

# Book of Genesis – Part IX - Genesis 21-22

## “God’s Impossible Command”

These next two chapters continue the story of Abraham. We have the birth of Isaac, the child of promise. We get a picture of Abraham’s life in “the land of the Philistines” (21:34). More than this, however, we have the single most dramatic episode in the entire Book of Genesis when Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice his own son. This appears to contradict every thing God has said up to this point.

- I. The Birth of Isaac – 21:1-21
  - a. This account begins with the basic statement that God is faithful to his promise. In the light of what is to follow, this is far more than a passing reference (21:1).
  - b. The child is given the name of “Isaac” which means “he laughs.” Sarah comments that “God has brought laughter for me” (21:6). This is the laughter of joy and celebration. When Abraham and Sarah had first heard God’s promise their laughter was one of mocking (17:17; 18:12). God’s promises can provoke the response, “You’ve got to be kidding?” Yet one of the key themes of Genesis (and indeed the whole Bible) is that nothing is too wonderful (or too hard) for God (18:14; Matt. 19:26).
  - c. Abraham circumcises Isaac on the eighth day which establishes the beginning of a ritual of community. It is no longer Abraham and Sarah by themselves. They are to be the parents of innumerable descendants including all of us who have faith in Christ (Galatians 3).
  - d. Difficulties, however, are not ended. There is a great feast when Isaac is weaned (somewhere between eighteen and twenty four months of age). Sarah sees Ishmael, the son she had arranged for Abraham to have with her servant girl, Hagar, playing with Isaac. There is no suggestion that anything improper is happening here. In her eyes, however, she sees Ishmael as a threat to Isaac’s inheritance since he is actually Abraham’s first born son.
  - e. Sarah wants Hagar and Ishmael cast out. What is notable here is that Sarah herself is responsible for this situation. She wasn’t content to wait for God’s promise to be fulfilled. She acted on her own, following a social custom of her time, rather than God’s Word. Now she plays the position of the person who is hurt when in reality it was all her idea in the first place. This is in fact the second time this has happened (16:4-16). Sarah hasn’t learned her lesson. Can we recognize this behavior in ourselves?
  - f. Abraham is distressed at this because Ishmael is his son. We have here the conflict which continues throughout history with God’s will and human decisions. God intervenes. He will provide for Hagar and Ishmael (21:15-21). Ishmael will, in fact, himself be the father of a great nation (21:18). Yet Hagar and Ishmael must go because God has chosen Isaac and nothing can interfere with God’s plan.

- g. Some commentators believe this is another version of the incident in chapter 16. Whether or not that is the case (as in the similar question of whether John 2:13-22 is another version of the cleansing of the temple from Palm Sunday) the lesson of the story remains the same. God's ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8) but God redeems what we have broken (21:17; Isa. 61:1).
  - h. Abraham's age of one hundred here might well be symbolic as is the case with other numbers in Scripture (21:5).
- II. Abraham and Abimelech – 21:22-34
- a. This is not a very familiar story but it is an important one. The first point to note is that a pagan king testifies to the fact that God is with Abraham in all that he does (21:22).
  - b. Abimelech asks Abraham to swear that he "will not deal falsely" with the king. Given the fact that Abimelech would have remembered Abraham's attempt to pass off Sarah as his sister (chapter 20) this is not an idle request. Two things are especially important here:
    - i. Abimelech, who is not a believer in the God of Abraham, nonetheless acknowledges Abraham's God and, understandably, expects Abraham to behave as one with whom the Lord is present. The same expectation applies to us from the unbelievers we know.
    - ii. This is the first instance of Abraham's call serving as a "blessing to the nations." Abimelech represents the nations.
  - c. The second part of the story shows Abraham and Abimelech making a covenant together. Abraham appears to have a legitimate complaint about his well being seized (21:25). Abimelech is unaware of the situation (21:26).
  - d. The theme of this event seems to be the covenant the two men make with each other, swearing an oath to respect each other's property (21:28-32). The point of this may well be to show that Abraham continues to live in the world of his time and place. His calling from God does not exempt him from everyday life. Abraham has to be careful also to demonstrate the fact that God is with him in all his dealings and, again, that he acts accordingly.
  - e. Abraham plants a tree and calls on the name of the Lord, "the Everlasting God." This was apparently an ancient name for God which Abraham now applies to the revealed God whom he now serves (cf. Isa. 40:28).
  - f. Abraham is living in the land which actually will become the land of the Philistines. This is very important for what follows. Abraham is living in a foreign land (just as we do). In the ancient world, people sacrificed their first born sons to gain favor with the gods (II Kings 3:26-27; Lev. 18:21; Deut. 18:10).

### III. Abraham's Test – 22:1-24

- a. We now come to the most disturbing story perhaps in the whole Book of Genesis. The opening line is unforgettable: "After these things God tested Abraham" (22:1).
- b. In this section, Abraham is being asked to do the unthinkable, to take his only son, Isaac, and offer him as a burnt sacrifice.
- c. The outline of the story is familiar. Abraham and Isaac go meticulously to the place of sacrifice. Isaac asks, "Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" (22:7). Abraham replies, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering" (22:8).
- d. "So the two of them walked on together." (22:8).
- e. Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac, taking his knife (22:9-10).
- f. God calls to Abraham saying to spare his son. God now knows that Abraham fears him. Abraham sees a ram caught in the thicket. He sacrifices the ram and spares his son. Abraham calls the place, "The Lord will provide" (22:11-14).
- g. This is the basic narrative. There are numerous themes introduced in this amazing story.
  - i. God seems to contradict himself completely. How can Abraham be the father of a great nation if his only son and heir is to be killed?
  - ii. The story of Abraham has focused on all the trials involved in him and Sarah having a son. Is this now all a cruel joke?
  - iii. The question being presented to Abraham and to all of us as his spiritual descendents is, can we live by the promises of God when nothing, including God himself, makes any sense to us?
- h. This is a story that prepares us for the death of Christ. Abraham's son is rescued but no one rescues God's Son on Calvary. We can imagine the disciples reacting as if everything they had experienced in Christ was pointless and incomprehensible. Yet consider the following:
  - i. Abraham and Isaac arrive at the place "on the third day." The third day as a decisive day in which God acts is a theme which runs through all of Scripture (Gen. 42:18; Ex. 19:11; Esther 5:1; Hosea 6:2; Matt. 16:21).
  - ii. Abraham does not lose faith in God when confronted with an impossible situation. He says, "God himself will provide the lamb" (John 1:29). Isaac who is hardly an unaware child at this point (he's carrying the wood, 22:6) goes along with this. He does not resist.
  - iii. So what's the point? Isn't this still all a cruel joke at Abraham's expense? No, the test is real. The first question has to do with establishing that Abraham is fearing God (22:12). To fear God does not mean to be afraid of God (hence the frequent admonition, "fear not"). The fear of God in the Old Testament refers to being obedient to God (Gen. 42:18; II Kings 4:1; Isa. 11:2; Prov. 1:7; Job 1:1, 8). The second is, does Abraham have the same dedication to his God as his pagan neighbors had to their gods? Abraham's faith

in fact is greater since this command seems to contradict what his God had told him previously.

- i. The real test here is, can Abraham live by the promises of God when nothing in his life bears out those promises? Will he still trust God when his life experience contradicts God, when God even seems to be an enemy? This test will be faced by Moses, Job, David, Esther, Jeremiah, Mary and ultimately by Jesus himself. The cry echoes throughout history, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest (Ps. 22:1-1).*
- j. God has already chosen Abraham yet this test confirms the choice. God swears only by himself (22:16; Heb. 6:13). This means that there is no outside source to corroborate what God promises. All Abraham (and Isaac) have is the Word of God. Often that is all we have, but that is enough. Abraham’s obedience confirms the promise already given. His descendents will be like the stars of the heavens and the sand of the seashore (22:17; cf. 15:5). In him, all the nations of the earth will gain blessing (22:18; cf. 12:3).
- k. The text ends with a brief genealogy of Abraham’s family (22:20-24). It is perhaps significant that there are twelve names listed, possibly foreshadowing the twelve sons of Jacob.

## Questions for us –

1. What can we learn from the conflicts in Abraham’s own household? How are the relationships among Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael typical of family conflicts in our world today? How do we see God’s grace overriding human failure and sin?
2. What do Abraham’s dealings with Abimelech teach us about how we deal with people, especially non-believers, in our world?
3. Why is the account of Abraham’s testing so important to our understanding of faith? How do we respond when events in our lives make no sense, when even God seems to make no sense? What can we learn about living solely by the Word of God, the promises of God?