What is it? What does he do as a result?
- What does Abraham’s extravagant hospitality to the visitors reveal to us? What happens later on in Genesis that is in stark contrast with Abraham’s actions?
- Why is hospitality so crucial in the ancient world? How is it crucial for Christian living and ministry in today’s world?
- God confirms His promise to Sarah and Abraham will be fulfilled. What is especially authentic and real about Sarah’s response? How does God respond?
- How do you interpret God’s statement to Abraham, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” How has this statement been true over the centuries? How is this statement true in your life?
- When have you waited, for what seemed like an eternity, for something you longed to happen in your life? What did you think and feel once it happened? What lessons about faith can you learn from this experience?

Genesis 18.16-33 - “Abraham Intercedes for Sodom”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 18.16-33 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from Genesis 18.1-15 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss the divine soliloquy of God in Genesis 18.16-19 [15 minutes].

- Meal concludes; Abraham accompanies the three personages
- Narrator tells us that another purpose for the visit concerns the disposition of Sodom
- Also, narrator gives us a rendering of God’s thought process in vv. 17-19; rhetorical device for drawing the reader/hearer into the account and for including Abraham in what’s next
- Why? Because Abraham is called to direct his descendants “to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice” (v. 19 ESV)
- Covenantal relationship with God is about God’s people living in accordance with God’s way
- New Testament take on covenantal connection between faith and life comes from Eugene Peterson: “Here is a text, words spoken by Jesus, that keeps this in clear focus: ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6). The Jesus way wedded to the Jesus truth brings about the Jesus life. We can’t proclaim the Jesus truth but then do it any old way we like. Nor can we follow the Jesus way without speaking the Jesus truth.” (*The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways That Jesus Is the Way*, Kindle edition, locations 67-70)

4. Discuss the anthropomorphism of Genesis 18.20-21 [10 minutes].

- Anthropomorphism definition: “an interpretation of what is not human or personal in terms of human or personal characteristics” (Merriam-Webster)
- Bothers some that God is shown as not being omniscient and omnipresent, not knowing about Sodom and Gomorrah until He visits the cities Himself
- Why is God depicted in this way? So we may understand God and His ways better: “The language is anthropomorphic to be sure, for divine omniscience knew all about the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. But this close scrutiny of God was a way of communicating His careful justice; He would not destroy the people of the plain unless He was absolutely sure they were wicked enough for severe punishment.” (*Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Genesis*, p. 126)
- Numerous examples in Scripture of God’s notable condescension toward us in our human frailty and weakness, most notably in the Incarnation; see John 1.1-18; Philippians 2.5-11

5. Discuss Abraham’s conversation with God in Genesis 18.22-33 [10 minutes].

- Two other visitors go to Sodom, but the Lord lingers to talk (shows His initiative)

- Abraham proceeds to intercede on behalf of Sodom first with a baseline question, followed with a baseline affirmation: “Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” (v. 23 ESV); “Should not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (v. 25 ESV)
- Series of negotiations ensue: starts with 50 righteous, and works down eventually to 10 (familiar to anyone who has bought a car at a dealership)
- Bothers us again: to our ears, sounds like Abraham, not God, is the one with a sense of justice
- Significant motivation for this conversation is for God to reveal and confirm Abraham’s compassion for Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham’s desire for justice beyond Lot and family

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- What’s the story of Genesis 18.16-33? Describe the plot line.
- What additional reason is given for the three guests’ presence? How does it foreshadow an important event later on in Genesis? What is it?
- We get a peek into God’s thinking in verses 17-19. What does this “divine soliloquy” reveal to you about God? About Abraham? About God’s intentions for you?
- Does it bother you that God is described as having to check things out in Sodom and Gomorrah? Shouldn’t He already know? What do you think are reasons behind such an “anthropomorphic” description of God?
- How does God lower Himself when it comes to human beings? What is the premier example of this “condescension” in all Scripture? (Hint: John 1.1-18; Philippians 2.5-11) How does God’s actions and attitudes change everything for us?
- Does it bother you that God and Abraham are talking about Sodom like people at a car dealership? What may be God’s motivation for having such an exchange with Abraham? What does this exchange show about Abraham?

Genesis 19.1-38 - “Sodom and Lot”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 19.1-38 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from Genesis 18.16-33 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss the arrival of the angels in Sodom in Genesis 19.1-11 [15 minutes].

- Two angels arrive in Sodom, greeted by Lot at city's entrance; Lot has moved in from tents in the countryside and become a civic leader, falling in with corrupt society
- Men of Sodom gather around Lot's house, demanding to rape the visitors; homosexual relations here not consensual, but expressions of domination akin to sexual behavior in prisons
- Lot seeks to save visitors by offering his daughters instead; “Lot tries to maintain his virtue as a host only to shame himself as a father.” (*The Story of God Bible Commentary: Genesis*, p. 238)
- Lot threatened by men of Sodom as “outsider” and “judge” (v. 9 NLT); angels rescue Lot, pulling him inside and striking men of Sodom blind
- Sexual practice (heterosexual and homosexual) couched in power and a lack of Biblical hospitality both seen as sinful here; symptomatic of a greater rebellion against God
- In other portions of Scripture, Sodom/Gomorrah seen as examples of rebellion against God without specifying (ex: Isaiah 1.9-11; Jeremiah 23.14; Amos 4.11; and Matthew 10.5-15)
- Other passages in Scripture note same-sex sexual behavior is against God's plan, such as Leviticus 18.22 and 20:13; Romans 1.24-27; and 1 Corinthians 6.9
- Particular challenge faced by church in contemporary society regarding sexual confusion, sexual practice, sexual ethics, sexual hypocrisy, and proclamation of the Good News with love

4. Discuss the escape from and destruction of Sodom/Gomorrah in Genesis 19.12-29 [10 minutes].

- Angels instruct Lot regarding destruction of Sodom and gathering of family
- Lot lingers; angels take Lot, Lot's wife, and Lot's daughters and leave Sodom with instructions to get out of the valley and head for the hills
- Lot asks to go to small community of Zoar (means “little”) for reasons unspecified by text (perhaps advanced age will not allow him to make it to the hills in time), and request is granted
- Destruction begins at dawn; Lot's wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt; verb indicates “prolonged, intense gazing” (*Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Genesis*, p. 130)

- Abraham goes to where he spoke with the Lord (Genesis 18) and sees destruction in distance

5. Discuss Lot and his daughters in Genesis 19.30-38 [10 minutes].

- Lot and his daughters hide in caves outside Zoar, afraid to go into town
- Believe destruction was not just of Sodom, but perhaps entire world: "... there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth" (v. 31 ESV)
- Afraid to trust God, they carry out plan to become pregnant through sex with their father
- Incredibly perverse family dynamics at work here, symptomatic of lives separated from and rebelling against God
- Origins of two peoples, both long-term enemies of Israel, the Moabites and Ammonites

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Read Genesis 19.1-38. Talk through the layered storyline. What happens? When and where? With whom? How and why?
- The men of Sodom surround Lot's house. What are they attempting to do? Why? How do their attitudes and actions reflect the depravity and fallenness of humans in general?
- Life in Sodom seems to be thoroughly engrained into Lot's character. How do we see this in his actions? How does it all start crashing down on him? What does it do to him spiritually?
- The Christian community faces significant challenges as we seek to speak "truth in love" (see Ephesians 4.15) in today's confused and confusing cultural moment. What are some of these challenges? How can we proclaim the gospel in the midst of our own flaws and missteps?
- Some interpreters say that Lot's wife's look back to Sodom was not a quick glance, but a prolonged and intense look, indicating a strong longing for what she had left. How do we long for our attachments to things other than God? How can we long for God more?
- Lot and his daughters have damaged family dynamics, symptomatic of their separation from and rebellion against God. What symptoms of this separation and rebellion exist in our lives and the lives of others? How can we help each other address the core spiritual issues?

Genesis 20.1-18 - “Abraham and Abimelech—Part 1”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 20.1-18 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from the previous passage, Genesis 19.1-38 [5 minutes]

3. Discuss Abimelech’s rescue by God in Genesis 20.1-7 [10 minutes].

- Tersely told story in vv. 1-2: Abraham has repeated his actions in Egypt, this time as he and Sarah wander through Negev (way to Egypt) after destruction of Sodom and end up in Gerar
- Near the coast; later identified as kingdom of the Philistines, perennial enemies of Israelites
- Abimelech probably a title rather than proper name; lit. “my father, the king”
- Abimelech prevented from adultery (act considered capital offense by most ancient Near East cultures) by direct intervention from God; Why important? 1) Abimelech’s ignorance and 2) Isaac’s parentage
- Sarah is almost 90 years old, so interesting (!) that Abraham would sense the need to keep up the “sister” strategy; old habits die hard...
- Abimelech, like Pharaoh in Genesis 12, comes off better than Abraham

4. Discuss Abraham’s justification of his actions in Genesis 20.8-13 [15 minutes].

- Abimelech angrily confronts Abraham after consulting with his advisors
- Abraham rationalizes his actions: 1) thought people were godless and corrupt, and 2) telling the partial truth in that she is my half-sister through my father’s line to cover marital ties
- Difficult to reconcile Abraham’s actions here with apparent progress made in trusting God; still seems unable to trust that God will provide for their safety and wellbeing
- Equally difficult to reconcile Abraham’s apparent repetition of this sin in other settings; appears to have been the usual practice for Abraham (v. 13)
- Speaks of God’s protection and promise through His covenant despite human flaws
- Speaks also of God’s grace with Abraham’s (and our) blind spots and habitual failings

5. Discuss Abimelech and Abraham’s reconciliation in Genesis 20.14-18 [10 minutes].

- Earlier told that Abraham is a prophet: first mention of this office in Old Testament
- Abraham expresses prophetic office through intercession, not prophesy (re: Sodom)
- Abimelech counseled to go through Abraham for intercession for barrenness of women

- Abimelech goes above and beyond with gifts to Abraham and to Sarah, a notable public vindication of her reputation and assurance that the child to be born later is Abraham's
- Difficult to note that Abraham appears to be materially blessed through his actions.

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Review Genesis 20.1-18. What is the plot? Who are the main characters? Any surprises?
- Abraham appears to be up to his old tricks in Gerar. When did he use this ruse previously? What prompts his return to his old ways in your opinion?
- How does God intervene in this instance? What does His interaction with Abimelech tell you about Abimelech? About Abraham and Sarah? About God?
- Describe and analyze Abimelech's actions and words in verses 8-13. What is being done and said? What is not being done and left unsaid? Sum up your description and analysis in a single sentence.
- Describe and analyze Abraham's actions and words in verses 8-13. What is being done and said? What is not being done and left unsaid? Sum up your description and analysis in a single sentence.
- How does God preserve the integrity of His promise to Abraham and Sarah in verses 14 and following? Why is this significant for what will happen later in the story?
- Patterns of sinful thinking and practice often plague us for many years. How does the forgiveness and grace of the gospel enter into these situations? How do we address these patterns spiritually and practically?
- How has God worked through your past circumstances? How is He working even now?

Genesis 21.1-19 - “Isaac and Ishmael”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 21.1-19 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from the previous passage, Genesis 20.1-18 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss the birth of Isaac in Genesis 21.1-7 [15 minutes].

- Culmination of 25 years of waiting and hoping for fulfillment of covenantal promise from Genesis 12
- Abraham age 100, and Sarah age 90
- Isaac means “he laughs;” reference to Genesis 18 and Sarah’s laughter of doubt in the tent
- Laughter transformed to that of joy and celebration; see Genesis 18.13-14 as reference
- Clearly one reason for the wait: to make it abundantly plain that this birth was something only God could plan and carry out, a deed only God could perform

4. Discuss the strife within the family and its resolution in Genesis 21.8-13 [10 minutes].

- Children weaned around age 3; big feast to celebrate
- Sarah observes Ishmael, about 17 years old, mocking 3-year-old Isaac; word play on “laugh” mentioned in earlier section, as Ishmael engages in mocking laughter toward his little brother
- Relationship between Sarah and Hagar/Ishmael first recognized as fractured in Genesis 16
- Abraham upset by Sarah’s reaction: Ishmael circumcised by Abraham in Genesis 17, even as God also reinforces the reality that Ishmael is not the child of the Genesis 12 covenant
- God reassures Abraham: while only Isaac is the child of the covenant, Ishmael will also begin a new nation; “I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring.” (v. 13 NIV)

5. Discuss the provision for Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 21.14-21 [10 minutes].

- Abraham prepares Hagar and Ishmael for journey away; not stated if Abraham reassures Hagar and Ishmael with his communication from God
- Wander in desert and run out of water; inferred that 17-year-old Ishmael’s physical condition deteriorates to the extent that Hagar “put the boy under one of the bushes” (v. 15 NIV)
- A “bowshot” away (about 100 yards), Hagar sits and cries, apparently near death herself
- Angel of the Lord speaks to Hagar, telling her of their rescue and Ishmael’s destiny

- “God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer.” (v. 20 NIV); Hagar finds Ishmael a wife from Egypt, her homeland

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Review Genesis 21.1-19. What are the main actions and actors within the passage? What grabs your attention as you observe what’s going on?
- What event finally happens after years of waiting? How do verses 1-5 emphasize that it is God’s plan, not human strategies, coming to fruition?
- Look at Sarah’s statements in verses 6-7. How would you characterize or describe them? If you could sum up with only one word that best expresses what Sarah says, what would that word be? Share this word with others, with no two group members able to use the same word.
- When have you perceived (either at the time or by looking back) that God acted in your life in a major way? Describe your thoughts and feelings. How did this experience influence your faith in Him?
- The glorious fulfillment in verses 1-7 does not ease the family’s dysfunction as shown in verses 8-13. What does Abraham have to do? How does God respond to Abraham’s plight?
- How does God intervene in Hagar and Ishmael’s journey in the desert? What physical comfort does God provide for Hagar? What spiritual comfort?
- What two peoples have historically descended from Isaac and Ishmael? How have these two peoples interacted, even to the present day? What lessons can be drawn from this enormously complex and intricate relationship as it has evolved over time?

John 8.31-59 - “Jesus and Jewish Leaders Debate”

OUTLINE

- 1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read John 8.31-59. [5 minutes].**
- 2. Remind the class of the insights from Genesis 21.1-19 [5 minutes].**
- 3. Discuss the Jewish claim to be Abraham’s descendants in John 8.31-40 [15 minutes].**
 - Important note: “Jews” references are not of the entire nation; not anti-Semitic
 - Jesus addressing the Jews who in some fashion publicly affirmed or “believed in Him” (John 8.30 ESV); so not addressing Pharisees, unlike in earlier portion of John 8
 - Test of discipleship: live deeply in Jesus, then you will know the liberating truth (v. 32)
 - Jesus (as Truth incarnate and the truth He teaches) sets people free from their bondage to sin
 - Reply of never being enslaved doesn’t hold up under scrutiny: under thumb of Romans now, and of many nations before (Greeks, Babylonians, Assyrians)
 - Jesus identifies vehement opposition of these Jews as they learn more about what it means to follow Him: “you seek to kill me” (vv. 36, 40 ESV)
 - Rhetoric of being Abraham’s true descendants not backed by actions: instead seeking to kill Jesus in opposition to Abraham
 - Jesus’ concern is their spiritual parentage, not physical, but His opponents do not perceive it
- 4. Discuss Jesus’ counterclaim about His Jewish opponents in John 8.41-47 [5 minutes].**
 - Jesus accuses these Jews of doing someone else’s works, not Abraham’s
 - Response is veiled accusation: Jesus is an illegitimate child (see Matthew 1.18-25)
 - Jesus identifies true spiritual parentage of His opponents: “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires.” (v. 41 ESV)
 - Simple fact: if His opponents were of God, they would get what He’s saying; but they’re not, so they won’t understand
- 5. Discuss Jesus’ claim to be divine in John 8.48-59 [15 minutes].**
 - Two jabs at Jesus: 1) He’s a Samaritan (culturally inferior) and 2) demon-possessed (spiritually inferior)
 - First jab part of ongoing dispute with Samaritans, considered unclean, heretical, and of mixed race from intermarrying of pagans with Jews remaining in Palestine after exile to Babylon (reason why Parable of Good Samaritan in Luke 10.25-37 so controversial to Pharisees)
 - Second jab means of disregarding His teaching as coming from Satan

- Jesus affirms He is the giver of eternal life, sparking consternation among the Jews
- Then Jesus affirms that He has seen and knows Abraham, sparking even more consternation
- Key statement: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am” (v. 58 ESV)
- Affirmation of Jesus’ deity references God’s self-naming in Exodus 3.14-15
- Little doubt Jewish listeners understood what Jesus means, given the response in v. 59

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- What’s happening in John 8.31-49? What jumps out as you read this passage?
- As v. 31 starts, Jesus is targeting His comments to a specific group of listeners. Who are they? What evidence do you find for this identification? Why do you think Jesus is addressing this group specifically?
- What historical claim is made in v. 33? What is wrong about this claim? What does this claim reveal about those making it?
- Jesus states, “If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (vv. 31-32 ESV). What does it mean to “abide” in His word? How are we set free by Jesus? Free from what? Free for what?
- How does Jesus refute the claim of His Jewish opponents that they are Abraham’s children? What traits and practices should characterize Abraham’s children, according to Jesus?
- Why would Jesus be labeled a Samaritan? A demon-possessed person? What are His opponents attempting to accomplish with such statements?
- Why do the people become violently upset by Jesus’ claim in v. 58? What is Jesus saying about Himself? Where else in John’s Gospel do we find similar claims? In the other Gospels?
- How and why is Jesus’ claim central to Christianity? What additional Scriptures support your answer?

Genesis 21.22-34 - “Abraham and Abimelech—Part 2”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 21.22-34 [5 minutes].
2. Remind the class of the insights from the previous passage, Genesis 21.1-21 [5 minutes]
3. Discuss Abraham swearing an oath to Abimelech in Genesis 21.22-24 (10 minutes).
 - After the birth of Isaac and sending away of Hagar and Ishmael
 - Abimelech: need to reconnect with Abraham
 - Implication is Abraham growing even more powerful; brings military commander with him
 - “In the past, Abraham feared interaction with foreign kings and made self-protective moves out of his lack of confidence in God’s ability to protect him. . . In our present story, however, Abraham speaks boldly and honestly with Abimelech. He enters into a treaty with the king and his military commander and even brings up a violation on the part of some of Abimelech’s people who have stolen his well. His planting of the tamarisk tree is a gesture that indicates he will be in the area for a while and that he belongs there” (*The Story of God Bible Commentary: Genesis*, pp. 284-285, with alternate spelling of Abimelech).
4. Discuss Abraham committing to a treaty with Abimelech in Genesis 21.25-32 (10 minutes).
 - Abraham brings up dispute over water (major concern in Middle East)
 - Abimelech and Abraham make a treaty together
 - “All Abimelech knew about this man was that God was blessing him (21.22) and that Abraham could not be trusted completely (cf. 20.9-10; 21.23). The sad contradiction made the treaty necessary” (Allen Ross, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Genesis*, p. 138).
 - Abraham gives good-faith gesture of 7 ewe lambs to Abimelech that confirms that the well belongs to Abraham
 - Site of treaty renamed Beersheba (either “well of seven” or “well of the oath,” but probably “well of seven” given v. 31)
5. Discuss Abraham planting a tamarisk tree in Genesis 21.33-34 (15 minutes).
 - Abraham plants a tamarisk tree at site of treaty
 - Tamarisk noteworthy for being evergreen and for taking up to hundreds of years to grow
 - Symbols of faithfulness and commitment are used regularly in every-day life (two common examples: wedding ring; handshake).

- What is Abraham saying and doing here? “I asked this question to my 7-year-old daughter. I asked her if it would be okay if we planted a tree in our neighbor’s yard. As expected she answered quickly and clearly, ‘No.’ Then I asked about planting a tree in our front yard. As you might expect she said, ‘Yes, it’s our yard.’ Exactly. Earlier in Genesis (12:7ff) God had promised Abraham that he would give his descendants this land. Now, nearly a quarter century later Abraham is standing in the land with the son of the promise in his tent. He is planting a tree in the land and declaring the faithfulness of God” (Erik Raymond, “The Day Abraham Planted a Tree,” Gospel Coalition blog; <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/erik-raymond/the-day-abraham-planted-a-tree/>).

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Review Genesis 21.22-34. What is the plot? Who are the main characters? Any surprises?
- Why does Abimelech seek to work again with Abraham in Genesis 21, despite Abraham’s lack of truthfulness in their earlier encounter? What is Abimelech wanting to accomplish through this interaction?
- How is Abraham’s behavior with Abimelech in Genesis 21 different from his behavior in Genesis 20 with the ruler? Different from Abraham’s behavior with Pharaoh in Genesis 12?
- What does the change in Abraham’s behavior reveal about Abraham’s growth?
- Look back over your life for the past 10 years. Pick out one notable way in which your actions toward others have changed for the better. What prompted this change? What positive benefits did you receive? Does this outward change reflect any inner change in your life? If so, how?
- How is planting a tamarisk tree a symbolic representation of Abraham’s trust in the Lord?
- Think about what symbolic representations of trust and fidelity that we use in everyday life. How do these representations help us maintain our commitments?

Genesis 22.1-18 - “Sacrifice of Isaac”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 22.1-18 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from the previous passage, Genesis 21.22-34 [5 minutes]

3. Discuss God’s command to Abraham in Genesis 22.1-9 (15 minutes).

- Indeterminate amount of time from Genesis 21.22-34
- Told in v. 1 God is testing Abraham: “The test will reveal the quality of Abraham’s trust in God. Will we respond with faith and will he again respond with fear?” (Tremper Longman III, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Genesis*, p. 287)
 - 1. God does not tempt to sin, but He tests with situations designed to see the depth and quality of faith: see Exodus 16.4; 20:20; Deut. 8.2,16; James 1.2-3; 1 Peter 4.12-13
 - 2. Note Abraham’s test is unique: made clear later in Old Testament, in a way not present at time of Abraham, that human sacrifice is evil
- Repetition in v. 3 significant: “your son, your only son, whom you love” (NIV)
- Human sacrifice at this time in ancient Middle East not a usual ritual, but most often used in emergencies to get a deity’s prompt attention
- Hints that Abraham trusts God to intervene: Abraham tells servants both he and Isaac will return in v. 5; Abraham tells Isaac in v. 8 God will provide the needed lamb
- Isaac seems to participate willingly in journey and in the sacrifice itself; could have physically prevented an aged Abraham from carrying out the task; much discussion over Isaac’s age, with many interpreters seeing him as either teenager or young adult

4. Discuss God’s substitution for Isaac in Genesis 22.10-14 (10 minutes).

- Abraham proceeds to conduct the sacrifice in v. 10; but angel intervenes in vv. 11-12 (note repetition of language by angel in v. 12 from v. 2)
- Ram caught in thicket: Abraham understands the ram as a substitute for Isaac
- New name for place: “The Lord will provide” (also translated “The Lord will see”)
- Abraham at new, higher place in his faith journey: trusts God to provide whatever is needed, compared to previous occasions where he felt compelled to act (ex.: Sarah as “sister”)
- Substitution considered by some interpreters to foreshadow substitutionary atonement by Jesus on the cross, as He dies on our behalf because of our sin

5. Discuss God’s reiteration of the covenant promises in Genesis 22.15-18 (10 minutes).

- Angel restates and reinforces original covenant promises from Genesis 12.1-3
- Many of Abraham’s prior challenges have been grounded in a lack of faith in God’s ability to keep these promises—but with most difficult test, Abraham succeeds

- Abraham's faith reveals itself in Abraham's actions: see James 2.14-26 for connection between faith and human deeds, with Abraham given as primary illustration in vv. 20-23
- Relationship between faith and works is not faith + works = salvation from God, but salvation solely through faith, with works as an evidence for the veracity and authenticity of faith

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- In Genesis 22.1-18, how does the plot move? What surprises, impresses, or irritates you?
- How does God test Abraham? What do you think is God's purpose for this test? How do tests differ from temptations? What other Scriptures reference testing or tempting?
- When and how have you experienced God testing you regarding some aspect of your faith and life? What did you discover through this test?
- What hints do we receive throughout the passage that Abraham anticipates God to provide a solution other than the sacrifice of Isaac? What might some possibilities be? How would each solution show the grace of God at work?
- In the passage, Abraham expresses a more mature trust in God's plans and purposes. How so? Compared to what? How do we grow in our trust of God's plans and purposes for us?
- When have you found yourself totally dependent upon God to address a situation beyond your control? How did things turn out? What did you learn from the experience?
- James 2.14-26 discusses faith and works, with Abraham and Isaac front and center in vv. 20-23. How is Abraham illustrative of the right relationship between faith and works? How are we to live out this relationship from day to day? What keeps us from doing so?

Hebrews 11.17-19 and Romans 4:17-25 - “The God Who Raises the Dead”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Hebrews 11.17-19 and Romans 4:17-25 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from the previous passage, Genesis 22.1-18 [5 minutes]

3. Discuss the shorter version of Abraham’s faith in God’s power in Hebrews 11.17-19 (10 minutes).

- Confirms Genesis 22.1 that God “tested” Abraham; not random or accidental, but purposeful
- Notes the incredible and apparently contradictory nature of God’s command to Abraham: sacrifice the only son in whom the covenantal promise would be realized
- Adds a helpful reason or motivation for Abraham’s compliance, especially given his lack of compliance in several prior circumstances: Abraham could sacrifice Isaac, and then God could raise Isaac from the dead
- Enables us to see, to some extent, how Abraham could respond so positively to command

4. Discuss the longer version of Abraham’s faith in God’s power in Romans 4.17-22 (15 minutes).

- Verse 17 not only mentions God’s ability to raise Isaac from the dead, but also God’s creative power and action: “This happened because Abraham believed in the God who brings the dead back to life and who creates new things out of nothing.” (NLT); see Genesis 1.1-31; John 1.1-5
- Verse 18’s evocative phrase, “In hope he [Abraham] believed against hope” (ESV), also rendered “even when there was no reason for hope” (NLT), “against all hope” (NIV), emphasizes trusting God, even when all outward evidence seemingly lines up against you
- Faith as defined in this section more than knowledge of information presented or mental assent to its truthfulness, but also includes whole-hearted trust in the One providing the information; Protestant Reformers in Latin: *noticia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*, respectively
- Verse 20’s “no unbelief made him waver” (ESV) speaks of Abraham’s response during the test; plenty of times previously when his faith wavers and his actions reflect it
- Verse 22’s “counted to him as righteousness” (ESV) or “credited to him as righteousness” (NIV) repeats Genesis 15.6; serves as essential of gospel Paul describes in Romans 1.16-17

5. Discuss the significance of Abraham's story for our personal stories of faith in Romans 4.23-25 (10 minutes).

- Verse 23 emphasizes Abraham's story not just for him, but for us too; not unique to Abraham
- We too are to be counted as righteous if we believe in the God who raised Jesus from the dead
- "We today are much more fortunate than Abraham, and have little or no excuse for unbelief. For we live on this side of the resurrection. Moreover, we have a complete Bible in which both the creation of the universe and the resurrection of Jesus are recorded. It is therefore more reasonable for us to believe than it was for Abraham. Of course we have to make sure that the promises we are seeking to inherit are neither wrenched out of their biblical context nor the product of our own subjective fancy, but truly apply to us. Then we can lay hold of them, even *against all* human hope, yet *in hope* (v. 18), that is, in the confidence of God's faithfulness and power. Only so shall we prove to be genuine children of our great spiritual forefather Abraham." (John Stott, *Romans*, p. 136)

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Review Hebrews 11.17-19 and Romans 4.17-25. What stands out to you? How are the two passages similar? Different?
- What reasoning does Hebrews 11.17-19 provide for motivating Abraham's prompt response to God's command regarding Isaac?
- How does Romans 4.17-25 elaborate upon the reasoning given in Hebrews 11.17-19 as noted above? What important truths about God rest at the center of this expanded reasoning?
- When have you, like Abraham, still believed, even though you saw no obvious reason to do so? Looking back, how did the Holy Spirit sustain you during such a difficult season?
- Romans 4.22 states that through faith, Abraham is counted as righteous before God. Where else in Scripture is this important teaching found? Why is this teaching so significant?
- Define faith: How is it more than just knowing information about God and then affirming its truthfulness? What else is needed for faith to be genuine? How is faith genuine in you?
- While Abraham trusted God completely during the test about Isaac, he experienced other significant times of doubt and opposition to God. Why would God continue to work with Abraham during such times? How is the grace shown to Abraham experienced in your life?

Genesis 22.19—23.20 - “Sarah’s Death”

OUTLINE

- 1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 22.19—23.20 [5 minutes].**
- 2. Remind the class of the insights from the previous passages, Hebrews 11.17-19 and Romans 4.17-25 [5 minutes]**
- 3. Discuss the revealing of Abraham’s eastern relatives in Genesis 22.20-24 (10 minutes).**
 - Nahor, Abraham’s brother who stayed in Haran, has 12 children; 8 with his wife Milcah, 4 with concubine Reumah
 - Appears that there was little contact between the two extended families until now
 - Why mention this? In chapter 24, Abraham will seek a wife for Isaac from these relatives
 - Important even at this time not to intermarry with Canaanites in advance of later directive to rid the land of them (see Joshua)
- 4. Discuss the death of Sarah and Abraham’s grieving in Genesis 23.1-4 (15 minutes).**
 - Sarah dies at 127 years old; only wife of patriarch whose specific age is mentioned
 - Where? Town of Hebron, or Kiriath-arba, near Mamre, the home base for much of Abraham and Sarah’s life
 - “Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her” (23.2 NIV); grief rituals usually included a season of public mourning at the gate of the city
 - Long life with Abraham with seasons of celebration (birth of Isaac) and seasons of struggle (going along with Abraham’s plan for calling her his sister; strife with Hagar and Ishmael)
 - Accompanies Abraham in life together as “a stranger and foreigner among you” (v. 4 ESV); this world not her home, nor Abraham’s home
 - Exemplar of faith herself: “By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered Him faithful who promised.” (Hebrews 11.11 ESV)
 - “How much of the power of our sin patterns flows from the fact that we have forgotten that this world is not our home and that we are actually aliens and strangers here?” (Iain Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham*, p. 154)
- 5. Discuss the purchase of land in Canaan in Genesis 23.5-20 (10 minutes).**
 - Verse 5 begins period of negotiation and discussion “familiar to those who have bought something in a modern Middle Eastern bazaar” (Tremper Longman III, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Genesis*, p. 305)

- Important for Abraham to pay for the cave, so he and his descendants will have ownership of it in perpetuity; considered “down payment” on future ownership of all the Promised Land
- Probably different group of Hittites than ones mentioned later in the Old Testament in Exodus and Deuteronomy; name means “sons of Heth”
- Place known today as “Tomb of the Patriarchs,” as Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah all buried there (Genesis 49.31)

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- In Genesis 22.19—23.20, how does the plot move? What surprises, impresses, or irritates you? Why?
- Abraham discovers his brother Nahor’s family is doing well back in Haran. Why might this become important a little later in Genesis?
- Abraham grieves at Sarah’s passing. Over the years, some have said grief indicates a lack of trust in God’s providence. Is this true? Why or why not? How should we grieve as followers of Jesus Christ?
- Looking back over Genesis 12-23, discuss how Sarah showed her flaws, doubts, and failings. Note at least one example and discuss its guidance for us as we also deal with our flaws, doubts, and failings.
- Looking back over Genesis 12-23, discuss how Sarah was an example of living by faith. What passage in Hebrews lifts up Sarah in this way? Why? What can we learn from her life?
- Abraham owns a little piece of the Promised Land at the end of chapter 23. How will this become significant later in Genesis? What covenantal promise from Genesis 12 does this purchase point toward?

Genesis 24.1-67 - “Isaac and Rebekah”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 24.1-67 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from Genesis 22.19–23.20 [5 minutes]

3. Discuss Abraham’s commissioning and sending his servant in Genesis 24.1-11 (10 minutes).

- Abraham “well advanced in years” (v. 1 ESV) and remarkably blessed by God
- Makes servant swear a vow regarding assigned task: to go back to his former home and find a wife for Isaac from Abraham’s extended family
- Swearing “under my thigh”: some believe this is a euphemism for genitals, the repository of Abraham’s seed, and thus sacred in this context
- Isaac not to marry Canaanite woman because Canaanites are under judgment not yet realized (see Genesis 15.16; Exodus 23.37-33); servant to return if woman unwilling
- Isaac not to go to Abraham’s homeland under any circumstances

4. Discuss Rebekah as an answer to prayer in Genesis 24.12-27 (10 minutes).

- Servant prays for guidance as he nears a well just outside town
- Request: to find the woman with characteristics of hospitality and generosity, as expressed through offer and follow-through to give water to him and then to camels
- “We are not to seek for physical beauty, or money, or even the right ‘chemistry,’ but rather *character*. The key question we should ask is ‘Does this person evidence godliness and grace in all his or her ways?’” (Iain Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham*, p. 164)
- Not a doubting request or search for a sign, like Gideon with fleece (Judges 6.36-40)
- Rebekah responds: gives servant water, then water for camels
- Servant gives thanks to God for answered prayer and faithfulness to Abraham

5. Discuss the servant’s negotiation with Laban in Genesis 24.28-58 (10 minutes).

- Laban is Rebekah’s brother; customary for brother to negotiate: “Our first impressions, guided by the narrator’s description, anticipate a cunning, greedy, opportunistic young man.” (Tremper Longman III, *Genesis: The Story of God Bible Commentary*, p. 317)
- Will see Laban later in Genesis with Jacob, Leah, and Rachel
- Servant doesn’t eat, but tells of his commissioning from Abraham and rehashes his encounter with Rebekah, then puts the question of Laban and Bethuel (v. 49)
- Response: “The Lord has obviously brought you here, so there is nothing we can say. Here is Rebekah; take her and go...” (v. 50-51 NLT)

- Rebekah asked in v. 58; responds in faith to go now and not wait 10 days

6. Discuss Rebekah's journey and arrival to Isaac in Genesis 24.59-67 (5 minutes).

- With servant girls, Rebekah travels to her new home in the Negev
- Isaac sees Rebekah; when Rebekah learns who Isaac is, she covers her face with veil
- Go into former tent of Sarah's and consummate relationship as husband and wife
- Note second half of v. 67: "...she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death." (ESV)

7. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Review the lengthy plot of Genesis 24. Who are the lead characters? How does the plot move from beginning to end? What surprises, conflicts, or concerns arise?
- Why is it so important for Abraham to find a bride for Isaac away from Canaan? Why is it equally important for Isaac to never leave Canaan? What's the connection here?
- Who does Abraham recruit to take care of things? What strikes you about this person as you read through the chapter?
- Describe the type of person being sought for Isaac. What are the primary characteristics? How does Abraham's representative attempt to find this person?
- Rebekah's brother Laban negotiates on Rebekah's behalf. What are your impressions of him? When and how will we see him again in Genesis?
- Genesis 24.67 notes the quality of Isaac and Rebekah's relationship. Discuss and elaborate on it. What can we learn?
- What are characteristics that the world insists are the most important to seek and to become? How do many of these run counter to God's desire for human relationships?
- What sort of person are we to seek for and to become in close relationships, including but not limited to marriage? How can we encourage and assist each other in this?

Genesis 25.1-18 - “Abraham’s Death”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Genesis 25.1-18 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from Genesis 24.1-67 [5 minutes].

3. Discuss Abraham’s family with Keturah in Genesis 25.1-6 (10 minutes).

- As many older men do after the loss of a spouse, Abraham takes another wife: Keturah
- Keturah and Abraham produce many sons who, in turn, produce many other nations:
- Midian the father of the Midianites, prominent later on (example in Genesis 37: Midianite traders find and sell Joseph to Ishmaelite caravan heading to Egypt)
- Important to note these children not of the covenant: Abraham takes steps
 - Gives everything to Isaac as the inheritor of the promise (v. 5)
 - Gives gifts to other children and then sends them far away from Isaac, “to a land in the east” (v. 6 NLT)

4. Discuss the death of Abraham in Genesis 25.7-10 (15 minutes).

- Brings the *toledot* of Terah, which began in Genesis 11:27, to an end
- Reminder: Hebrew word *toledot* (“account” NLT; “generations” ESV) marks the significant divisions within Genesis and provides structure for the narrative
- Abraham lives to be 175: advanced age even for that era; pre-Flood limit: “Then the Lord said, ‘My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.’” (Genesis 6.3 ESV)
- Summary statement in v. 8 about character and quality of Abraham’s life: “We have seen how during much of his life he struggled in his relationship with God and often responded with fear and manipulation when confronted with obstacles to the fulfillment of the promises. But after the birth of Isaac, he demonstrates a steady confidence in his God.” (Tremper Longman III, *Genesis: The Story of God Bible Commentary*, p. 326)
- Important to note Isaac and Ishmael join together to bury Abraham in tomb originally purchased in Canaan for Sarah near Mamre
- Apparently some level of relationship between Isaac and Ishmael: otherwise, how would Ishmael have known about Abraham’s passing?

5. Discuss the conclusion of Abraham’s story and the transition to Isaac in Genesis 25.11-18 (10 minutes).

- Isaac goes back to “near Beer-lahai-roi in the Negev” where he and Rebekah lived
- Isaac’s story will continue, beginning Genesis 25:19 with his *toledot*
- Brief *toledot* for Ishmael in vv. 12-18: “...The non-chosen sibling (in this case Ishmael) is not necessarily excluded from all divine favor. Ishmael, while not the

chosen child and thus excluded from the covenant, does receive some of the elements of the original Abrahamic promise in Gen. 12: being blessed, being fruitful, and becoming a great nation.” (J. S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election*, p. 41, quoted in *Genesis: The Story of God Bible Commentary*, p. 328)

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- What is the plot of Genesis 25:1-18? Review the who, what, when, where, and how.
- Were you surprised to discover Abraham remarried after Sarah’s death? Why or why not? Why do you think Abraham remarries? How does this humanize him in your eyes?
- Abraham takes steps to ensure Isaac’s preeminence after Abraham dies. What are they? Do you find them overbearing? Faithless? Practical? Something else? Explain.
- In your life, how do you discern the differences between taking practical steps God will honor, and faithless steps presuming you’re in control? Please give examples.
- How old is Abraham when he dies? How does it compare to the lifespan typical in that time? Is there any importance in this longevity?
- Where is Abraham buried? Who buries him? What do you find relationally, theologically and biblically significant in both answers, and why?
- There is apparently some ongoing relationship between Isaac and Ishmael. Explore what the dimensions and characteristics of this relationship may be. How have you dealt with similar dynamics in relationships with family, colleagues, and neighbors?
- How does God act in your life to reassure and remind you of His covenant and care?

Hebrews 11.8-16 - “Exemplars of Faith”

OUTLINE

1. Greet one another, begin with prayer, and read Hebrews 11.8-16 [5 minutes].

2. Remind the class of the insights from Genesis 25.1-18 [5 minutes]

3. Discuss Abraham’s example of faith in Hebrews 11.8-10 (10 minutes).

- Abraham called by God to a place he would receive as an inheritance from God; he goes “not knowing where he was going;” allusion to Genesis 12.1-9
- Lives in this land by faith as a “foreigner” (v. 9) living in tents, transient and temporary, along the lines of Isaac and Jacob; doesn’t realize the fulfillment in his lifetime
- This deep faith is described in v. 10 as “looking forward to the city that has foundations” (ESV), meant as contrast to living in tents with no permanent home
- “To live the Christian life there is necessary a certain reckless willingness to adventure. If faith does not involve risk, it is not faith. If faith can see every step of the way, it is not faith. It is sometimes necessary for the Christian to take the right way, the way to which the voice of God is calling him, without knowing what the consequences will be.” (William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews: Daily Study Bible*, p. 163)

4. Discuss Sarah’s example of faith in Hebrews 11.11-12 (10 minutes).

- Sarah conceives even as she is past the age of child bearing because “she considered Him faithful who had promised” (v. 11)
- So despite appearances, God’s promise for a great nation for Abraham and Sarah comes true as together they place their trust in God and His promises
- Scholarly disagreement over translation of v. 11: “Although some translations give Abraham as the subject, it is best to take “Sarah” as the subject here (as the ESV does), because (1) both Sarah’s name and “herself” (Gk. *autē*) are in the nominative case (indicating the subject of the sentence), and because (2) making Abraham the subject requires either an unusual grammatical understanding of the words for “Sarah herself” or an assumption that an early copyist made an error in transcribing those two words” (ESV Study Bible, note on Hebrews 11.11).

5. Discuss what it means to walk by faith in Hebrews 11.13-16 (15 minutes).

- Referent for “these” (ESV) is not just Abraham and Sarah, but also Abel, Enoch, Noah
- “Strangers” (*xenoi* in Greek) and “exiles” (*parapidemoi* in Greek): those not citizens, but just passing through or with temporary residency (see 1 Peter 2.11)
- Yet those living by faith resist temptation to return to where they started (allusion to Israelites complaining after Red Sea; Exodus 16.3), but instead step forward in faith
- Maintain their trust in the “better place” (NLT) ahead in the world yet to come

- “Abraham’s example can be a powerful one in our modern world. Particularly in the West, most of us are affluent enough to enjoy nice homes—ones that are comfortable and safe. As a result, we can easily begin to make this world our home, forgetting that a much better one—a real and glorious one—awaits us... In short, we’ve become enamored with the seen things rather than unseen. The cure to this kind of worldliness is to change what we believe—about God and about ourselves. We need to recover our real identity as ‘strangers and exiles’” (Michael Kruger, *Hebrews for You*, 176).

6. Close in prayer.

QUESTIONS

After starting your small group with prayer, discuss the following:

- Review Hebrews 11.8-16. Who are the lead characters? What is happening?
- According to v. 8, what is a predominant characteristic describing Abraham’s journey to Canaan? What in Genesis 12 backs up this account?
- William Barclay wrote, “If faith does not involve risk, it is not faith.” (*The Letter to the Hebrews: Daily Study Bible*, p. 163) How so? Explore the connection of faith and risk.
- Sarah is also an example of faith, according to v. 11. How? What passages in Genesis support the assessment made by the writer of Hebrews?
- How is Abraham’s life in Canaan described in v. 9? How is this same imagery revisited and expanded upon at the end of v. 13? Why and how does this imagery apply today?
- Verses 13-16 are key verses for understanding how faith expresses itself through Abraham and Sarah and through all who trust in Christ. Unpack these four verses, put them into your own words, and talk about their meaning for your walk with Christ.
- Examine yourself: What do you truly and honestly long for? How does this longing reveal itself in your life?