

# *In the Beginning: Genesis 1 to 25*

## Week 5

**Monday, April 3rd**

**Genesis 19: 15-37**

15At dawn the next morning the angels became insistent. "Hurry," they said to Lot. "Take your wife and your two daughters who are here. Get out of here right now, or you will be caught in the destruction of the city."

16When Lot still hesitated, the angels seized his hand and the hands of his wife and two daughters and rushed them to safety outside the city, for the LORD was merciful. 17"Run for your lives!" the angels warned. "Do not stop anywhere in the valley. And don't look back! Escape to the mountains, or you will die."

18"Oh no, my lords, please," Lot begged. 19"You have been so kind to me and saved my life, and you have granted me such mercy. But I cannot go to the mountains. Disaster would catch up to me there, and I would soon die. 20See, there is a small village nearby. Please let me go there instead; don't you see how small it is? Then my life will be saved."

21"All right," the angel said, "I will grant your request. I will not destroy that little village. 22But hurry! For I can do nothing until you are there." From that time on, that village was known as Zoar.

23The sun was rising as Lot reached the village. 24Then the LORD rained down fire and burning sulfur from the heavens on Sodom and Gomorrah. 25He utterly destroyed them, along with the other cities and villages of the plain, eliminating all life--people, plants, and animals alike. 26But Lot's wife looked back as she was following along behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.

27The next morning Abraham was up early and hurried out to the place where he had stood in the LORD's presence. 28He looked out across the plain to Sodom and Gomorrah and saw columns of smoke and fumes, as from a furnace, rising from the cities there. 29But God had listened to Abraham's request and kept Lot safe, removing him from the disaster that engulfed the cities on the plain.

30Afterward Lot left Zoar because he was afraid of the people there, and he went to live in a cave in the mountains with his two daughters. 31One day the older daughter said to her sister, "There isn't a man anywhere in this entire area for us to marry. And our father will soon be too old to have children. 32Come, let's get him drunk with wine, and then we will sleep with him. That way we will preserve our family line through our father." 33So that night they got him drunk, and the older daughter went in and slept with her father. He was unaware of her lying down or getting up again.

34The next morning the older daughter said to her younger sister, "I slept with our father last night. Let's get him drunk with wine again tonight, and you go in and sleep with him. That way our family line will be preserved." 35So that night they got him drunk again, and the younger daughter went in and slept with him. As before, he was unaware of her lying down or getting up again. 36So both of Lot's daughters became pregnant by their father.

37When the older daughter gave birth to a son, she named him Moab. He became the ancestor of the nation now known as the Moabites. 38When the younger daughter gave birth to a son, she named him Ben-ammi. He became the ancestor of the nation now known as the Ammonites.

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### Points of Interest:

- 'Get out of here right now'—in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, we have something of a replay of the flood. Just as God warned Noah to get his family into the boat before the flood began, the angels warn Lot to get his family out of town.
- 'When Lot still hesitated'—Noah had immediately done exactly what God had instructed, but Lot hesitates before leaving. Even after the experience of the night before, Lot remains attached to Sodom. Abraham was willing to leave everything behind for the sake of the future promises of God, but Lot is having a hard time leaving everything behind even to save his own life. The angels have to drag Lot and his family out of the city, a little like firefighters bodily carrying smoke-poisoned people out of a burning building.
- 'I cannot go to the mountains'—Lot is more of a city-dweller. He can't handle the thought of living in the wilderness; so he asks the angels if they can preserve one of the small cities for him. It seems to me that he's being a little over-dramatic when he claims he'll die if he has to go to the mountains; but, amazingly, the angels actually grant his request.
- 'From that time on, that village was known as Zoar'—Zoar means 'small' (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*).
- 'Then the LORD rained down fire'—last time God brought judgment, it was by raining down water. This time, he rains down fire.
- 'eliminating all life--people, plants, and animals alike'—another direct parallel to the flood. The scope of this destruction is smaller, but no less complete. I don't know about you, but it's disturbing to me to know that God is capable of causing such utter destruction. In Genesis, God has portrayed himself as the primary agent of goodness and abundance in the world. It's difficult to understand and accept that he is also perfectly willing to bring judgment to the world. Even more perplexingly, it seems that both Moses and God see this very terrible judgment as consistent with God's overall desire to be a source of blessing. Once when I was struggling with these questions of blessing and judgment, a friend of mine proposed something intriguing. He said, 'It seems like we have a tendency to treat sin lightly and death very seriously; maybe God sees sin as being more serious than death.' In other words, perhaps from God's perspective there comes a point when it is more merciful to end someone's life than to allow them to continue to live in their sin. It's a fact that each of us will die someday; maybe God determined that for these particular people it was better that they die right away than that they continue to live on their current trajectory. These ideas aren't entirely comforting, and they don't completely resolve my problems; but I think they do helpfully bring me closer to facing both the inevitability of death and the destructiveness of sin. It puts God's judgment in a different perspective.
- 'But Lot's wife looked back'—Lot's wife has an even harder time leaving Sodom behind, and it costs her life. Because she identifies more with the life she is leaving behind than with the rescue ahead, she actually shares in the destruction of the city.
- 'But God had listened to Abraham's request and kept Lot safe'—the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah had not yet been decided by the time Abraham and the LORD finished their conversation the day before. Abraham only finds out now that the city could not be saved. God did, however, mercifully hear and grant Abraham's underlying hope: that Lot would be rescued.

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- 'he went to live in a cave in the mountains'—ironically, Lot ends up in the mountains anyway. The little village is not as attractive as it appeared from a distance.
- 'let's get him drunk with wine'—after the flood, Noah accidentally got drunk, and Ham accidentally saw him naked. After the fire, Lot's daughters purposely get him drunk so that they can have sex with him.
- 'both of Lot's daughters became pregnant by their father'—after the flood, God told Noah and his family to be fruitful and multiply. Here we have a particularly sad, desperate, and twisted echo of that drive to re-populate the world.
- 'the ancestor of the nation now known as the Ammonites'—the Moabites and Ammonites are the nations that settle the lands just west of the Jordan River. When Abraham's descendants eventually inhabit the land of Canaan, they will end up in pretty much perpetual border conflict with the Moabites and Ammonites. The strife between the shepherds of Abraham and Lot will grow into war between their descendants.

### **Taking it home:**

- *For you and your family:* As we talked about during the flood, the LORD is a God who is eager to rescue people who turn to him. Are you in trouble right now? God is both willing and able to provide a way out. Sometimes, though, we are strangely attached to our troubles; like Lot and his wife, we are tempted to hesitate or to look back. Do you find yourself oddly stuck in your difficulties, even reluctant to completely leave them behind? If so, ask God to grab you by the hand and pull you out of trouble; and ask him to give you the willpower to look forward to his rescue, rather than back to the place of trouble.
- *For our church:* Pray that our church would grow in our desire and ability to treat sin seriously. Pray that God would grow in us a deep conviction that sin ultimately leads to death—or perhaps even to a fate worse than death. Pray that God would empower us to avoid sin and live lives that reflect and welcome God's goodness instead.
- *For our city:* In their desperation, Lot's daughters make a bad decision, one that they will probably eventually regret. It's often the case, that the decisions we make in desperation aren't our best ones. At this very moment, they are people all over our city—and quite possibly right around you—who are feeling desperate. Lift these people up to God. Ask him to give these people an infusion of hope, and pray that he would protect them from decisions that they would regret later.

### **Tuesday, April 4th**

#### **Genesis 20**

1Now Abraham moved south to the Negev and settled for a while between Kadesh and Shur at a place called Gerar. 2Abraham told people there that his wife, Sarah, was his sister. So King Abimelech sent for her and had her brought to him at his palace.

3But one night God came to Abimelech in a dream and told him, "You are a dead man, for that woman you took is married."

4But Abimelech had not slept with her yet, so he said, "Lord, will you kill an innocent man? 5Abraham told me, 'She is my sister,' and she herself said, 'Yes, he is my brother.' I acted in complete innocence!"

6"Yes, I know you are innocent," God replied. "That is why I kept you from sinning against me; I did not let you touch her. 7Now return her to her husband, and he will pray

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for you, for he is a prophet. Then you will live. But if you don't return her to him, you can be sure that you and your entire household will die."

8Abimelech got up early the next morning and hastily called a meeting of all his servants. When he told them what had happened, great fear swept through the crowd. 9Then Abimelech called for Abraham. "What is this you have done to us?" he demanded. "What have I done to you that deserves treatment like this, making me and my kingdom guilty of this great sin? This kind of thing should not be done! 10Why have you done this to us?"

11"Well," Abraham said, "I figured this to be a godless place. I thought, 'They will want my wife and will kill me to get her.' 12Besides, she is my sister--we both have the same father, though different mothers--and I married her. 13When God sent me to travel far from my father's home, I told her, 'Wherever we go, have the kindness to say that you are my sister.' "

14Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen and servants--both men and women--and gave them to Abraham, and he returned his wife, Sarah, to him. 15"Look over my kingdom, and choose a place where you would like to live," Abimelech told him. 16Then he turned to Sarah. "Look," he said, "I am giving your 'brother' a thousand pieces of silver to compensate for any embarrassment I may have caused you. This will settle any claim against me in this matter."

17Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and the other women of the household, so they could have children. 18For the LORD had stricken all the women with infertility as a warning to Abimelech for having taken Abraham's wife.

### **Points of Interest:**

- 'Abraham told people there that his wife, Sarah, was his sister'—Abraham employs the tell-them-you're-my-sister strategy a second time. Over the 25 years since he first responded to God's call, Abraham has been able to trust God for many things; and he's seen God defend him and take care of him in many ways. But, for some reason, this is a tough one for Abraham. He just can't seem to believe that God will protect him from these powerful men who might be attracted to his wife; so he once again decides to abandon his wife to a king in order to save himself. Incidentally, Sarah seems to be quite an attractive older woman. She would be about ninety years old now. People might still be somewhat long-lived by our standards (Abraham and Sarah's father lived to be 205 years old); but Sarah is described as 'very old' and long past child-bearing years, and she calls herself an old, worn-out woman. Yet, a king who could have any woman he wants finds her desirable enough to add her to his harem (And we can surmise that it's not merely Sarah's intellect Abimelech is interested in by the fact that God prohibits him from touching her). I heard a theory once that God supernaturally slowed Sarah's aging process, extending her child-bearing years and making her more youthful in appearance than she was in age. It's mere speculation, and doesn't seem to have any big implications; but I somehow find it intriguing enough that I'm passing it along to you.
- 'That is why I kept you from sinning against me'—I find it interesting that even though Abimelech is completely unaware (at least in this instance) of the fact that he is taking someone else's wife, and that God freely acknowledges that Abimelech is innocent, but that God nonetheless would have considered Abimelech sleeping with Sarah to be a sin. Apparently, God still holds someone culpable for an offense, even if it is done in ignorance. While it seems unfair, it also makes some sense: damage has been done,

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and needs to be accounted for. We implicitly recognize this when we, for example, say, 'Excuse me,' when we bump into someone.

In this particular instance, of course, Abraham is mostly to blame for the situation. It is God, more than Abraham, whom Abimelech has offended; God is the one who is most concerned to protect Sarah, for her own sake and for the sake of the child God has planned to give her. It would be a terrible thing for Sarah, for Abraham, and for God's purposes if Sarah were to have a child with Abimelech rather than Abraham. So, to protect Sarah, to protect his purposes, and to save Abimelech from unknowingly making a grave error, God sends a warning to Abimelech.

- 'I figured this to be a godless place'—at least from what we see here, Abraham seems to have underestimated Abimelech. Abimelech is someone who hears God, and who responds quickly and wholeheartedly to what he hears. It is Abraham, not Abimelech, who is acting godlessly in this story.
- 'the LORD had stricken all the women with infertility'—God is so concerned that Sarah not end up having a child with Abimelech that he temporarily puts a halt to all pregnancies in the village.

### **Taking it home:**

- *For you and your family:* Do you find yourself making the same mistake over and over again? Fortunately, God is very patient with us as we continue to work on our weak points; he wants us to thrive and to succeed. Ask God to protect you in your area of weakness, just like he did for Abraham. Also, ask him to provide what you need to break the pattern; often, what it takes is a greater measure of faith that God will meet some specific need. Abraham trusted God deeply in many areas of his life, but for some reason he simply couldn't believe that God would protect him from these potential rival suitors. Is there something you don't trust God to provide or some area in which you don't trust him to back you? Is it at all related to your area of habitual failing? Ask God to give you a new infusion of faith that he can provide for you in that way better than you can provide for yourself.
- *For our church:* Abraham made an assumption that Abimelech was a lot less connected to God or interested in his ways than Abimelech actually was. I think it's all too common a mistake that religious people make of non-religious people. By God's grace, we're a church that has had at least some success at being a welcome place for people who aren't necessarily from a church background. Even so, we can have some tendencies to fall into an us/them mentality, along with ungracious or simply wrong perceptions of 'them.' Pray that God would give us the wisdom to avoid pre-judgments of people, particularly of people who are visiting us for the first time. Pray that anyone who visits our church or interacts with anyone who represents it would feel respected, listened to, and thought well of.
- *For our city:* The LORD is a God who actually wants to communicate directly with people. He spoke to Abimelech in a dream, and it changed Abimelech's life. Pray for an outpouring of dreams from God all over the city. Pray that God would be communicating with people, guiding them, and helping them even in their sleep.

### **Wednesday, April 5th**

#### **Genesis 21: 1-7**

1Then the LORD did exactly what he had promised. 2Sarah became pregnant, and she gave a son to Abraham in his old age. It all happened at the time God had said it would.

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3And Abraham named his son Isaac. 4Eight days after Isaac was born, Abraham circumcised him as God had commanded. 5Abraham was one hundred years old at the time.

6And Sarah declared, "God has brought me laughter! All who hear about this will laugh with me. 7For who would have dreamed that I would ever have a baby? Yet I have given Abraham a son in his old age!"

### Points of Interest:

- 'the LORD did exactly what he had promised'—today's passage is short and simple. There aren't any plot twists or strange mysteries to explore in this episode, but it's perhaps the most significant moment of our story thus far. The long-awaited promise finally comes true. God shows himself faithful, and Abraham and Sarah have their deep and seemingly impossible longing met and one of their big promises from God fulfilled.
- 'It all happened at the time God had said it would'—it takes much longer than Abraham and Sarah wanted or expected—25 years—but in the end it happens when God predicted.
- 'God has brought me laughter!'—*Isaac* means 'laughter.' Earlier in our story, Sarah laughs in cynical disbelief, but by his supernatural power God has transformed her laughter into joyous laughter. Isaac's very name will be a continuous reminder of this moment of transformation.
- 'who would have dreamed that I would ever have a baby?'—Sarah is still a little disbelieving, but it's an entirely different kind of disbelief. What has just happened to her is too good to be true—and yet it is true. She's giddy and amazed at what has happened to her.

### Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* If you get a chance today, spend a moment swapping stories with your family, with a housemate, a friend, or a co-worker. What is your favorite story of a time God really came through for you? How did he do it?
- *For our church:* Living a life of following God should produce laughter and joy. It's what God wants for us. Pray that our church would be a place that is overflowing with joy.
- *For our city:* Pray for an outbreak of supernatural gifts from God in our city. Pray for many people who say along with Sarah, 'Who would have dreamed that . . .?' Pray that our whole city would get a taste of the joy and amazement that comes with experiencing a supernatural event.

### Thursday, April 6th

#### Genesis 21: 8-19

8As time went by and Isaac grew and was weaned, Abraham gave a big party to celebrate the happy occasion. 9But Sarah saw Ishmael--the son of Abraham and her Egyptian servant Hagar--making fun of Isaac. 10So she turned to Abraham and demanded, "Get rid of that servant and her son. He is not going to share the family inheritance with my son, Isaac. I won't have it!"

11This upset Abraham very much because Ishmael was his son. 12But God told Abraham, "Do not be upset over the boy and your servant wife. Do just as Sarah says, for Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted. 13But I will make a nation of the descendants of Hagar's son because he also is your son."

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14So Abraham got up early the next morning, prepared food for the journey, and strapped a container of water to Hagar's shoulders. He sent her away with their son, and she walked out into the wilderness of Beersheba, wandering aimlessly. 15When the water was gone, she left the boy in the shade of a bush. 16Then she went and sat down by herself about a hundred yards away. "I don't want to watch the boy die," she said, as she burst into tears.

17Then God heard the boy's cries, and the angel of God called to Hagar from the sky, "Hagar, what's wrong? Do not be afraid! God has heard the boy's cries from the place where you laid him. 18Go to him and comfort him, for I will make a great nation from his descendants."

19Then God opened Hagar's eyes, and she saw a well. She immediately filled her water container and gave the boy a drink. 20And God was with the boy as he grew up in the wilderness of Paran. He became an expert archer, 21and his mother arranged a marriage for him with a young woman from Egypt.

### **Points of Interest:**

- 'But Sarah saw Ishmael making fun of Isaac'—it's the big party to celebrate the fact that God's promises have finally come true, but Ishmael has a hard time joining in. He used to be Abraham's only son; now he's just the servant's son. It's natural enough that it would be difficult for Ishmael to get into a celebratory mood; but it also shows very bad grace to be mocking Isaac at his own party, and it's a bit bullying: Isaac is a toddler, and Ishmael is a teenager. It's understandable that Ishmael would have some feelings and questions about what has just happened, but taking them out on Isaac isn't the best way to address them. I wonder how things could have gone differently if Ishmael had brought his concerns to Abraham or to God, or if he had been able to bless Isaac rather than mock him. It's hard to know, but I imagine that things could have gone better for both Ishmael and Isaac (and perhaps for our whole world) if Ishmael had somehow been able to decide to be a great older brother to Isaac.
- 'This upset Abraham very much because Ishmael was his son'—there's lots of tension between Hagar and Sarah and between their children, and Abraham is stuck in the middle. It's the lasting effect of Sarah and Abraham's faithless decision to try to do things their own way.
- 'Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted'—while God has compassion for Ishmael and willingness to bless him, it doesn't change the fact that Isaac is his heir. It's Isaac's birthright as the son of Abraham's wife, and it's also an important element of God's plan. God plans to bring about his promises through Isaac because Isaac is a living example of God's supernatural power. More than any wealth he gathers or land he is promised, Abraham's legacy is a life lived in trust of God's goodness and supernatural power. It is this belief that Isaac is to pass on to his descendants and ultimately to the whole world.
- 'He sent her away with their son'—Ishmael and Isaac can't continue to live in the same camp; so Hagar and Ishmael are sent away. There's a certain harsh and unpleasant reality to this event, but it doesn't mean that Ishmael is necessarily completely abandoned or that his life is doomed. Ishmael has a great example in his father of the fact that a life that begins this way can turn out quite well. Just like Ishmael, Abraham is an older son who left his father's home with nothing. There's hope for Ishmael, even in the wilderness, if he can trust God to provide for him.

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- 'God has heard the boy's cries'—just like the last time Hagar ran away into the desert, God shows that he sees and hears her, and that he will take care of her.
- 'God opened Hagar's eyes, and she saw a well'—it's notable that God did not create the well. The well was always there, but Hagar's hopelessness and fear made her unable to see it. She and her son could have died of thirst right next to a well. God does a little spiritual surgery on Hagar's eyes so that she can see the signs of hope around her.

### **Taking it home:**

- *For you and your family:* God had shown Hagar once before that he saw her situation and he heard her cry, but her confidence had waned over time. She needed a fresh reminder that God cared about her and her son. Do you need a refresher from God? Ask God to give you a new dose of confidence in his care for you.
- *For our church:* Pray that God would protect our church from jealousy and competition. Ask that God would give us the ability to bless other churches and to truly celebrate whatever success they experience.
- *For our city:* Hope goes a long way. Without hope, Hagar could have died of thirst within reach of a well. With hope, Hagar could believe that her son would be the father of a great nation. Pray for the people of our city, that they would be filled with a hope that comes from God. Pray particularly for people who feel hopeless or seem to be stuck at a dead-end. Ask God to give them an infusion of hope, and to point them toward the things that they need to move forward.

### **Friday, April 7<sup>th</sup>**

#### **Genesis 21: 22-34**

22About this time, Abimelech came with Phicol, his army commander, to visit Abraham. "It is clear that God helps you in everything you do," Abimelech said. 23"Swear to me in God's name that you won't deceive me, my children, or my grandchildren. I have been loyal to you, so now swear that you will be loyal to me and to this country in which you are living."

24Abraham replied, "All right, I swear to it!" 25Then Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well that Abimelech's servants had taken violently from Abraham's servants.

26"This is the first I've heard of it," Abimelech said. "And I have no idea who is responsible. Why didn't you say something about this before?" 27Then Abraham gave sheep and oxen to Abimelech, and they made a treaty. 28But when Abraham took seven additional ewe lambs and set them off by themselves, 29Abimelech asked, "Why are you doing that?"

30Abraham replied, "They are my gift to you as a public confirmation that I dug this well." 31So ever since, that place has been known as Beersheba--"well of the oath"--because that was where they had sworn an oath. 32After making their covenant, Abimelech left with Phicol, the commander of his army, and they returned home to the land of the Philistines. 33Then Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and he worshiped the LORD, the Eternal God, at that place. 34And Abraham lived in Philistine country for a long time.

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### Points of Interest:

- 'It is clear that God helps you'—Abimelech sees that Abraham has something special. He wants to be friends with someone who is such a friend of God.
- 'Swear to me in God's name that you won't deceive me'—Abraham hasn't exactly proven himself to be trustworthy in his previous interaction with Abimelech.
- 'swear that you will be loyal to me and to this country in which you are living'—Abraham is what the INS might call a resident alien. He's been living in Philistia for quite some time, but he's not a local or even necessarily a permanent resident. If Abraham is going to continue to live in Philistine country, Abimelech wants to know that Abraham is a friend. Will Abraham side with the Philistines, or their enemies? Will he be a good neighbor? Will he treat the land responsibly? Basically, Abimelech is asking Abraham to tie his interests to the Philistines' interests for as long as he happens to remain in their land.
- 'a well that Abimelech's servants had taken violently'—water is rare in the area, and wells are hard to dig. Abraham's people had done the hard work of digging a new well, only to have it taken away by Abimelech's more numerous servants.
- 'they made a treaty'—it seems like both Abraham and Abimelech are feeling a little vulnerable here. From Abraham's perspective, his household is a small group of people traveling in a strange place, susceptible to being abused by the people around them. From Abimelech's perspective, there's a dangerous stranger wandering around his country. Abraham is a wildcard. At any moment, God may decide to bring his power to bear on Abraham's behalf. Rather than defending themselves from one another or attacking one another, they decide to admit their weaknesses and to agree not to take advantage of one another.
- 'Abraham lived in Philistine country'—the Philistines are a people group distinct from the Canaanites. They are relative newcomers to the area, probably having migrated from the Aegean Sea. They settled in the area between Canaan and Egypt. Our name 'Palestine' is derived from the Philistines.

### Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* God gives Abraham a friend in Abimelech. They have some early misunderstandings, and their initial interactions are a bit awkward; but they work through it and come to a place of mutual understanding and support. How are you feeling about your friendships?
  - Could you use a friend? If so, ask God to bring someone your way.
  - Are you in the midst of conflict with one? Pray that God's grace and peace would bring you through it to a new place of understanding and trust.
  - Are you happy and thriving in your friendships? Thank God for your friends, and ask him to bring you to an even more satisfying place of companionship and support. After all, human beings weren't meant to be alone.
- *For our church:* Pray that God's favor would be on us in obvious ways. Pray that God truly would be with us, and that people would be drawn to us because it is obvious that we know God and that God helps us in what we do.
- *For our city:* Like Abraham in Philistia, many of us Boston residents are actually fairly recent arrivals, and we don't know how long we'll be here. Ask God to plant a love for Boston in the hearts of us transplants. Pray that Boston's transplants would be cheering for the city's success and investing in its future for as long as we remain in town.

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**Saturday, April 8th**

**Genesis 22: 1-12**

1 Later on God tested Abraham's faith and obedience. "Abraham!" God called.

"Yes," he replied. "Here I am."

2 "Take your son, your only son--yes, Isaac, whom you love so much--and go to the land of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will point out to you."

3 The next morning Abraham got up early. He saddled his donkey and took two of his servants with him, along with his son Isaac. Then he chopped wood to build a fire for a burnt offering and set out for the place where God had told him to go. 4 On the third day of the journey, Abraham saw the place in the distance. 5 "Stay here with the donkey," Abraham told the young men. "The boy and I will travel a little farther. We will worship there, and then we will come right back."

6 Abraham placed the wood for the burnt offering on Isaac's shoulders, while he himself carried the knife and the fire. As the two of them went on together, 7 Isaac said, "Father?"

"Yes, my son," Abraham replied.

"We have the wood and the fire," said the boy, "but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?"

8 "God will provide a lamb, my son," Abraham answered. And they both went on together.

9 When they arrived at the place where God had told Abraham to go, he built an altar and placed the wood on it. Then he tied Isaac up and laid him on the altar over the wood.

10 And Abraham took the knife and lifted it up to kill his son as a sacrifice to the LORD.

11 At that moment the angel of the LORD shouted to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Yes," he answered. "I'm listening."

12 "Lay down the knife," the angel said. "Do not hurt the boy in any way, for now I know that you truly fear God. You have not withheld even your beloved son from me."

### **Points of Interest:**

- 'God tested Abraham's faith and obedience'—God continues to raise the stakes with Abraham. It's not enough that Abraham once lived by faith. God would like him to continue to walk in faith, which means to continue to trust God to provide him with an ever-better life through unexpected means. Each new step of faith brings greater blessing, and also a bigger next step of faith. Abraham's walk with God began with God asking Abraham to leave his family and his home behind, trusting that God would provide even more abundantly. Now, God is asking Abraham to give up something even more valuable: his son.
- 'your only son'—Isaac is probably referred to as an only son because Ishmael has left the household to form his own family.
- 'Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering'-- any good father values his children above all else and would do anything for them. Although it scarcely seems possible, Abraham's attachment to Isaac might go even deeper than normal: Abraham waited 25 years for this child; his birth was a miracle; he is the sign of God's blessing on Abraham; and God has told Abraham that Isaac is the means by which God will fulfill his promises to Abraham and bring blessing to the whole world. It is this son that God is asking Abraham.

# *In the Beginning: Genesis 1 to 25*

## Week 5

Culturally speaking, it might not have been as completely shocking and repulsive to Abraham as it is to us that God would ask him to sacrifice his son. Worshippers were expected to sacrifice a portion of their yield—including children—to Ancient Near Eastern fertility gods. God had provided, and he deserves his share. Shockingly, though, the share he is asking for is everything. Furthermore, what God is asking here seems entirely out of character with everything we have seen of him thus far in Genesis. This is the same God who provided every good thing for the man and the woman in the garden of Eden. This is the God who made the first sacrifice himself, in order to cover the shame of the man and the woman. This is the God who has repeatedly promised Abraham that he wants to shower him with countless blessing. This is the God whose mission is to spread goodness and abundance to fill the world. This is the God who commanded humanity to multiply to fill the earth, and who specifically provided Abraham and Sarah with this son so that they could multiply and fill the earth with blessing. What could possibly motivate him to ask something so cruel?

Thankfully, Moses gives us a hint as to God's purpose in his introduction of the story. God's intent here is not to take anything away from Abraham. His purpose is to see just how far Abraham is willing and able to trust him. Remember that Abraham's father Terah started on a journey of faith, but he eventually settled down halfway to his goal. God wants to see if Abraham will follow him all the way. Terah apparently ended his life in a state of inconsolable mourning for his dead son. God wants to see if Abraham is able to believe God for a good life beyond the life of his son.

This test God is willing to put Abraham through is unbelievably intense. It's disturbing. Again and again, we've seen people in Genesis making a choice between trusting God and trusting their own reason and senses. Here's the most extreme case of that exact same choice. The question put before Abraham and before us readers of the story is, having trusted in God's goodness thus far, will we draw the line here or will we continue to trust? Can we trust God that even in this most bizarre, disturbing, intense case he will prove to have our best interests in mind?

Thankfully for us, Abraham decides to listen to God. We have the privilege of seeing how it works out for him, so that our faith can be strengthened. Nonetheless, it's a hard thing to accept.

- 'God will provide a lamb, my son'—perhaps Abraham is speaking obliquely of Isaac, the sacrifice that God has provided. Perhaps, though, Abraham truly believes that, in the end, God will provide a replacement for his son. The writer of Hebrews, one of the books of the Bible's New Testament, offers a different, and even more amazing, explanation of what Abraham was hoping; he or she suggests that Abraham believed that God would resurrect Isaac after the sacrifice (Hebrews 11). I'm sure that on the long walk up the mountain, Abraham had the opportunity to consider all of the possible ways that God could bring him through this trial.
- 'Abraham took the knife and lifted it up to kill his son'—Abraham goes to the very limit before God stops him. I love the Rembrandt painting of this moment, where the angel swoops in as the knife is on the downward stroke; he actually grabs Abraham's hand and knocks the knife out of it. Even if it's not quite accurate to the story, it captures the incredible drama of this moment.
- 'Lay down the knife'—God's command takes a radical about-face, from 'Sacrifice your son,' to, 'lay down the knife.'

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- 'You have not withheld even your beloved son'—a foreshadowing of God's own choice not to withhold his beloved, only son Jesus. God goes further with his own son, actually completing the sacrifice—and then raising Jesus from the dead, just as the writer of Hebrews suggests was possible for Isaac.

### **Taking it home:**

- *For you and your family:* Are there any faith risks God is asking you or your family to make right now? What are they, and how do you feel about them? What, if anything, is making you hesitate? What assurances do you need from God in order to step forward? If it sounds like something you would like, consider asking God to give you faith like Abraham's: an utter conviction that God always has your best interests in mind.
- *For our church:* Navigating this tricky and intense situation took good hearing and quick ears on Abraham's part. He had to be sure that God had spoken to him in the first place, and he had to be able to hear when God's instructions changed direction. Ask God to pour out a gift of good spiritual ears on our entire church. Pray that every single one of us would grow in our ability to hear God and in our quickness in hearing him.
- *For our city:* Earlier this week, we prayed that God would be speaking to people all across our city, particularly asking that he would speak to people in their dreams. Today, let's pray that people would be able to hear and ready to respond as God speaks to them. Pray that God would be opening up ears to hear him all across Boston.

### **Sunday, April 9th**

#### **Genesis 22: 13-24**

13Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a bush. So he took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering on the altar in place of his son. 14Abraham named the place "The LORD Will Provide." This name has now become a proverb: "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

15Then the angel of the LORD called again to Abraham from heaven, 16"This is what the LORD says: Because you have obeyed me and have not withheld even your beloved son, I swear by my own self that 17I will bless you richly. I will multiply your descendants into countless millions, like the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore. They will conquer their enemies, 18and through your descendants, all the nations of the earth will be blessed--all because you have obeyed me." 19Then they returned to Abraham's young men and traveled home again to Beersheba, where Abraham lived for quite some time.

20Soon after this, Abraham heard that Milcah, his brother Nahor's wife, had borne Nahor eight sons. 21The oldest was named Uz, the next oldest was Buz, followed by Kemuel (the father of Aram), 22Kesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel. 23Bethuel became the father of Rebekah. 24In addition to his eight sons from Milcah, Nahor had four other children from his concubine Reumah. Their names were Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

### **Points of Interest:**

- 'Abraham looked up and saw a ram'—it happens just as Abraham had said. Whether it was a merciful lie to Isaac or a true hope of Abraham's, his prediction of a ram being provided comes true.
- 'in place of his son'—God provides Abraham with a suitable, alternative sacrifice to make in gratitude for the birth of his son.

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- 'The LORD Will Provide'—not 'The LORD has provided,' but 'The LORD will provide.' Abraham has reached a place of utter confidence that God will always provide.
- 'all because you have obeyed me'—it's important to emphasize once again that Abraham's obedience is an obedience of faith. It's not as if Abraham has done God some great service; nor has Abraham followed some complicated system of religious rules and rituals to prove his worthiness. Rather, he has shown through his actions that he trusts God. He believes that God will provide for him, and because of that, there is no limit to what God can give him.
- 'Abraham heard that Milcah, his brother Nahor's wife, had borne Nahor eight sons'—after long separation, he hears some news from his family back in Haran. Perhaps a traveling caravan has brought the news, or maybe a servant was sent as a messenger to re-establish connection.

### **Taking it home:**

- *For you and your family:* Abraham named this place, 'The LORD will provide,' as a lasting testimony to God's power and his goodness. Take a moment today to reflect on the ways God has provided for you. Like we did a few days ago, look for another opportunity to share a story of God's provision with your family, your friends, or your housemate. Also think about something you need God to provide now or soon. Ask him to provide for you in that regard, just as he has in these previous stories of provision.
- *For our church:* Abraham had the kind of faith that put no cap on what God could and would do for him and through him. Pray that we as a whole church would grow in our faith, so that we can receive all of the blessings and take on all of the purposes God has for us.
- *For our city:* Like Abraham, many of us are separated by a long distance from our extended families. It can sometimes be a somewhat lonely or disconnected way to live. Pray for the family relationships of the people in our city. Ask God to give everyone who lives far away from their families the connection with them they need to thrive.