

# **Father Abraham** *The Obedience of Faith*

A Study of Genesis by Stan Key

## **Answer Guide**



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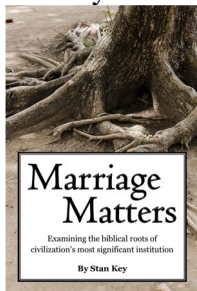
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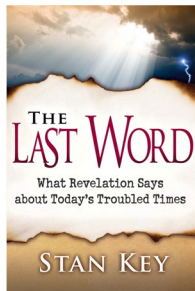
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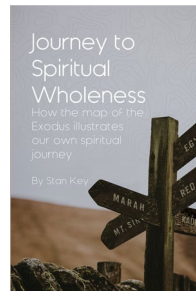
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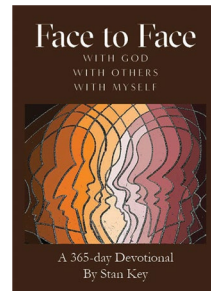
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# Father Abraham

## *The Obedience of Faith*

### THE CALL

*Genesis 12:1–9*

#### I. The Big Picture of Genesis

- A. The call of Abraham serves as a kind of pivot or hinge. The narrative changes dramatically with Genesis 12.

Genesis 1–11	Genesis 12–50
Universal history	History of <b>the Hebrews</b> (the patriarchs)
The despair of rampant wickedness	The <b>hope</b> of redemption
God’s anger and judgment on the world	God’s gracious <b>election</b> of Israel
Ends with God’s judgment on the nations (Babel)	Ends with the Hebrews blessing on Egypt
Satan is bruising the heel of <b>the seed of the woman</b>	The seed of the woman is beginning to crush the head of the serpent
Babel’s tower cannot reach God	God comes down to reach man
The failure of the City of Man	The search for the <b>City of God</b>
Several thousand years	Perhaps 300 years
The problem ( <b>sin</b> and <b>judgment</b> )	The solution (a <b>chosen</b> people, the <b>covenant</b> )

#### B. The Patriarchs: Genesis 12–50

Our study of Genesis will now focus on four primary characters: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. The narrative basically falls into three divisions:

<b>Abraham</b> and his sons, Ishmael and Isaac (especially Isaac)	Isaac and his sons, Esau and <b>Jacob</b> (especially Jacob)	Jacob and his 12 sons (especially <b>Joseph</b> )
Gn 12:1–25:18	Gn 25:19–36:43	Gn 37:1–50:26

#### II. Father Abraham (Genesis 12:1–9)

- A. It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of Genesis 12. Not only is Abraham’s call important for historical reasons, just as importantly, it serves as a **model** for everyone who pursues righteousness and seeks the Lord.

*Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord:  
look to the rock from which you were hewn,  
and to the quarry from which you were dug.  
Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you;  
for he was but one when I called him,  
that I might bless him and multiply him. (Isaiah 51:1–2)*

- B. Abraham’s historical significance is seen in the fact that he is the **biological** father of 12 million Jews and 1 billion Muslims. Beyond that, the New Testament insists that Abraham is also the **spiritual** father of anyone who puts their faith in Jesus

Christ. “If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring” (Gal 3:29; see also Gal 3:7; Rom 4:16).<sup>1</sup>

C. In Abraham’s life there are numerous themes that will have a profound impact on the remainder of human history in general and salvation history in particular:

1. **The Covenant** (Gn 15 and 17). One could argue that the concept of covenant is *the* dominant theme in the whole Bible. The Bible itself is divided into two parts: the Old and New Covenants (Testaments). We have already seen the covenant with Noah (Gn 8:20–9:17). And there will be future covenants with Moses and David. But the *Abrahamic Covenant* is the first and most foundational covenant that speaks to the need of a restored **relationship** between God and man. The sign of this covenant is **circumcision**.
2. **Salvation as Journey**. Standing at the beginning of salvation history, Abraham anchors us in understanding salvation and faith as a journey. From Ur to Haran to Canaan to Egypt and back to Canaan, Abraham lived as a pilgrim as he follows God’s call. The symbol of his life is a **tent**. God’s greatest work is done in the humble tents of a family, not in the arrogant walls of a city.

*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. . . .*

*[Abraham] died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were **strangers** and **exiles** on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. (Hebrews 11:8–10, 13–14)*

3. **Worship**. Converted out of idolatrous paganism (see Jos 24:2–3), Abraham exhibited the zeal and passion of all **first-generation** believers. We will see how this passionate love for God becomes somewhat **diluted** when it is passed on to the second (Isaac) and third (Jacob) generations. But with the fourth generation (Joseph), we see a rediscovery of Abrahamic worship.

A second symbol of Abraham’s life, then, is the **altar**: a place of worship, praise, encounter, sacrifice, public testimony. You can chart Abraham’s journeys by following the altars that he built: at Shechem (Gn 12:6–7), at Bethel (Gn 12:8; 13:2–4), at Hebron (Gn 13:18), at Moriah (Gn 22:9–19).

4. **Family**. The Abraham narrative is full of information about Abraham’s success and failure as a husband<sup>2</sup> and as a father. It is no accident that we speak of “*Father Abraham*.” God is teaching us that before Abraham can be the leader of a “great nation” (Gn 12:2), he must *first* learn to be a great **husband** and a great **father**. His record in this respect is mixed.

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<sup>1</sup> The New Testament not only says that those who are not biological descendants of Abraham may indeed become his children but it also insists that “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they belong to his offspring” (Rom 9:6–7; see also Mt 3:9; Jn 8:39).

<sup>2</sup> Twice he claimed Sarah was his sister to protect himself (Gn 12:10–19; 20:1–18), once he slept with a family servant (Gn 16), and after Sarah’s death he married Keturah and had other concubines and children (Gn 25:1–6).

5. *How to be **right with God (righteous)**.* Abraham had such a good relationship with God that he was called God's **friend** (Isa 41:8; Jas 2:23). In other words, Abraham was right with God (= justified) 430 years **before** the Law was given on Mount Sinai (see Gal 3:17). In Abraham's day there was no Temple, no Law, no priests, no liturgy, no Jewish religion, etc. Abraham "believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Gn 15:8). Abraham is the supreme example of **justification by faith**.
6. This introduces us to the primary theme in Abraham's life: **faith**. And though his faith will be tested many times, it is his **first step** of faith that sets the stage for all that follows. We will understand Abraham's faith only when we understand **his call**. Likewise, in our own personal journey, we will never grasp the significance of faith until we grasp the significance of God's call.

### III. Abraham's Call

*Now the Lord said [or, had said] to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3)*

#### A. Analysis of the text.

1. There is one primary **command** that has two aspects (Gn 12:1):
  - **Go from.** Leave your family, your tribe, and all that is familiar, comfortable, and safe.
  - **Go to.** I'll not yet tell you where to go but I'll show you the way. Begin a journey.

Note:

- a. This is a verbal command. It came in **words**: "The Lord said . . ." This reminds us of Genesis 1 when the Lord *spoke* and created the universe. It reminds us also of Jesus' initial call to his disciples: "Follow me" (Mk 1:17). So too with Abraham. The magi may have responded to a visual invitation when they followed a star (see Mt 2:1-2), but salvation only comes through the Word of God! "Faith comes from **hearing**, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17).
  - b. The **two-fold** nature of the command (to *go from* and to *go to*) points to the foundational necessity of making a clean break with our past (idols, securities, identities, comforts, etc.) and of moving toward the future that God has prepared for us (the City of God, the people of God, a life of service, fruitfulness, significance, etc.). "He brought us out . . . to bring us in . . ." (Deut 6:23). In general terms, this corresponds to **repentance** and **faith**; emptying our lives so that God may fill them.
2. There is a seven-fold **promise**. This promise is **conditional**. Abraham must first leave his old life for these promises to be realized. Faith must show itself in **obedience**. Note the "I will" statements:
    - a. "I will show you" the way to go (Gn 12:1).
    - b. "I will make you a **great nation**" (Gn 12:2). In other words, you will have many descendants. But there is a problem: Sarai is **barren** (Gn 11:30). This will constitute one of Abraham's greatest tests of faith!

- c. “I will bless you” (Gn 12:2).
  - d. “I will make your **name great**” (Gn 12:2). Remember that the builders of the Tower of Babel aspired to make their own name great (see Gn 10:4). Abraham shows us that true greatness is a gift of God not a human achievement. But it is a gift that God longs to give!
  - e. “I will bless those who bless you” (Gn 12:3).
  - f. “I will curse those who dishonor you” (Gn 12:3).
  - g. “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gn 12:3). God’s real interest in electing and blessing Abraham is *not* Abraham! He is chosen not for his sake, but for the sake of **the world**! He is blessed to be a blessing. He is a channel, not a reservoir.
- B. Abraham “went, as the Lord had told him” (Gn 12:4). Note it well: faith is not mere **mental assent** to certain truths. The demons have this kind faith and tremble (Jas 2:19). Abraham did not merely believe *in* God; he trusted God’s character. He took God at his word and acted on the promises. Faith without works is dead (Jas 2:14–26). True faith always expresses itself in **obedience**. (Do you believe in bungee jumping?)
- C. When Abraham stepped out in faith and began the journey of salvation, God then **appeared** to him and added another important element to the promise: “To your offspring I will give this **land**” (Gn 12:7). But there is problem. There are **Canaanites** in the land (Gn 12:6). Furthermore, the land of promise is experiencing **famine** (Gn 12:10). Just as God will test Abraham’s faith when it comes to his promise of children, so he will test Abraham’s faith when it comes to his promise to give him the land.
- IV. What about You? Are You Called?
- A. The real problem for most people is not that God is not calling; the problem is that they are not **listening**!
1. John Muir (1838–1914), mountaineer, and one of the fathers of the U.S. National Parks, famously said: “The mountains are **calling**, and I must go . . .”
  2. Oswald Chambers: “The call of God is like the call of the sea, or of the mountains; no one hears these calls but the one who has the nature of the sea or of the mountains; and no one hears the call of God who has not the nature of God in him.”<sup>3</sup>
- B. Six characteristics of a call.
1. It is **initiated** by God. There is no calling without a Caller. Abraham didn’t choose his life work; he was **chosen**! Babel’s Tower had taught him the futility of trying to reach God. God was looking for Abraham—and Abraham was listening! The Lord called on the name of Abraham long before Abraham called on the name of the Lord (Gn 12:8). Frodo, in *Lord of the Rings*, often struggled with his calling: “Why was I chosen?” Every child of God recognizes this basic truth: “You did not choose me, but I chose you . . .” (Jn 15:16).
  2. Answering the call will be the **most important** decision of your life—and the most difficult. God gave very little information to Abraham at first. He just said, “Go . . . Leave . . .” All Abraham knew was that his current reality must change.

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<sup>3</sup> Chambers, 864.

His call became clear only as he obeyed! It made sense only in the **rearview mirror**. If we insist on clarity and explanations before we begin, we will never begin! “In the spiritual domain, nothing is explained until we obey.”<sup>4</sup>

3. The call is to a **journey** as much as to a destination. Like Enoch and Noah, Abraham **walked** with God (Gn 5:22; 6:9; 17:1). God’s answer to the question “Where are we going?” is always the promise, “I will show you.” So, Abraham went out “not knowing where he was going” (Heb 11:8). Abraham lived in tents all his days. He was a pilgrim and stranger. The only real estate he owned in Canaan was a **burial plot** (Gn 23). “All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Rom 8:14).
4. The call is to a **relationship** as much as it is to a task. Abraham was a friend of God. The call to walk with God was an invitation to intimacy. Jesus appointed the twelve, first of all, to be **with him** and then to send them out to preach (Mk 3:13–15). The call is first **to be** something and then **to do** something. Who you are is much more important than what you do!
5. Responding to the call will **cost you everything**. Abraham has to leave his home and family to follow the call. Eventually, he will be asked to sacrifice his only son (Gn 22). “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die” (Bonhoeffer). The only way to move forward on the journey of salvation is to leave everything behind (like a trapeze artist wanting to jump to the next trapeze . . . he must let go).
6. The call is **not about me**, it is about others. God called Abraham so that he could bless the nations through him. God blessed Abraham so that Abraham could be a blessing. The doctrine of election has nothing to do with **favoritism**! It has everything to do with being used for the sake of others! Luis Palau (*Urbana*, 1976): “Christians are a lot like **manure** . . . .”

C. Abraham’s true children

The New Testament makes clear that to be a true child of Abraham is not a matter of biology but rather a matter of faith to:

- *Hear* God’s call.
- *Believe* the promises.
- Start *walking*; it’s a journey.
- Live as a stranger and *pilgrim*.
- *Be a blessing*.

Remember: Faith is not the result of human striving. It is the gift of God. “Faith comes from **hearing**, and hearing through the word of Christ (Rom 10:17).

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<sup>4</sup> Chambers, 866.



## QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Am I listening? There is no calling without a Caller. The problem is always in our ears and hearts, not in the Voice of the One who calls.
2. Am I responding in faith to the will of God that I understand? Don't wait for clarity. That will come later. Take the first step.
3. Are my bags "packed"? Do I live in a "tent"?
4. Am I a channel of blessing to others? Or do God's blessings stop with me?

## He Leadeth Me: O Blessed Thought

By Joseph H. Gilmore (1862)

*He leadeth me! O blessed thought,  
O words with heav'nly comfort fraught;  
Whate'er I do, where'er I be,  
Still 'tis Christ's hand that leadeth me.*

Chorus:

He leadeth me! He leadeth me!  
By His own hand He leadeth me;  
His faithful follower I would be,  
For by His hand He leadeth me.

*Sometimes 'mid scenes of deepest gloom,  
Sometimes where Eden's bowers bloom,  
By waters still, o'er troubled sea,  
Still 'tis His hand that leadeth me.*

*Lord, I would clasp Thy hand in mine,  
Nor ever murmur or repine;  
Content, whatever lot I see,  
Since it is Thou that leadest me.*

*And when my task on earth is done,  
When, by Thy grace, the vict'ry's won,  
E'en death's cold wave I will not flee,  
Since Thou in triumph leadest me.*



# Father Abraham

## *The Obedience of Faith*

### THE TEST OF FAITH

*Genesis 12:10–13:18*

#### I. Understanding Faith

Abraham is the supreme example of faith.<sup>1</sup> Paul calls him “the father of all who believe” (Rom 4:11). Therefore, understanding faith is necessary not only in helping us to discover the significance of Abraham but also in learning what it means for us.

##### A. Without faith:

1. It is impossible to **please God** (Heb 11:6).
2. We will fail to do the **work** of God (Jn 6:28–29).
3. We cannot be **saved** (Acts 16:30–31).
4. We have no **shield** to protect us from satanic attacks (Eph 6:16).
5. We will be unable to do anything but **sin** (Rom 14:23).
6. We will be condemned and go to **hell** (Jn 3:18).

##### B. With faith:

1. Nothing is **impossible** (Mt 17:20).
2. We receive whatever we ask in **prayer** (Mt 21:22).
3. We can **overcome** the world (1 Jn 5:4).

##### C. This explains why:

1. Followers of Jesus are called “**believers**” (Acts 2:44; 5:14; etc.).
2. The Christian religion is called “**The Faith**” (1 Tm 4:6; 2 Tm 4:7; Jude 3; etc.).

##### D. Faith is not:

1. **Optimism.** A cheery, positive outlook on life is not faith. “Don’t worry, everything will work out in the end.”
2. **Sincerity.** “Some trust in chariots and some in horses . . .” (Ps 20:7). Sincere and passionate faith in an unworthy object is foolishness, not faith!
3. **Mental assent.** Affirming and recognizing that God exists is not faith. Even the demons have this level of “faith”—and they tremble (Jas 2:19).
4. **A leap in the dark.** Many seem to believe that what matters is the leap, the commitment, being authentic. No, that is putting faith in faith. Faith never saved anyone! It is the *object* of faith that is of supreme importance.

##### E. Faith is:

1. **Trust.** There will certainly be an **intellectual** component to faith and perhaps an **emotional** component. But at its core, biblical faith is **volitional**; an act of the will. It is simply taking God at his word and acting on the assumption that he will do what he has promised.

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<sup>1</sup> “Faith” is the noun, “to believe” is the verb. Though the terms in English are different, in Greek the root form is the same.

2. In this sense, faith is almost indistinguishable from **obedience**.
  - “By faith Abraham *obeyed* when he was called . . .” (Heb 11:8).
  - “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever *does not obey* the Son shall not see life . . .” (Jn 3:36).
  - “We have received grace and apostleship to bring about *the obedience of faith* for the sake of his name among all the nations . . .” (Rom 1:5; see also Rom 16:26).
  - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, writes: “Faith is only real when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience” (64).
3. Faith does not save us, but it is **the link** that connects us to the One who can (like an electric cord). Small faith in a great God is much preferable to great faith in a false god. Note the prepositions: “For **by grace** you have been saved **through faith** . . . For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **for good works** . . .” (Eph 2:8–10).

## II. The Test of Faith

- A. We have seen how God called Abraham and gave him two incredible promises: 1) to make him a great nation (he will have **many children**), and 2) to give him the **land of Canaan**. We briefly were introduced to two possible problems: Sarai is **barren** (Gn 11:30) and there are **Canaanites** living in the land (Gn 12:6).
- B. Untested faith is no faith at all. So, God arranges a series of **tests** that will prove the authenticity of Abraham’s faith. Some of these tests he will pass. Some he will fail. But when he comes to the **supreme test** (final exam) of his life on Mount Moriah, Abraham passes with flying colors. In response, God says, “**Now I know** that you fear God” (Gn 22:12).
- C. But **why** does God need to test our faith? Is he cruel? Isn’t taking that initial step of faith (leaving Ur and starting the journey) enough? Two passages in the New Testament are instructive:
  - “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that *the testing of your faith* produces **steadfastness**. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be **perfect** and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jas 1:2–4).
  - “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that *the tested genuineness of your faith*—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in **praise and glory and honor** at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pt 1:6–7).

## III. Three Tests for Abraham (Genesis 12:10–13:18)

- A. Read Genesis 12:7 then 12:10. The test of **adversity**.

*Key Question:* Can I trust God when he **disappoints** and **underperforms**?

*Abraham’s grade:* **F**

  1. When Abraham discovered that the Land of Promise resembled **Death Valley**, he packed up and left. Did I leave Ur for *this*? Is this some kind of cruel joke? No, it is a test! But Abraham wasn’t ready. The faith that got him to Canaan wasn’t strong enough to sustain him there!

2. There is no indication that he prayed or sought God's will. He just did what seemed **logical** at the time. This is not the only time in Scripture when the people of God put their trust in **Egypt**. "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help . . . but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord!" (Isa 31:1).
3. Once on the wrong path, other decisions only **deepen the crisis** of faith. Three bad consequences happen in Egypt:
  - a. Marital strife between Abraham and **Sarah**.
  - b. **Lot** is captured by the glitter of Egyptian worldliness (the City of Man).
  - c. **Abraham** becomes rich. Pharaoh rewards him. But ill-gotten gain is dangerous. Among the Egyptian "female servants" (Gn 12:16) was a woman named **Hagar**.

B. Read Genesis 12:11–20. The test of threats to my **self-interest**.

*Key Question:* Can I trust God when I'm in **danger**?

*Abraham's grade:* **F**

1. Pharaoh collects women<sup>2</sup> for his harem. Abraham places self-protection over his marriage.<sup>3</sup> His motivation is brazenly **selfish**: "Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you . . ." (Gn 12:13).<sup>4</sup> To save his own skin, he puts his wife (and the mother of the future Messiah!) in the harem of a pagan king.<sup>5</sup>
2. Actually, Sarah is Abraham's sister; same father but different mothers (see Gn 20:12). So, Abraham's story is a **half-truth**.
3. Abraham may have failed to protect his wife, but God didn't! He sent **plagues** on Pharaoh and his house. Though God had called Abraham to be a blessing to the nations (see Gn 12:2–3), he had become a **curse**!
4. Genesis 12:18–19 is surely one of the most **ironic** scenes in all Scripture: a pagan king rebuking the patriarch Abraham and giving him a lecture on **morality**!

C. Interlude. Read Genesis 13:1–4.

On returning to Canaan, Abraham goes **back to Bethel**, "to the place where he had made an altar at the first" (Gn 13:4; see Gn 12:8). Sobered by the debacle in Egypt, Abraham needs to reset his compass and get back on track. In calling on the name of the Lord, perhaps Abraham said something like this: "Lord, I blew it! I stepped out of your plan for my life. I left the land you gave me and failed to love my wife. Can you forgive me? Will you give me **another chance**?"

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<sup>2</sup> At age 65, Sarah's beauty must have been truly remarkable! She lived to be 127, so she was "only" middle-aged.

<sup>3</sup> This is a tragic example from the one who is called to model fatherhood and the sanctity of the family!

<sup>4</sup> Abraham will pull a similar stunt 25 years later with the king of Gerar, Abimelech (see Gn 20). To make matters worse, his son Isaac will do the same thing (see Gn 26:6–11). The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

<sup>5</sup> The text is unclear whether Pharaoh actually had a sexual relationship with Sarah, but it seems to hint that he did (see Gn 12:15, 19).

D. Read Genesis 13:1–18. The test of **conflict**.

*Key Question:* Can I trust God to watch out for my well-being when there is **strife** and **conflict**?

*Abraham's grade: A*

1. Because of ill-gotten gain in Egypt, Abraham and Lot are very rich. The land cannot support them both. This creates conflict and strife. As the senior partner, Abraham could have resolved the situation by **pulling rank** and mapping out a plan. Surprisingly, he let his worldly, second-hand-faith nephew make the decision. (Something indeed had happened during that worship service at Bethel!)
  2. We will learn more about Lot as the story of Abraham unfolds, but here we catch a glimpse of his true character:
    - a. Lifting up his **eyes**, Lot sees the Jordan Valley (cities of Sodom and Gomorrah) and is reminded of Egypt. **Worldliness** and double-mindedness cause him to “choose for himself” the cities of the valley (Gn 13:10–11).
    - b. Lot moves his tent “**near** Sodom” (Gn 13:12).
    - c. Later, we learn that Lot is living “**in** Sodom” (Gn 14:12).
    - d. Still later, we discover that he is “sitting in **the gate** of Sodom” (Gn 19:1), a place typically reserved for the rulers.
  3. Abraham's **motivation** for giving Lot first choice seems to be two-fold:
    - a. My **relationship** with my nephew is more important than getting my own way. (If only he had said *this* concerning Sarah when he was in Egypt!)
    - b. I can **trust God** to take care of his promises. I don't have to scheme and manipulate to accomplish the will of God. God is able to work it out.
- E. Remember, Abraham's greatest test of faith is yet to come (see Gn 22). These smaller tests are preparing him for his final exam!

*At times, it appears as if God has not only forsaken his word but has deliberately deceived us. We asked him for a particular thing . . . and expected that it would mean the fulness of blessing, and actually it has meant the opposite—upset, trouble and difficulty all around, and we are staggered, until we learn that by this very discipline God is bringing us to the place of entire abandonment to himself.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Chambers, 868.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Where is your faith being tested? \_\_\_\_\_
2. If this lesson has helped you to go “back to Bethel,” what is God asking you to do?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Farther Along

By W. B. Stevens

*Tempted and tried, we're oft made to wonder  
Why it should be thus all the day long;  
While there are others living about us,  
Never molested, though in the wrong.*

*Refrain:*

*Farther along we'll know more about it,  
Farther along we'll understand why;  
Cheer up, my brother, live in the sunshine,  
We'll understand it all by and by.*

*Sometimes I wonder why I must suffer,  
Go in the rain, the cold, and the snow,  
When there are many living in comfort,  
Giving no heed to all I can do. [Refrain]*

*Tempted and tried, how often we question  
Why we must suffer year after year,  
Being accused by those of our loved ones,  
E'en though we've walked in God's holy fear. [Refrain]*

*Often when death has taken our loved ones,  
Leaving our home so lone and so drear,  
Then do we wonder why others prosper,  
Living so wicked year after year. [Refrain]*

*Faithful till death, saith our loving Master;  
Short is our time to labor and wait;  
Then will our toiling seem to be nothing,  
When we shall pass the heavenly gate. [Refrain]*

*Soon we will see our dear, loving Savior,  
Hear the last trumpet sound through the sky;  
Then we will meet those gone on before us,  
Then we shall know and understand why. [Refrain]*



# Father Abraham

## *The Obedience of Faith*

### A LOT TO REMEMBER

*Genesis 13, 14, and 19*

#### I. Don't Forget to Remember

- A. "Remember Lot's wife" (Lk 17:32). My purpose is to call us to obey this **commandment**. In the Greek, it is in the present imperative tense: "*Keep on remembering Lot's wife.*" Jesus never tells us to remember Isaiah, Daniel, or Ruth. But he pleads with us not to forget this nameless woman. Why?
- B. Spiritual amnesia is not cute or innocuous. It is very **serious**. The things we forget typically point to the things that are destroying us and creating dysfunction. Thus, the Bible often call us to remember:
- "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Ex 20:8).
  - "Remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness . . ." (Dt 8:2).
  - "Remember from where you have fallen; repent . . ." (Rv 2:5).
  - "Do this in *remembrance* of me" (Lk 22:19).
- C. To remember involves more than cognitive recall. If your wife tells you to *remember* her birthday, she is not talking about mental awareness of the date in history! To remember means to **act**, to **do something**. Literally, it means to put the *members* of a past event into place again. To forget something is to **dismember** it. So, let's *remember* the story of Lot and his wife.
- D. Lot was Abraham's **nephew**. When Lot's father, Haran, died, Abraham "adopted" him (Gn 11:27–32). This seemed like a perfect match since Abraham had no son and Lot had no father. Thus, Lot was Abraham's potential **heir**. The defining quality of Lot's early life is captured in the phrase, "and Lot went with [Abraham]" (Gn 12:4; 13:1, 5). Abraham walked with **God**. Lot walked with **Abraham** (at first).

#### II. Survey of Lot's Life (Genesis 13, 14, 19)

- A. Lot's choice (Genesis 13:5–13).
1. The ill-gotten gain in Egypt (see Gn 12:16) made both Abraham and Lot wealthy men. The land could not support them both and this resulted in conflict. So, they agreed to separate. Abraham, the senior partner, gave the **first choice** to Lot (a gracious and magnanimous thing to do).
  2. The text is precise in describing Lot's choice:
    - a. He "lifted up his **eyes** . . ." (Gn 13:10). Just as Eve's fall began when her eyes became fixed on something forbidden (Gn 3:6), so with Lot. He assumed that his eyes could be **trusted** to lead him to something good.
    - b. He saw that the Jordan Valley was lush and green, like **Egypt** (Gn 13:10). Lot's experience in Egypt had introduced him to the glitter and glamour of **worldly** pleasures and life styles. He wanted more.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Before the destruction of the cities of the plain, what is today known as the Dead Sea was apparently a fertile, well-watered region. Today, it is one of the harshest environments on earth. The Dead Sea is filled with salt and is 1,286 feet below sea level, the lowest spot on Earth.

- c. “He **chose for himself** all the Jordan Valley” (Gn 13:11). He didn’t pray about his decision or seek counsel. He simply opted for what seemed to be in his best interests.
  - d. He “pitched his tents **near** Sodom” (Gn 13:12 NIV). Though enamored with the glitter of Sodom, he seems to know better than to live **in** this notoriously wicked place (see Gn 13:13).
  - e. “Abraham settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley” (Gn 13:12). We see that Lot’s choice was **outside** the land of promise. This meant he could no longer be considered a possible heir of his uncle; he **could not inherit** the land promised to Abraham.
3. Lot’s choice was the **greatest mistake** of his life. Because he never revisited this tragic moment and repented, his life went **downhill** from here. Let’s pause to analyze Lot’s calamitous choice:
- a. It was **selfish**. What’s in it for me?
  - b. It was based on **external appearances**. He trusted his eyes, his desires. “Let us then learn by this example, that our eyes are not to be trusted.”<sup>2</sup>
  - c. It seemed to be **logical**; grounded in human wisdom.
  - d. It was Lot’s way of **coping** with the conflict with his uncle. He ran away.
- B. Lot’s rescue (Genesis 14:11–16)
1. Lot has now moved out of his tents near Sodom and is living in a house **in the city** itself (Gn 14:12). He has become a **Sodomite**.
  2. When taken captive by an enemy army, Abraham could easily have said: “Not my problem. He made his bed, let him lie in it!” Amazingly, Uncle Abe holds **no grudges** and quietly forms a militia and, in a daring raid, defeats the invading army and brings back all the hostages.
  3. Looking at this story from Lot’s perspective, what should he have learned from this incident?
    - a. I’ve made some bad choices, but **God still loves** me and has a purpose for my life. I need to **repent** and get back on the journey to spiritual wholeness.
    - b. My uncle still loves me and wants to relate to me even though I’ve treated him poorly and have chosen to go my own way. I need to **rebuild the relationship** and get back into fellowship.
    - c. Sodom is **dangerous!** Though prosperous and full of cultural entertainments, it can poison the soul. Maybe this isn’t the best place to live and **raise my family**. Perhaps I should move back to Canaan.
    - d. \_\_\_\_\_.
    - e. \_\_\_\_\_.
    - f. \_\_\_\_\_.

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, quoted by Ross, 287.



- C. Lot's life and legacy (Genesis 19:1, 4–18, 23–29)
1. Lot is now “sitting in the gate” of Sodom (Gn 19:1). This is where the ruling elders sit. He is apparently fully integrated into Sodomite culture and is a respected **civic leader**. He calls the other Sodomites “my brothers” (Gn 19:7).
  2. The visitors are “**angels**” (Gn 19:1). Earlier, they had visited with Abraham and Sarah (see Gn 18:1–8). Only later does Lot learn of their mission (see Gn 19:13). In the Ancient Near East, showing **hospitality** was of supreme importance. The host was to guarantee the safety of his guests.
  3. When we studied Babel (see Gn 11:1–9), we learned that cities in Genesis are hotbeds of wickedness. Sodom is perhaps the worst! We will not see a comparable city until the end of history (Rv 17–18) when Babylon, the **Great Prostitute**, “will be burned up with fire” (see Rv 18:8). Let's describe this “city of man” (Sodom) and its sinful condition:
    - a. Her sin is not the garden variety of sin but is described in extreme terms:
      - “The men of Sodom were wicked, **great** sinners against **the Lord**” (Gn 13:13).
      - “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is **very grave**. I will go down to see . . .” (Gn 18:20–21).
      - “We are about to destroy this place because the **outcry** against its people has become great before the Lord” (Gn 19:13).
      - After naming other sins of Sodom, the Lord says: “They did an **abomination** before me. So, I removed them” (Ezek 16:50).
    - b. Ezekiel 16:49–50 gives a sobering list of sins that were being practiced:

*Sodom's sins were **pride, gluttony, and laziness**, while the **poor and needy** suffered outside her door. She was proud and committed detestable sins, so I wiped her out, as you have seen. (NLT)*
    - c. 2 Peter 2:6–10 gives us more information about this wicked city.

*If by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard); then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge in the lust of **defiling passion** and **despise authority**.*
    - d. The sin of Sodom seems to be summarized in an attitude that cares only for my kind. **Xenophobia** is hatred of the stranger/foreigner and love of my own kind. **Sodomy** is hatred of the other gender and love of my own kind. And **incest** is a preference of family over the detested outsider.

*Sodom is a city notorious for injustice, for that unqualified love of one's own and that unqualified hatred and mistreatment of strangers, exemplified in the attempted homosexual rape of the men-angels visiting Lot. . . . The city thus blinds its inhabitants to*

*the truth silently carried by all strangers and beggars: any stranger or beggar may be a “god in disguise.”<sup>3</sup>*

4. In answer to Abraham’s intercessory prayer (see Gn 18:22–33), Lot is graciously rescued from Sodom’s destruction. But notice:
  - a. He **lingered** and the angels had to coerce him to leave (Gn 19:16).
  - b. He lost his **family**: his married daughters and their husbands and his wife (Gn 19:14, 26).
  - c. He **negotiates** with the angels, asking not to escape to the hills but to be permitted to go to another **city** (Zoar), only a “little one” (Gn 19:17–22).
  - d. The aftermath makes a bad situation even worse<sup>4</sup> when Lot’s daughters make him **drunk** and then **sleep with him** in order to have children. This is the origin of the Moabites and the Ammonites (Gn 19:30–38). One could say that Sodom was **reborn** in that cave!
5. Thus, we learn that it is one thing to get Lot out of Sodom. It is another thing to **get Sodom out of Lot**.

### III. Characteristics of Worldly (Carnal) Christians<sup>5</sup>

- A. **Second-hand** faith. As long as Lot walked with Abraham (who walked with God) his life seemed to be okay, but once he separated from Abraham, the truth came out!
- B. Trusts his **eyes** (desires). Lot wanted what he wanted. He leaned on his own understanding and trusted his instincts. He did what his heart told him to do.
- C. Foolishly assumes **he can resist** the corrosive influence of sin. He sees (ogles) Sodom (Gn 13:10). He moves near Sodom (Gn 13:12). He bought a home and moved into Sodom (Gn 14:12). He became a respected leader in Sodom and considered the citizens his brothers (Gn 19:1, 7). Unconfessed sin always puts us on a **slippery slope**.
- D. **Double-mindedness**. Though Lot apparently loves the Lord and wants (most of the time) to do the right thing, he also loves Sodom and its glitter and glamor. He waivers between the City of God and the City of Man. A double-minded man “is **unstable** in all his ways” (Jas 1:8).
- E. **Hypocrisy**. Though he says the right things and professes the right beliefs, his actions give a different message. Lot’s family saw him for the hypocrite that he was. Thus, when he told them to flee, they did not take him seriously; they thought he was “jesting” (Gn 19:14).
- F. Saved as **through fire** (see 1 Cor 3:15). We are surprised to learn that the New Testament calls Lot a “righteous man” (2 Pet 2:7). In comparison to the Sodomites, his actions certainly did seem righteous. But we should not glibly conclude by saying, “Well, at least he was saved; at least he made it to heaven.” Assuming he did make it to heaven; consider the cost of his worldliness:

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<sup>3</sup> Kass, 328–39.

<sup>4</sup> I’ll leave it to the reader to determine whether incest is worse than sodomy!

<sup>5</sup> If one inverts the following seven statements so that they say the opposite, one can easily see what it takes to be a healthy, mature, godly child of God.

- He had no positive influence on Sodom. Though he lived there for years and was a respected citizen, the Lord could find **not even ten** righteous people in the entire city.
- He had no positive influence on **his family**. His wife and his married daughters and their families were clearly lost. His unmarried daughters were a moral disaster and the result of such worldly living was the birth of some of Israel's greatest enemies: the Moabites and Ammonites.

#### IV. Remember Lot's Wife

There are three things that I think Jesus wants us to remember about Mrs. Lot:

- A. Remember her **opportunities**. As a member of Abraham's family, she had the greatest privilege in history of knowing the truth about God. "To whom much is given, from him much will be required . . ." (Lk 12:48 NKJV). This explains why it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Sodom than for Capernaum (Mt 11:23-24).
- B. Remember her **sin**. It wasn't some great moral perversity that brought God's judgment but her love of this world. She looked back. She couldn't let go of the things of this world. "Don't you know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?" (Jas 4:4; see 1 Jn 2:15-17).
- C. Remember her **judgment**. She was turned into a pillar of salt. It was terrifying, painful, and permanent. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Pv 9:10).

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why did Jesus insist that we remember Lot's wife?
2. Early in his life Lot made a tragic choice and the consequences remained with him the rest of his life. Can you think of someone you know who made a tragic choice early in life? What should we learn from this?
3. Lot felt he could resist the corrosion of sin. What do we learn from Lot's tragic example? What does his example teach us about the temptations around us today?
4. Why doesn't the church talk about the sin of worldliness anymore? What should be done about this?
5. Are sexual sins worse than other sins?



# Father Abraham

## The Obedience of Faith

### GROUND ZERO

Genesis 15

#### I. The Bottom Line

- A. On three occasions in the New Testament, at a critical point in the argument, authors refer to **Genesis 15:6** in their effort to explain how a person can be right<sup>1</sup> with God (Rom 4; Gal 3; Jas 2:14–26).

*“[Abraham] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Gn 15:6).*

This is not only a summary statement about Abraham’s spiritual journey, it underscores the indispensable role of **faith** in the Christian walk. More than moral **behavior**, doctrinal **orthodoxy**, or sincere **piety**, those who want to be right with God must believe. Without faith we *cannot* please God (Heb 11:6).

- B. A powerful contrast: Billy Graham and Chuck Templeton

When Billy Graham was beginning his ministry, one of his closest associates and friends was Chuck Templeton (1915–2001). Both were great preachers with a passion for evangelism, but Templeton could not shake his **doubts**. He felt belief in the Bible was “intellectual suicide.” He left the ministry. In an interview with Lee Strobel, Templeton (age 83) told of perhaps the key moment on his path to agnosticism:

*It was a photograph in Life magazine. It was a picture of a black woman in Northern Africa. They were experiencing a devastating drought. And she was holding her dead baby in her arms looking up to heaven with the most forlorn expression. I looked at it and I thought, “Is it possible to **believe** that there is a loving or caring Creator when all this woman needed was rain?”<sup>2</sup>*

The two men discussed the growing chasm several times. Graham also wrestled with the intellectual questions that made faith difficult. But one night, just before the famous Los Angeles Crusade (1949), at age 30, Graham knelt and prayed a prayer that changed everything. Gripping his Bible, he said,

*“O God! There are many things in this book I do not understand . . . I can’t answer some of the philosophical and psychological questions Chuck and others are raising . . . Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word—by **faith**! I’m going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will **believe** this to be Your inspired Word” . . . When I got up from my knees . . . I sensed the presence and power of God . . . Not all my questions were answered, but a major bridge had been crossed. In my heart and mind, I knew a spiritual battle in my soul had been fought and won.<sup>3</sup>*

- C. For Abraham, the bottom line—Ground Zero—was not his obedience, his moral character, or his doctrinal orthodoxy. It was his faith. This is what set him apart as a hero and caused him to become “the father of all who believe” (Rom 4:11).

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<sup>1</sup> Righteous, justified; in a right relationship.

<sup>2</sup> Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Graham, 139.

## II. Talking It Out

Those who think that believing in God is easy reveal their ignorance. Trusting in God is the **hardest** thing anyone can do. Prior to this moment, God's appearances to Abraham had been a monologue. But now, Abraham **talks back!** He *wants* to believe but needs reassurance, evidence, and some questions answered.

Let's reconstruct the passage by compressing and summarizing the dialogue so as to better understand the dynamics of what is happening in this classic passage on faith:

### A. God speaks **first** and makes an amazing (three-fold) **promise**.

True faith is always a response to God's initiative. Faith comes by **hearing** the word of God (see Rom 10:17). Though Abraham has heard some of this before, in this encounter, God's promise is in its clearest form yet:

1. "Do not be afraid, Abram. **I am** your shield, your exceedingly great reward" (Gn 15:1 NKJV). God promises protection and provision, but in essence he is promising **Himself**. The Giver is more important than the gifts! A. B. Simpson's famous hymn *Himself* (1891) says it well:

*Once it was the blessing, now it is the Lord;  
Once it was the feeling, now it is his Word.  
Once the gift I wanted, now the Giver own;  
Once I sought for healing, now Himself alone.*

*Once it was my working, His it hence shall be;  
Once I tried to use Him, now He uses me.  
Once the pow'r I wanted, now the Mighty One;  
Once for self I labored, now for Him alone.*

2. "This man [Eliezer] shall not be your heir; your **very own son** shall be your heir . . . ' And he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' . . . 'So shall your **offspring** be'" (Gn 15:4-5).<sup>4</sup>
3. "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur . . . to give you **this land** to possess . . . . To your offspring I give this land . . ." (Gn 15:7, 18).

### B. Abraham responds by asking two questions that reveal his inward struggle to believe. The promises sound great, but he knows there are some **huge obstacles** related to promises #2 and #3.

1. "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" . . . 'Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir'" (Gn 15:2-3).

The promise of a son and many descendants is complicated by the fact that Abraham is approximately 80 years old and Sarah is about **70** and **barren**. They will wait **20** years before Isaac is born.

2. "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" (Gn 15:8).

The promise of the land is complicated by the fact that it is presently **inhabited** by the Kenizzites, Hittites, Perizzites, Amorites, Canaanites,

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<sup>4</sup> It's interesting to note that Sarah is not specifically mentioned in this promise.

Girgashites, and Jebusites. Also, Abraham's descendants will have to spend **400** years in a foreign land before this promise will be realized.

Abraham struggles with faith. "How can I **be sure** about this?" God does not scold Abraham for asking questions but seeks to reassure and encourage him to **believe anyway**. The Lord does not remove the obstacles to faith, but rather reminds Abraham of the character of the God he worships!

- C. God responds to Abraham's need for reassurance by establishing<sup>5</sup> a **covenant** with him and his descendants. "Bring me a heifer . . ." (Gn 15:9ff). In the Ancient Near East, a covenant was a type of **binding agreement** that defined how two parties were to relate to one another.
1. Typically, the ceremony that celebrated the ratification of the covenant involved the following:
    - Cutting animals in half and laying them out in two parallel rows.
    - Oaths and promises, blessing and curses.
    - The two parties walk between the bloody carcasses symbolically saying, "May I be ripped apart like these animals if I fail to keep my end of the covenant." A sort of **dramatized curse**.
  2. Jeremiah 34:18–20 gives a vivid picture of such a ceremony:

*And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts—the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf. And I will give them into the hand of their enemies . . . (Jeremiah 34:18–20)*
  3. But notice that in *this* covenant-making ceremony with Abraham, only God passes between the sacrificial animals, seen by the smoking pot and the flaming torch! This is a **unilateral** covenant.<sup>6</sup> God is stating in the most solemn manner possible: if I fail to keep my promise to you, may I be dismembered and my body ripped apart. "Cross my heart and hope to die . . ."
- D. Abraham's final response: "He believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Gn 15:6). The Hebrew word for "believe" is *aman* (the root of the word "Amen"). To God's promise, Abraham said, "**Amen!** So be it! Let it be so!"
1. Abraham **knows God** well enough to trust his **character**, to take him at his word. "I can trust a God like that!" He puts his trust in the God of the promises and the promises of God. Salvation is not more complicated than that. Damnation is not more complicated than unbelief.
  2. God responded to Abraham's faith by counting it<sup>7</sup> to him as **righteousness**. Though he had left everything, built altars, and won a great battle against pagan kings, none of this made him righteous. Abraham is justified (made

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<sup>5</sup> "Cutting" a covenant (in Hebrew).

<sup>6</sup> The Covenant established at Mount Sinai centuries later would stipulate conditions that Israel was expected to fulfill (a bilateral covenant). But here with Abraham, God's promises were unconditional. All Abraham had to do was to believe that God would fulfill what he had promised.

<sup>7</sup> Reckoning, crediting.

right) by **faith alone**. Paul makes this point in Romans 4 when he encourages us, today, to put our trust in God and his promises:

*He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that **God was able** to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (Romans 4:19–25)*

### III. Children of Abraham: Live Out Your Calling

Abraham is the father of all who believe (Rom 4:11). His story is not just history, it is written so that his example will nudge us to live even as he did: by **faith in the promises** of God. Some of these promises are written below. Let the Holy Spirit direct you to the promise that is most relevant for you. Then, take the **revolutionary** step that Abraham took: believe! As you do, realize that this act of faith puts you in a **right relationship** with him!

1. A promise for **grace** to handle a difficult situation: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).
2. A promise for **provision** for some unmet need: "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19).
3. A promise of **hope** in some situation that seems to have no solution: "I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jer 29:11).
4. A promise of **strength** when confronted by a frightening foe or an intimidating obstacle: "They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isa 40:31).
5. A promise for **victory** in some conflict you are experiencing: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13).
6. A promise for **peace** in some traumatic conflict or turmoil: "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you" (Isa 26:3).
7. A promise for **cleansing** for some inner sense of pollution: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9).
8. A promise of **rest** for one who is tired and fatigued: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt 11:28–29).
9. A promise of **the Holy Spirit** for one who feels empty and alone: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Lk 11:13).
10. A promise for **guidance** to one facing an important decision: "And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it'" (Isa 30:21).

11. A promise of **assurance** that God is with you as you face grief and pain: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you . . . when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned . . .” (Isa 43:1–2).

Tonight, God is not asking you to *do* something. He is asking you to *believe*.

*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:31–32)*

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In Abraham’s struggle with faith, which promise was most difficult for him to believe? Why?
2. Where is faith most difficult for you? What is the source of your doubts? Why is it so hard just to take God at his word?
3. Which promise of God is most important for you right now? Would you permit others in the group to pray for you?

## We Rest on Thee

By Edith G. Cherry (c. 1895)

*We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender!  
We go not forth alone against the foe;  
Strong in Thy strength, safe in Thy keeping tender,  
We rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go.*

*Yes, in Thy Name, O Captain of salvation!  
In Thy dear Name, all other names above;  
Jesus our Righteousness, our sure Foundation,  
Our Prince of glory and our King of love.*

*We go in faith, our own great weakness feeling,  
And needing more each day Thy grace to know:  
Yet from our hearts a song of triumph pealing,  
“We rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go.”*

*We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender!  
Thine is the battle, Thine shall be the praise;  
When passing through the gates of pearly splendor,  
Victors, we rest with Thee, through endless days.*





# Father Abraham

## *The Obedience of Faith*

### HOW TO BIRTH A DONKEY

*Genesis 16*

#### I. Delayed Gratification

##### A. The Marshmallow Test

##### B. This is Abraham's **fourth** test of faith.

1. The "Follow the Call" test (Gn 12:1–4). Grade: **A**.
2. The "Famine in the Land of Promise" test (Gn 12:10). Grade: **F**.
3. The "Conflict with My Nephew" test (Gn 13–14). Grade: **A**.
4. We could call the test of Genesis 16 the "God Is Not Keeping His Promises" test. We'll give Abraham the grade of **F**.

Faith is far more than mental agreement with certain truths about God and it is much more dynamic than a one-time prayer inviting Christ into one's life. Faith is a **walk**. It is a life attitude of confidence that God will do what he has promised. To verify its authenticity, it must be **tested**—again and again. Like a **muscle** being exercised, it grows stronger with repeated use.

##### C. The **context** of Abraham's test. Almost as if a psychologist were setting up a well-prepared experiment, God has arranged the details of Abraham's fourth test:

1. God has made a crystal clear, solemn **promise** to Abraham: he will have a son and many descendants (Gn 15:4–5). Abraham **believed** God's promise (Gn 15:6). God considers his faith as righteousness.
2. Ten years have passed since his initial call. Abraham is now 85 and Sarah is 75. She is also barren. This is an **impossible situation!**
3. Not to worry, a **solution** is at hand. Many in the Ancient Near East practiced **surrogate** parenting. This was not considered immoral. A wife could designate another woman (concubine) who would be impregnated by her husband. The child would then be "adopted" by the married couple and, if the father so chose, could become the heir. Surely, this must be how God's promise is meant to be fulfilled! (Go ahead, eat the single marshmallow now!)

##### D. We can diagram the situation like this:



Note: This "solution" is a **human** invention. As the story unfolds, we discover that God has a very different solution. The wisdom of man cannot achieve the purposes of God. The creative genius of the characters in Genesis 16 (Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar) gave rise to a global crisis that is still with us today: the **Arab-Israeli** conflict.

## II. Examine the Text

### A. Sarah's bright idea (Gn 16:1–6).

1. Time is running out. After seeing fertility specialists and undergoing hormone therapy, Abraham (85) and Sarah (75) decide to help God out. Ten years is a long time to wait! After all, God helps those who **help themselves**, right?
2. Though surrogate parenting may have been accepted by the culture, the text makes it clear that this was *not* God's plan for fulfilling his promise. Though Abraham was justified by faith (Gn 15:6), he is now walking **in the flesh**.
3. The text emphasizes the **dysfunction** that is painfully evident in the marriage of Abraham and Sarah:
  - a. Sarah is **manipulative** and urges her husband to do something morally questionable. Like what happened in the Garden of Eden, the woman is the origin of the sinful path.<sup>1</sup>

*Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control. (1 Timothy 2:14–15)*
  - b. Abraham is **passive**. Though the head of his home, he is failing miserably as a leader! He submits to his wife's leadership in both sleeping with Hagar and then remaining silent as Sarah abuses her (Gn 16:3, 6). As in the Garden, the husband is a silent **wimp**.
  - c. Notice how this episode is a mirror image of what had happened earlier in Egypt (see Gn 12:10–20 and 20:1–18). In Egypt, Abraham pushed Sarah to **deny their marriage** by pretending to be his sister. This meant she was taken into Pharaoh's harem to (potentially?) be his sexual partner! Now, Sarah is pushing Abraham to deny the meaning of marriage and commit quasi-adultery by sleeping with their Egyptian servant. It's tit for tat. All is fair in love and war!
4. Sarah seems to be something of a **bitter old woman**. She blames God for her barrenness and then blames Abraham for the chaos going on in their family (Gn 16:2, 4–5). She has waited long enough! She seems to be controlled by the motto: "Don't just stand there, **do something!**"<sup>2</sup>
5. The moral of the story. Though Abraham and Sarah have a clear, unshakeable knowledge of **God's will** (children), they go about doing God's will in the wrong way.<sup>3</sup> "The fanatical passionate desire to fulfil God's will lead them into desperate error."<sup>4</sup> Stated in New Testament terms: they are trying to do the will of God in the **power of the flesh**.

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<sup>1</sup> Though Adam and Abraham should *not* have taken the advice of their wives, Pilate should have (Mt 27:19), as well as Nabal (1 Sm 25)! The dynamics of the marital relationship and the origin of sin are truly deep and complex.

<sup>2</sup> And yet, the story will reveal that this is one of those situations when Sarah and Abraham should have been controlled by the motto, "Don't do anything; just sit there!"

<sup>3</sup> Note how later in the Genesis story, when Isaac's wife Rebekah is discovered to be barren, Isaac, rather than resorting to human ingenuity, simply prays for her, and God opens her womb (see Gn 25:21).

<sup>4</sup> Chambers, 877.

- B. God's love for Hagar and Ishmael (Gn 16:7–16; see also 17:20–21; 21:8–21 and 25:12–18).
1. This is the first mention of the “angel of the Lord” in the Bible. This may well be a **preincarnate** manifestation of the Second Person of the Trinity. Running away to her home in Egypt, Hagar is told to go back to Sarah and submit<sup>5</sup> (Gn 16:9). Though God is comforting Hagar, it is an example of tough love.
  2. The primary message and the key to the entire chapter seems to be found in three names:
    - Hagar's son is named *Ishmael* (Gn 16:11)—**God hears**.
    - Hagar gives God a new name: *El Roi* (Gn 16:13)—**God sees**.
    - The well is named *Beer Lahai Roi* (Gn 16:14)—The well of the One who **sees me**.
- These names serve as a **rebuke** to the unbelief and impatience of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. If they could have only remained strong in the confidence that God hears and sees, they could have avoided creating the mess they did.
3. It is shocking to hear God describe Hagar's son as “a **wild donkey** of a man” (Gn 16:12). This is prophetic of the conflict that will come into the world between the families of Ishmael and Isaac.

### III. How to Birth a Donkey

This story gives us an unforgettable picture of what happens whenever a child of God tries to accomplish the will of God by using human ingenuity; when a Christian tries to achieve a holy end by utilizing unholy means; when the **work of the Spirit** is done in the **power of the flesh**. The result is always the birth of a donkey!

Here is a sure-fire, bona fide, money-back-guarantee formula for birthing a donkey:

- A. Do God's work **my way**.
1. Abraham and Sarah came up with their own method for doing God's will. They did not realize that in God's kingdom, the **means** are just as important as the **goal**. They assumed that if their plan was rational, practical, efficient, and culturally acceptable, it would be fine. Jesus is the way (Jn 14:6) not just the destination!
  2. Look again at Proverbs 3:5–6, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on **your own understanding**. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” The Bible has a special term to describe those who believe in themselves and trust in their own knowledge: **fool**.
  3. We can imagine that the “national anthem” of hell will be Frank Sinatra's famous song, “I Did It **My Way**.”
  4. Fifteen years later, when Sarah (age 90) got pregnant, everyone knew that **God** was the author of *this* story.
- B. Do God's work in **my time**.
1. Abraham and Sarah knew what God wanted, but they were not willing **to wait** for him to accomplish it in his timing. They had already waited 10 years, and

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<sup>5</sup> This is similar to what Paul told the runaway Christian slave Onesimus (see Phlm 12).

they would have to wait for **15 years** longer. That's a long time. But the alternative to waiting on the Lord is... birthing a donkey!

2. In the Bible to wait on the Lord is a synonym for **trust/believe**. Abraham and Sarah felt they had to *do* something, but the real test of faith lies in **not doing!**
  - “They who **wait** for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Isa 40:31).
  - “**Wait** for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” (Ps 27:14).
3. To wait on the Lord is not a call to **passivity**. It is a call to trust!

C. Do God's work in **my power**.

1. Abraham and Sarah used their own **human resources** in their attempt to do the will of God. They succeeded but discovered that they had birthed a donkey. They climbed the ladder to success only to discover that it was leaning against the wrong wall (see Ps 106:15)!
2. When Peter took a sword and single-handedly attacked a squad of Roman soldiers in Gethsemane, he was on the right team, zealous and ready to die for his faith, but he was using the **wrong weapon**.

*For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. (2 Corinthians 10:3-4)*

3. “God's work, done in God's way, will never lack God's supply” (Hudson Taylor).

### **PRIVATE AND PERSONAL REFLECTION**

1. Though Abraham was justified by faith (Gn 15), he was still walking in the flesh (Gn 16). He would never be the father that God had called him to be until he learned to walk in the Spirit. Is there an area where you are seeking to accomplish some work of the Spirit in the power of the flesh? Describe what this looks like.
2. Is there an area in your life (a conflict, an unanswered prayer, a task to accomplish, a relationship, etc.) where you have deep certainty about what God's will is, but you're not certain that your approach is the right one? You know what the result is supposed to be but you're not certain of the means you're supposed to use to get there. Ask the Lord what he is trying to tell you.



# Father Abraham

## *The Obedience of Faith*

### AN OLD MAN GETS A NEW START

*Genesis 17:1–27*

I. Is this all there is?

A. The promises of God.

So far, on four separate occasions, God has made a series of amazing promises to Abraham. These promises are freely offered and seem to be **unilateral** and **unconditional**. Note how often God says, “I will.”

- Genesis 12:1–4 (age 75)—*I will* make you a great nation . . . *I will* bless you . . . *I will* make your name great . . . In you all nations will be blessed.
- Genesis 12:7—“To your offspring *I will* give this land.”
- Genesis 13:14–17—*I will* give you the land . . . *I will* make your offspring as the dust of the earth . . . Walk through the land; *I will* give it to you.
- Genesis 15:1–21—Your reward shall be great . . . Your very own son will be your heir . . . Count the stars: so shall your offspring be . . . To your offspring *I will* give this land.

We can summarize God’s promise to Abraham under three basic headings:

1. You will have many **descendants**—millions!
2. Your descendants will possess **Canaan** (the Promised Land/the Holy Land).
3. You will be a blessing to **all nations** of the world.

B. The response of faith.

Though it would be wrong to call Abraham’s response **passive** (he *left* Ur, he *followed* the Call, he *walked* with God, etc.), his primary response was to simply take God at his word and assume that he meant what he said. In other words, Abraham **believed** God. This is precisely the response that God was looking for! “And Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord counted it to him as **righteousness**” (Gn 15:16).

C. Fast-forward twenty-five years. Let’s look to see how things are working out for Abraham and Sarah. Is it profitable to put your trust in the promises of God?

1. As for the promise of land.

It still belongs to the **Canaanites** (Gn 12:6) and has periodic **famines** (Gn 12:10). It is not even adequate to support Abraham’s and Lot’s flocks at the same time (Gn 13:5–13). Sometimes, the land is a battlefield where kings wage war and take captives and plunder (Gn 14). When Abraham dies, the only piece of real estate he will own is a **burial plot**, the Cave of Machpelah (Gn 23).

Lesson: The Promised Land isn’t quite what I expected. I left Ur for *this*?

2. As for the promise of descendants.

When the promises first came, Abraham and Sarah were **old** (75 and 65) and Sarah was **barren** (Gn 11:30). The years have ruled out both nephew Lot (see Gn 13) and servant Eliezer of Damascus (see Gn 15:2) as possible “sons” and heirs. When Abraham is 86, Sarah suggests they have a son vicariously through

the Egyptian slave Hagar (see Gn 16). But this created a disaster; Ishmael was a **donkey** of a man (Gn 16:12).

Lesson: I don't understand it, but God just hasn't kept his end of the deal on this promise. Maybe this promise is for heaven.

3. As for being a blessing to the nations.

Abraham brought affliction and **plagues** on the land of Egypt because of lying about his wife (see Gn 12:10–20). He also was involved in warfare with kings who had invaded Canaan (see Gn 14).

Lesson: I can't deal with the dysfunction in my own family much less think about being a blessing to anyone else!

D. Is that all there is?

1. Now, in Genesis 17, twenty-five years have passed. Abraham is 99 and Sarah is 89. And though Abraham continues in a **right relationship** with God (justified by faith), nothing much has changed. His wife is still old and barren. Canaan is still in the hands of the Canaanites. And his family dysfunctions and lame attempts to help God fulfill his promises only create more problems for everyone around him.
2. Perhaps you can identify with Abraham and Sarah. After decades of believing the promises of God, perhaps your life is little different than when you first began the journey. Though you don't doubt your relationship with God, you realize that your life is rather **monotonous, predictable, and unfruitful**. There is no skip in your step or song in your heart; no fire in the belly. *Is this all there is to salvation?* Maybe the opening words of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* speak to your heart:

*Midway along the journey of our life, I woke to find myself in a dark wood, for I had wandered off from the straight path.*

3. Abraham needs a **fresh work of grace**! Genesis 17 is a picture of how God gave an old man a new start. Long before the Bible gives a doctrinal explanation of **entire sanctification** (Rom 1–8, 1 Thes, etc.), it gives us a flesh and blood illustration.<sup>1</sup> Though Abraham is clearly justified by faith (Gn 15), he continues to **walk in the flesh** (Gn 16). So God brings him to a place where a deeper work of grace can be done in his heart.
4. Genesis 17 is **pregnant** with significance. Notice that Abraham's justification was accomplished when "the word of the Lord" came to him (Gn 15:1, 6). However, sanctification can only be realized when the Lord himself appears (Gn 17:1). Though this chapter will repeat the three-fold promise of children, land, and global blessing, there are at least five things that are dramatically new!

II. Five New Beginnings

A. A new **understanding of God**.

1. You would think that a man who had been walking with God for **25 years** would know him rather well. But as in **marriage**, you can live with someone for decades and still discover dimensions of personhood that are completely unknown! At age 99, Abraham gets a fresh revelation of who the God he

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<sup>1</sup> We'll have an even clearer illustration in the life of Jacob in his wrestling match with the angel of the Lord (Gn 32).

worships truly is. William Temple's words are helpful: "If your **concept of God** is wrong, then the more you worship this deity, the more dangerous you become to yourself and to others."

2. "I am El Shaddai" (Gn 17:1). "God Almighty"—He is **all-sufficient**, he is all you need when you need it! This is more than a title or label, it approaches a personal name.<sup>2</sup> There is a huge difference in knowing someone by their title and knowing them by their name. It appears that for 25 years Abraham had basically known "God" as just that, "the Deity," "the Man Upstairs." The relationship was authentic but a bit **impersonal**. In telling Abraham his name, God is giving him access to his heart.
3. Perhaps Abraham's relationship with God prior to this had been rather **mercenary**, calculating ("What's in it for me?"). God had promised Abraham land, children, blessings and international influence. And Abraham said, "Well, sure!" Now, God wants to explore the **motives** of Abraham's faith. Do you love *me*... or do you love my *gifts*? A. B. Simpson captures this dynamic powerfully in a hymn entitled *Himself* (1891).

*Once it was the blessing, now it is the Lord;  
Once it was the feeling, now it is his Word;  
Once his gift I wanted, now, the Giver own;  
Once I sought for healing, now Himself alone.*

*Once it was my working, his it hence shall be;  
Once I tried to use him, now he uses me;  
Once the pow'r I wanted, now the Mighty One;  
Once for self I labored, nor for him alone.*

B. A new **identity**.

1. When God gives someone a new name, it is full of significance and indicates a fresh start and often a **transformation** of character. "Abram" (exalted father) becomes "Abraham" (father of a multitude). The real significance is perhaps not so much in the nuances of meaning as in the act of renaming itself. God is giving this old geezer the chance to start again by discovering how grace can still transform the heart.
2. Notice how Abraham's new identity is discovered only *after* he comes to a fresh understanding of God's identity. We **find ourselves** only when we find God! We find ourselves when we **lose ourselves** in him. We see these truths most dramatically at the burning bush when Moses screamed at God, "Who am I?" God's answer reveals the truth about every person's search for identity: "I will be with you" (see Ex 3:11–12).
3. Sarai also gets a new name (Gn 17:15) as will others in the unfolding story, most notably Jacob (see Gn 32:28).

C. A new **sense of humor**.

1. In Genesis 17:3, Abraham "fell on his face" in worship. But when he heard that his 90-year-old wife was going to become pregnant, he "fell on his face and

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<sup>2</sup> It was at the burning bush many centuries later that God would finally reveal his personal name to Moses (Ex 3:13–15). God explained this situation in these words: "I am the LORD [Yahweh]. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty [El Shaddai], but by my name the Lord [Yahweh] I did not make myself known to them" (Ex 6:2-3).

laughed” (Gn 17:17). Apparently, the mental image of old Sarah waddling about the geriatric center pregnant was just too much, and he fell on the floor **doubled over** in laughter. I think he laughed so hard his dentures fell out.

2. Think about this. It has probably been 25 years since Abraham had had a really good belly laugh. Life had been **hard** with travel, kidnappings, famines, wars, and family conflict. Not to mention all the problems that come with old age: arthritis, back aches, trips to the pharmacy, doctors’ appointments, hearing aids, bifocals—But this thing God was proposing was **hilarious!** Just imagine it:
  - Sarah looking under her bifocals as she does a Google search on her smart phone shouting at her deaf husband: “Hey Abe, how do you spell gynecology?”
  - Abraham with his walker going to Kroger, asking the clerk where the pickles are.
  - Abe and Sarah attending birth training classes.
  - Sarah going to the nursery department after church to pick up baby Isaac when the lady in charge says, “Oh hello, are you Isaac’s great-grandmother?”
  - Abraham was perhaps the only man in history who paid his maternity bills with a Social Security check.
  - I picture Abe and Sarah on the front porch, rocking baby Isaac while Sarah nurses him. Abe winks, and then they both just fall over laughing.
3. Far from rebuking Abraham for his laughter, **God is laughing too**. Don’t tell me that God doesn’t have a sense of humor! I think all creation was laughing. So, God said, “Let’s give this baby a name that memorializes this new sense of humor forever. Let’s call him Isaac—‘he laughs.’”
4. One final note: don’t confuse Abraham’s laugh with **Sarah’s laugh**. Not all laughter is the same, not all humor is God honoring! God was pleased with Abraham’s laughter but he rebuked Sarah for hers.

*They said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “She is in the tent.” The LORD said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.” (Genesis 18:9–15)*

D. A new **sacramental symbol**.

1. Genesis 17:9–14 explains the meaning of **circumcision** and Genesis 17:23–27 tells how Abraham carried out the divine command. God had already made the covenant with Abraham (see Gn 15) but now he is establishing the **sign of the covenant**. A rainbow was the sign of the covenant with Noah, and now circumcision is a sign of the Abrahamic covenant. The sign does not produce



the reality, but it bears witness to it. Beware of confusing the sign with the **reality** to which it points.

2. Time forbids us to talk about the powerful meaning attached to the many elements involved in this sacred symbol:
  - Given to tiny **children** before they are able to decide for themselves.
  - Give to **males** only.
  - The place of the sign means it is related to sexuality, masculinity, and reproduction.
  - The mark is physical, literally in the flesh.
  - The mark is **permanent** and cannot be undone.
  - The sacrament of circumcision in the Old Covenant seems to parallel the sacrament of **baptism** in the New Covenant.
3. The most important thing to know about circumcision is that the *physical act* is little more than formalistic, meaningless religiosity unless it indicates a **spiritual reality** that has occurred in the heart. In what could be called the climactic statement of the entire Torah (Pentateuch), Moses puts the matter succinctly:

*And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. (Deuteronomy 30:6)*

E. A new **commandment**.

1. “Be blameless” (Gn 17:1). The Hebrew word *tamim* means complete, whole, **undivided**, simple. The word is translated in the KJV as **perfect**. To be perfect is to have a heart wholly devoted to God, no inner division, no double-mindedness. God had commanded Abraham to leave his home, to travel to Canaan, to not be afraid, to be circumcised, etc. But this commandment to “be perfect” was new. What can it mean?
2. In chapter 16 we saw how Abraham, though right with God (justified by faith), was still **walking in the flesh** when he gave birth to Ishmael. God is telling Abraham that he is interested in more than belief and more than a right status with God. What God really wants is our **wholehearted** surrender and love—a heart to heart relationship.
3. The command includes the words “Walk before me,” meaning to walk in the presence of **my face**. God wants to be face-to-face in wholehearted intimacy with Abraham. This is what perfection is all about; not a perfection of performance but a **perfection of love**. “Purity of heart is to will one thing” (Kierkegaard).
4. But how does our heart become wholly his? That is what **entire sanctification** is all about. It is a command to **be** something more than to do something. God is preparing Abraham for his ultimate test, when he will determine whether his heart is wholly devoted to him. “Take you son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering . . .” (Gn 22:2).

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the dangers Christians face after decades of believing the promises? How does Abraham encourage us to know how to respond to such dangers?
2. Do you agree with the author's opinion that Genesis 17 is an Old Testament depiction of the doctrine of entire sanctification? Why or why not?
3. Describe a time in your life when God gave you a new start, a fresh beginning? What spiritual impact did it have on your life?
4. Which of the five new beginnings spoke most powerfully to you (a new understanding of God, a new identity, a new sense of humor, a new sacramental symbol, or a new commandment)? Explain.
5. What can be done to keep sacraments from becoming dead rituals?

## The God of Abraham Praise

By Thomas Olivers (1760); based on *The Yigdal* of Daniel ben Judah

*The God of Abraham praise, who reigns enthroned above;  
Ancient of Everlasting Days, and God of Love;  
Jehovah, great I AM! by earth and heaven confessed;  
I bow and bless the sacred name forever blest.*

*The great I AM has sworn; I on this oath depend.  
I shall, on eagle wings upborne, to heaven ascend.  
I shall behold God's face; I shall God's power adore,  
and sing the wonders of God's grace forevermore.*

*The God who reigns on high the great archangels sing,  
and "Holy, holy, holy!" cry "Almighty King!  
Who was, and is, the same, and evermore shall be:  
Jehovah, Lord, the great I AM, we worship thee!"*

*The whole triumphant host give thanks to God on high;  
"Hail, Father, Son and Holy Ghost!" they ever cry.  
Hail, Abra'm's God and mine! I join the heav'nly lays;  
all might and majesty are Thine, and endless praise.*



# Father Abraham

## *The Obedience of Faith*

### IS ANYTHING TOO HARD FOR THE LORD?

*Genesis 18:1–33*

#### I. Too Hard for God?

The key verse that unlocks the message of Genesis 18 is verse 14: “Is anything too hard [difficult, impossible, wonderful] for the Lord?” Notice that God himself is the one asking the question! This is not a **rhetorical** question. Though some may think the answer is obvious, think again.

A. *On the one hand*, the Bible underscores the **omnipotence** of God. In fact, in the previous chapter God had given a new revelation of himself to Abraham by saying “I am **God Almighty** [El Shaddai]” (Gn 17:1).

1. On numerous occasions the Bible emphasizes God’s absolute power over all creation:

- “I know that you can do **all things**, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2).
- “Our God is in heaven; he does **whatever** pleases him” (Ps 115:3 NIV).
- “He does according to **his will** among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’” (Dan 4:35).
- “[God’s Son] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he **upholds the universe** by the word of his power” (Heb 1:3).

2. Note that Genesis 18:14 asks a question, but on at least three other occasions, the Bible puts these same words in the form of an emphatic statement: “Nothing is **too hard** for you” (Jer 32:17); “With God **all things** are possible” (Mt 19:26); “For nothing will be **impossible** with God” (Lk 1:37).

B. *But on the other hand*, the material in Genesis 18 suggests that there may be something El Shaddai cannot do! The chapter is divided into two sections, which dramatically places the question before us:

1. Genesis 18:1–15. Is God powerful enough to enable a 90-year-old woman like Sarah to get pregnant? The answer is **Yes!**

If God can cause a donkey to talk, make an axe head float, divide the Red Sea, make the sun stand still, heal the lame, cleanse the leper, and raise the dead—he can make an old, post-menopausal lady pregnant. Piece of cake!

2. Genesis 18:16–33. Is God powerful enough to save a wicked city like Sodom? The answer is **hmm, I’m not so sure.**

The challenge in answering this question comes in how we understand three important doctrines. Abraham must come to grips with these realities if he is to be a blessing to the nations and a true child of the covenant:

- a. What does **divine omnipotence** look like? When it comes to enabling Sarah to become pregnant, it looks one way. But when it comes to saving a city like Sodom, it looks very different. Can divine power save those who don’t want to be saved?

- b. How deep is the problem of **human sin**? When humans, made in the image of God, harden in unbelief and willful disobedience, is there a point beyond which they cannot be saved? A point of no return? Can human persons **resist** sovereign grace? *Is anything too hard for El Shaddai?* God himself seems to want to know—and apparently, he needs his friend Abraham to help him find the answer.
- c. What does **justice** look like in a fallen world? “Will not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gn 18:25). Is it just to slay the innocent with the righteous? Is it just to let the wicked remain unpunished? How can God save sinners and remain just? But how can he destroy sinners and maintain his love? This is the **divine dilemma**.

## II. Read Genesis 18.

### A. Part One—verses 1–15. Three visitors and an amazing promise.

1. “The Lord appeared to Abraham . . . and behold, three men were standing in front of him” (Gn 18:1–2). God visits Abraham in the form of **three persons**. Is it the Lord and two angels? Is it a threefold manifestation of God? Regardless of how we understand this **theophany**, the appearance is fully consistent with the orthodox teaching about God’s triune personhood.
2. Abraham and Sarah extend gracious **hospitality** to these three strangers. Did they realize who they were entertaining? “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained **angels** unawares” (Heb 13:2). “The spirit of hospitality consists in this, that in or with the stranger, we receive the Lord himself.”<sup>1</sup>
3. These heavenly visitors are obviously on a mission. God is passing by Abraham’s tent headed toward **Sodom**. Why does he stop?
  - He wants to announce that in 12 months’ time, Sarah will have a baby boy!
  - He also wants to discuss with Abraham his plans for Sodom. He is looking for more than a meal. God is looking for an **intercessor**!
4. Sarah’s laugh is a cynical chuckle of **unbelief** (Gn 18:12). Unlike Abraham’s laugh earlier (see Gn 17:17) at the hilarity of grace that would enable an old couple to have a baby, Sarah’s laugh brings the Lord’s disapproval (Gn 18:13–15).

### B. Part Two—verses 16–33. Abraham stands between God and Sodom.

1. The visitors leave Abraham’s tent and walk toward Sodom. God explains that the sin of Sodom is so serious that he himself has come down to **investigate**, to see if things are as bad as he has heard (Gn 18:20–21).
2. “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” (Gn 18:17). To whom is God asking this question? Apparently, to **himself**! God is talking to himself—the three visitors are discussing the matter among themselves. We see other examples in Scripture of when God talks to himself: Gn 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa 6:8. Those who are friends with God get close enough to him to be able to **overhear** what he says as he talks to himself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chambers, *Not Knowing Whither*, 885.

<sup>2</sup> As we will see in the closing section, being close enough to God to listen to his heart, to overhear conversations within the triune Godhead, is the *only* sure foundation for all intercessory prayer.

3. The *reason* God reveals to Abraham what he is about to do is interesting:

*Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and **all the nations** of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and **justice** . . . (Genesis 17–19)*

In other words, God is revealing his plans to destroy Sodom because if Abraham's family is indeed to be a blessing to the world, they absolutely must understand not only personal righteousness (see Gn 15:6) but also **social justice**! God is sharing with Abraham how a righteous and loving God deals with wicked cities (nations, communities, families, etc.) like Sodom. It is **crucial** that Abraham understand this!

4. The conversation between Abraham and God is passionate, bold, and **confrontational**. Abraham is in God's face, challenging the Judge of all the earth concerning the justice of destroying innocent people.<sup>3</sup> More to the point, God is inviting Abraham to share the **responsibility** for what ultimately happens to Sodom. God is making Abraham his partner in determining the outcome.<sup>4</sup>
5. Abraham negotiates with God concerning the number of people in the righteous **remnant** necessary to save the city. What about 50? 45? 40? 30? 20? 10? Why did he stop at ten?

- Perhaps because there were 10 people in Lot's family (Lot and wife, his two unmarried sons, two unmarried daughters, and two married daughters and sons-in law. See Gn 19:8, 12, 14).
- Perhaps because it was apparent to Abraham that the conversation was over. Verse 33 makes it clear that *God* (not Abraham) stopped the conversation.

But it is **dubious** whether Lot and his family could be considered a righteous remnant. God does indeed answer Abraham's prayer: he takes Lot out of Sodom, but there is no indication that Sodom has been taken out of Lot (see Gn 19:30–38).

### III. Five Characteristics of Intercessory Prayer

There are other examples of intercession in the Bible: Samuel (1 Sm 7:5–9; 12:19–25), Elijah (1 Kgs 17:17–23), Elisha (2 Kgs 4:33; 6:15–20), Job (Job 42:7–9), Amos (Amos 7:1–6), and especially Moses (Ex 32:11–13, 31–34; Nm 12:11–13; 14:13–19). The ultimate illustration of intercession is, of course, **the cross** of Christ, where Jesus stood in the gap, between a holy God and human sinners, and did a work that preserved both divine justice and love. Looked at together with this first and most famous example of Abraham praying for Sodom, we can highlight five characteristics of the ministry of intercession:

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<sup>3</sup> See Jeremiah 12:1–4 for a similar passionate questioning of God's justice. And see Exodus 32:12 where Moses tells God to "repent" of the "evil" he is about to commit against the sinful Hebrew people.

<sup>4</sup> In 1 Corinthians 6:2–3 Paul says, "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?" Most Christians in fact do *not* know this! But Abraham's descendants, like the patriarch, are invited by God himself to help determine the future of our wicked world.

A. The origin of intercessory prayer: **God**.

1. Though Abraham has a burden for Sodom, his compassion is *not* the origin of his intercession. God is the one who shared with Abraham his decision to destroy the city and **invited** him into a discussion **already occurring** within the triune Godhead (see Gn 18: 17, 20–22).
2. Intercessory prayer is not really man begging God to do (or not do) something. Rather it is God sharing his **inner turmoil** and pain with a **friend**. Only a friend can really stand in the gap because he/she knows intimately both the heart of God and the human crisis. Abraham was God's friend (Jas 2:23).
3. Interceding for others thus becomes not so much a personal pleading for God to have mercy but rather allowing God to borrow your heart so that he can **talk to himself** through you! Intercessory prayer thus can be understood as God talking to himself through the medium of a human heart.

*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26–27)*

B. The nature of intercessory prayer: **wrestling with God**.

1. Most translations say that “Abraham still stood before the Lord” (Gn 18:22), but there is some manuscript evidence that it may have been *God* who was standing before Abraham.<sup>5</sup> But whether Abraham is blocking God's path or God is blocking Abraham's, the message is the same: intercession is confrontational, conflictual, at times, **argumentative**. Would you spare the city for 50 righteous? What about 30? Etc.
2. Perhaps the most startling example of the messy, in-your-face nature of intercession is seen in Moses' intercession for the people of Israel after their sin with the golden calf. At times, the conversation sounds more like a **shouting match** than a prayer (Ex 32:7–14).
3. Intercession is not a **passive** acquiescence to the **preordained** will of God: “Thy will be done.” That is more Islamic than Christian. True intercession is wrestling with God: “Give me children, or I die!” (Gn 30:2). “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Gn 32:26). Submission to the will of God comes **at the end** of intercession, not the beginning. “It is an insult to sink before God and say, ‘Thy will be done’ when there has been no intercession.”<sup>6</sup>

C. The power of intercessory prayer: causes God to **change his mind**.

1. When God announced his plans to destroy Sodom, Abraham might well have responded: “Well, since you have already told me your will to destroy the city, I suppose my role is to accept it. Thy will be done.” But no, Abraham boldly told God that he wanted him to do differently than he was planning to do. He was asking God to change his mind, to **repent**. “God instituted prayer to impart to his creatures the dignity of causality.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See discussion in Victor Hamilton's commentary, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Chambers, *Not Knowing Whither*, 887.

<sup>7</sup> Pascal, 320.

2. Though the Bible tells us that God does not change his mind/repent (Nm 23:19), there are several occasions where he, in fact, does!
    - Exodus 32:7–14. “And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people” (14).
    - 1 Samuel 15. “And the Lord repented that he had made Saul king over Israel” (see verses 11, 29, 35).
    - Jonah 3. When God saw how the Ninevites repented from their evil ways, then he repented from his plan to destroy the city (9–10).
  3. In Genesis 18, God continues with his plan to destroy Sodom, but we learn that he was at least open to the possibility of a **different outcome**.
- D. The content of intercessory prayer: the **glory of God**.
1. Far from being a plea for some **personal agenda** he may have, Abraham’s prayer was foundationally a cry for God to vindicate his Name, his justice, his glory: “Will not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gn 18:25).
  2. True intercessory prayer is never ultimately about the petitioner’s private preferences. Rather it is about **God’s glory** among the nations, God’s promises being fulfilled, God’s reputation seen through our lives.
- E. The cost of intercessory prayer: complete **self-giving love**.
1. Abraham had already risked everything once when he saved Lot and his family (see Gn 14). Now he is **risking his relationship** with El Shaddai to stand in the gap for his nephew.
  2. Intercessory prayer is the **costliest** of all forms of prayer:
    - “But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of our book that you have written” (Ex 32:32).
    - “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom 9:2–3).
  3. François Fénelon said: “Intercessory prayer is only another name for **love**.”

#### IV. Conclusion

Now we can understand why intercessory prayer is so **rare**. But if God can find one intercessor, **just one**, then human history can be different.

*And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none. (Ezekiel 22:30)*

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What did you learn tonight about divine power (omnipotence)? What does it look like? How is it manifested?
2. What did you learn tonight about intercessory prayer? Have you ever known a true intercessor? Do you want to be one?
3. Is anything too hard for the Lord?



# Father Abraham

## *The Obedience of Faith*

### ABRAHAM HAD TWO SONS

*Genesis 21:1–21; Galatians 4:21–31*

#### I. Learn to Discern

##### A. *To Tell the Truth.*

In a popular TV game show of the 1960s, four celebrity panelists questioned three contestants, trying to determine which one was the “central character” whose unusual occupation or experience had been explained earlier in the show. The two imposters would lie, but the central character had to tell the truth. The panelists would vote for the contestant they thought was telling the truth, then the host would ask, “Will the real [person’s name] please stand up?” **Discerning the truth** was not easy!

##### B. Will the real child of the covenant please stand up?

Genesis tells a series of stories where the reader must discern which son/daughter is the true, authentic carrier of God’s work in the world. Discerning the true from the false is **harder than you think!** Cain or Abel? Ham or Shem or Japheth? Ishmael or Isaac? Jacob or Esau? Leah or Rachel? Joseph or Judah or one of the other brothers?

##### C. Ishmael and Isaac (Gn 21:1–21; Gal 4:21–31).

Abraham had **two** sons. Though they had much in common (similar DNA, behaviors, beliefs, resemblance, circumcision, etc.) don’t be fooled! Only one of these men was the true son of the covenant. Jesus told a parable about **weeds** and **wheat** growing together “until the harvest” when they would be finally separated; the weeds to be burned and the wheat to be gathered into the master’s barn (Mt 13:24–30). Discerning the difference between wheat and weeds is a matter of **life and death**.

##### D. Our Scripture tonight will educate us in how to **learn to discern**. Such wisdom will enable us to be better equipped to see the truth concerning:

- The ongoing global conflict between **Jews**, **Muslims**, and **Christians** (all claiming to be children of Abraham).
- The presence of such a wide diversity of people who call themselves **Christians** (Catholics, Orthodox, social justice, liberation theologians, gay activists, racists, NRA enthusiasts, nutritionists, etc.).
- Most importantly, to protect us from **self-deception**; to recognize the potential in our own warped and ego-centric hearts to pervert the grace of God and distort the meaning of what it means to be a child of the covenant. Being a child of Abraham is not enough! Don’t forget that Abraham had *two* sons.

#### II. Genesis 21:1–21

The Birth of Isaac	The Expulsion of Ishmael
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isaac is born (Abraham is 100; Sarah is 90).</li> <li>• God keeps his promise (<i>hesed</i>)</li> <li>• “God has made laughter for me” (Sarah)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ishmael is a threat to Isaac</li> <li>• Sarah demands that Hagar and Ishmael be “cast out”</li> <li>• Abraham is grieved but God confirms Sarah’s decision</li> <li>• God blesses Ishmael too!</li> </ul>
Gn 21:1–7	Gn 21:8–21



Notes of the text:

- A. Great is Thy faithfulness! It took **25 years** of waiting and a miracle touch on a post-menopausal woman, but God fulfilled his promise. Sarah had a baby! The Hebrew term that speaks of God's faithfulness is *hesed*. Though translated in a wide variety of ways (mercy, grace, lovingkindness), the basic meaning is "**covenant faithfulness**." God is utterly reliable. What he promises, he will do. His *hesed* endures forever (see Ps 136).

*It is amazing that as important as this word is (occurring some three hundred times in all its forms in the Old Testament), there is no known cognate in any other Semitic language. It is as though the Hebrews have had to create a term for a concept that is unknown elsewhere in the world around them.<sup>1</sup>*

- B. Isaac is **circumcised** when he was eight days old (Gn 21:4). Ishmael had been circumcised earlier when he was 13 years old (Gn 17:25).
- C. Depending on the age of weaning, Ishmael was a teenager (15–17) and Isaac was an infant (2–4) when this story takes place.
- D. What was Ishmael doing that caused such a strong reaction from Sarah? The text says simply that he was "laughing" (ESV), "mocking" (NIV). Was he clowning, horsing around? Telling jokes? The Septuagint and Vulgate add the words "with her son" but this is not in the original Hebrew. If Ishmael was **innocently** "playing" with Isaac, then Sarah's anger was perhaps prompted by the presumed equality between the two boys, as if a lower caste slave child could be a peer to her son.

It seems more likely that Ishmael was **abusing** Isaac in some way: perhaps mocking, insulting, making fun, or bullying him. Some think there may even be a hint of sexual abuse between a teen and an infant sibling.<sup>2</sup> Paul interprets Ishmael's behavior toward Isaac as a form of "**persecution**" (see Gal 4:29).

- E. In what feels like an angry, ugly moment of self-protectiveness, Sarah demands that Hagar and Ishmael be "cast out" (Gn 21:10). Although her **motives** may have been wrong (jealousy, hatred, favoritism, etc.), her **instincts** were right—God, somewhat surprisingly, confirmed this! Ishmael's presence was a real threat to the work of God in the world.
- F. Abraham must **give up (sacrifice)** Ishmael. Losing this son is painful for Abraham. Note: before Abraham was ready for his final test where he was asked to sacrifice the child of promise (see Gn 22), he first had to sacrifice the child of flesh!

### III. Galatians 4:21–31.

- A. Paul is writing to a church that is being influenced by a teaching that says that faith in Jesus Christ is **not enough**. One must *also* obey the commandments given by Moses on Mount Sinai in order to be in right relationship (justified) with God: circumcision, Sabbath, dietary rules, etc. In other words, to be a Christian one must obey certain rules, follow certain ceremonies, recite certain words, etc. There are

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<sup>1</sup> Kinlaw, 172–173.

<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word "play" used here sometimes has a definite sexual connotation (see Gn 26:8; 39:17; Ex 32:6).

**litmus test** issues that will show everyone whether you are a true child of the covenant or not. Faith alone is inadequate. It is faith plus **works**.

- B. Paul explains that he is using the story of Genesis 21 **allegorically**. That is, he is using an historical story to teach a spiritual truth, a deeper meaning. What happened to Hagar and Sarah long ago in Canaan is related to what is happening in the Galatian church centuries later—and in our lives in America today. This is a **remarkable** way to interpret the Old Testament!<sup>3</sup>
- C. As a theologically trained pharisee, Paul had been taught to **begin** his understanding of how to be right with God (justified) by starting with Moses and the Law (Torah) at **Mount Sinai**. Being right with God means we must keep the rules. Isn't this self-evident? But after meeting Jesus on the Damascus Road, Paul experienced a revolution in the way he read the Bible. In **rereading** the Old Testament, he was shocked to learn from the Torah itself, that Abraham was in a right relationship with God 430 years *before* the Law was even given on Sinai (see Gal 3:16–18). In rereading the Old Testament, Paul realized that he had **misunderstood** the message. Being right with God had always been a matter of faith—and faith alone. Abraham was Exhibit A (see Gn 15:6, etc.).
- D. Paul is not contrasting Christians with Jews. His contrast is between followers of Jesus Christ who live according to the flesh and those who live according to the Spirit, those under the Law and those under grace. To drive his point home, Paul develops a **contrast** between Hagar and Sarah. These women represent two very different ways to understand how we are to be in a relationship with God. One is by works and the other is by grace.

<b>Under the Law</b>	<b>Under Grace</b>
Hagar—the slave	Sarah—the wife
Ishmael	Isaac
Born according to the flesh	Born according to the Spirit
Natural life	Supernatural life
Old Covenant	New Covenant
Sinai—the present Jerusalem	The Jerusalem above
Bondage	Freedom
Walks in the flesh	Walks in the Spirit
The Law	The Promise
Works	Faith
Persecutor	Persecuted
Will be cast out	Received the inheritance

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<sup>3</sup> We see a similar interpretive (hermeneutical) approach in 1 Corinthians 10:1–13 where Paul twice says that these Old Testament stories are “examples” (vv. 6, 11). The Greek word is *typos* (types). Christians today miss a huge blessing when they do not learn to read the Old Testament as Paul did. “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4).

#### IV. Applying Paul's Sermon

##### A. **Listen** more closely to the Old Testament

"Tell me . . . do you not listen to the law?" (Gal 4:21). "For it is written . . ." (Gal 4:27 where he quotes Isa 54:1). Paul is not inventing new ideas. He is simply reading the Old Testament in a new way.<sup>4</sup>

Application: Lord, fill me with your Holy Spirit so that you can open my eyes to behold the deeper meaning in your inspired Word.

##### B. Beware of **falling back** into slavery again.

- "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Gal 3:3).
- "But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain" (Gal 4:9).
- "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are **severed** from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have **fallen** away from grace. . . . You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?" (Gal 5:1-4, 7).

Application: Have I become attached and influenced by another "mother." Have I begun to think that my behavior, actions, religious disciplines, ceremonies or correctness of doctrine make me right with God? Have I begun to judge others as if this were so? Have I permitted litmus test issues to determine what it means to be right with God?

##### C. **Walk** by the Spirit.

*But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.... If we live by the Spirit, let us also **keep in step** with the Spirit. (Galatians 5:16-25)*

Application: When I look at the list of the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit, which list best characterizes my life? What can I do to ensure that the fruit of the Spirit becomes manifest in my life?

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<sup>4</sup> Think of the many occasions in which Jesus used irony with the pharisees (PhDs in Biblical Studies) by saying, "Haven't you read . . . ?" (Mt 12:3; 19:4; 21:42; etc.).

D. **Crucify** the flesh

Only a radical response will be adequate when one discovers that one has slipped back under the tyranny of the law and allowed Hagar to be one's mother! "**Cast out** the slave woman and her son . . ." (Gal 4:30).

- "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).
- "And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal 5:24).
- "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14).

Application: Can I point to a time in my life when the fleshly part of me (selfish ambition, ego-centricism, the desire to get my own way) has been dealt a death blow? If the works of the flesh are still manifest in my life, is it not time to ask God for a radical cure?

E. Keep the **main thing** the main thing.

- "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only **faith working through love**" (Gal 5:6).
- "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall **love your neighbor** as yourself.' But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another" (Gal 5:13–15).
- "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a **new creation**. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God" (Gal 6:15–16).

Application: Have I forgotten that faith working through love is what the gospel is all about? Have I neglected to love my neighbor? Do I read the Bible in a way that causes me to miss the fact that love (*agape*) is the point of it all?

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do you currently read the Old Testament and listen to its stories? Has this lesson made you think differently about the Old Testament?
2. Tell a story from your own life experience when it was very difficult to discern the true children of God from the false. What did you learn?
3. Describe a Christian situation you have known that had reverted to being "under law" more than "under grace." What happened?
4. In your Christian community, are there certain "litmus test" issues that are understood to distinguish those who are "in" from those who are "out"? Talk about this.
5. Did this lesson help you to discern any places in your own life where you are walking according to the flesh? What do you plan to do about it?



# Father Abraham

## *The Obedience of Faith*

### ABRAHAM'S FINAL EXAM

*Genesis 22:1–19*

I. The most sacred of all mountains

A. Abraham, Abraham! (Gn 22:11).

When God calls someone's name **twice**, you know something out of the ordinary is taking place!

- *Jacob, Jacob* (Gn 46:2). "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt . . ." (v. 3).
- *Moses, Moses* (Ex 3:4). "Take your sandals off your feet for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (v. 5).
- *Samuel, Samuel* (1 Sm 3:10). "I am about to do a thing in Israel at which the ears of everyone who hears it will tingle" (v. 11).
- *Simon, Simon*. "Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat" (Lk 22:31).
- *Jerusalem, Jerusalem* (Mt 23:37). "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate" (Mt 23:37–38).
- *Saul, Saul*. "Why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4).
- *Martha, Martha*. "You are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary . . ." (Lk 10:41–42).
- *Eloi, Eloi*. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34).

B. Few chapters in the Bible equal Genesis 22 in importance. For agnostics and cynics, it confirms their worst fears: God is cruel, capricious, egotistical, irrational, and guilty of child abuse. But for those who have eyes to see, this chapter is one of the clearest presentations of **the Gospel** ever written.<sup>1</sup> Here, we are on **holy ground**.

1. The **place** is holy. Mount Moriah (and the region around it) is uninhabited. But centuries later, this will be the site of **Solomon's Temple** in Jerusalem (see 2 Chron 3:1). Far more than Mount Sinai, *this mountain* (the place of worship, sacrifice, substitution, the lamb) will be the most holy place for the people of God.
2. The **persons** are holy. Abraham and Isaac are patriarchs for the people of God. Their beliefs and actions set the standard for what it means to be a child of the covenant.
3. The **action** is holy. This chapter, set at the beginning of the story of salvation told in the Bible, introduces us to concepts that are foundational to spiritual wholeness: faith, sacrifice, worship, substitution, parenting (father/son relationship).

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<sup>1</sup> We have already seen how Paul used the story of Hagar and Sarah (Gn 21) to teach about two covenants (works and faith, law and grace, flesh and Spirit) in Galatians 4:21–31. We are learning that many Old Testament stories are types (symbols, allegories) of realities that are only understood fully through the revelation of God we get in the New Testament (the incarnation, atonement, resurrection, etc.).

II. Brief commentary on the text.

A. This is a **test** (Gn 22:1).

1. It is important to distinguish between a “test” and a “**temptation**.” The purpose of a temptation is sinister: to make one stumble and fall. Satan is the tempter (Rv 12:9), not God (Jam 1:13).
2. God often “tests” (proves, tries, disciplines, educates) his children.<sup>2</sup> He does this, not because he is sadistic, but to **reveal** their true character, to **burn away** what is impure, to **prepare** them for the journey ahead.
3. The text is clear that God is testing the depth of Abraham’s **trust**: “Now I know that you fear [have awe, reverence] God” (Gn 22:12). Although Abraham had already trusted God to the extent that he left everything and stepped out into the unknown in obedience, he had **never** been tested like this!

B. Each word of Genesis 22:2 seems intended to press home the reality, to drive deeper the knife.

- *Your son*—the one you waited for 25 years; the miracle gift of God.
- *Your only son*—Ishmael is not your (real) son. You have only one!
- *Isaac*—laughter.
- *Whom you love*. This is the first time the word “love” occurs in the Bible!

C. “And offer him as a *burnt offering . . .*” (Gn 22:2). The Hebrew term *olah* is the origin of the English word “**holocaust**.” Leviticus 1:3ff. explains that this offering is **totally consumed** by flames on the altar; it is literally turned into smoke and ashes. Leon Kass formulates God’s question to Abraham in these terms:

*Will you walk reverently and wholeheartedly before God even if it means sacrificing all benefits promised for such conduct? Do you fear and revere God more than you love your son—and through him, your great nation, great name, and great prosperity?*<sup>3</sup>

D. When God announced his plans to destroy Sodom, Abraham **pleaded** with God to reconsider (see Gn 18:16–33). But here, Abraham says nothing. He rises early, saddles his donkey, and promptly obeys. Apparently, he knew that on this matter, there was to be no discussion. According to Hebrews 11:17–19, he “considered that God was able even to **raise him** from the dead . . .”

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. —The Serenity Prayer*

E. God stops Abraham from killing his son. Though we know that God is adamantly opposed to child sacrifice,<sup>4</sup> he lets the drama play out to the last second before he intervenes. As a substitute for Isaac, God provides a **lamb**; technically, God provides a **ram**—the *father* of a lamb (Gn 22:7–8, 13–14). Apparently, the ram had been there

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<sup>2</sup> A rich study awaits those who make the effort to search the many occasions in Scripture when God tests his children. For example, see Ex 15:25; 16:4; 20:20; Dt 8:2; Jgs 3:1–4; 2 Chr 32:31; 1 Cor 10:13; Jas 1:2–3; 1 Pt 1:6–76.

<sup>3</sup> Kass, 337.

<sup>4</sup> The Bible is categoric in its abhorrence of child sacrifice and announces divine judgement on the surrounding nations where such abominable deeds were practiced. See for example, Lv 18:21; 20:1–5; Jer 7:30–31.

all along, but Abraham was able to see it only **after** he had come to a point of full surrender. Abraham names the place *Yahweh-jireh* (the Lord will provide).

- F. Once Abraham has passed the test, God renews the covenant promises (Gn 22:15–19). God will bless Abraham, give him innumerable descendants and make him a blessing to the nations. But this time God adds something new. He confirms the covenant promise with an **oath**. “By myself I have sworn . . .”

*For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.” . . . For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things (the **promise** and the **oath**), in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. (Hebrews 6:13–18)*

### III. A Text for Meditation

Though I love to preach hard-hitting sermons on full surrender from Genesis 22 (Is your all on the altar?), I feel constrained to take a more **contemplative** approach in this study. Let’s prayerfully absorb the deep meaning of this story from the perspective of the three main characters.

- A. *Abraham*. Put yourself in his sandals and imagine what it must have been like.

1. Think again on Abraham’s walk of faith prior to this moment; how he had left **everything**, trusting in the promises of God—for 30–40 years!
2. Think again of how Abraham had fathered **Ishmael** (the child of flesh)—how he loved him and then was forced to let him go.
3. Think of the mind-boggling, breath-taking, heart-stopping command that came from God: *Take your **only son**, the one you love so much, the one named Laughter, and make a holocaust of him; turn him to smoke and ashes!*

Describe your reaction to this command (feelings, questions, emotions):

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Abraham obeyed, he believed, he put his all on the altar. He thus became a hero of the faith and **set the standard** once and for all for what it means to believe in God.

*Abraham was great with that power whose strength is powerlessness, great in that wisdom whose secret is folly, great in that hope whose outward form is insanity, great in that love which is hatred of self . . . I cannot understand Abraham, I can only admire him.<sup>5</sup>*

- B. *Isaac*. It is hard to be a father, but it is also hard to be a son. Put yourself in Isaac’s sandals and imagine what it must have been like.

1. Isaac was **old enough** (aged 18–30) to understand what was happening and to either run away or resist (Abraham was an old man, perhaps 130).

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<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, 50, 136.

2. Isaac was no **victim**. He was a **willing** sacrifice.
3. This passage is not just about what it means to be a father. Just as importantly, it is about what it means to be a son. Is this what the sacrament of **circumcision** was all about?
4. In answer to his question about the lamb, Abraham said, "**God** will provide a lamb" (Gn 12:8). Isaac would always remember that his father taught him to put his trust *not* in his father, but in the Lord!
5. Isaac learned an amazing lesson: though his father loved him with passionate devotion, he loved God **more**!
6. Isaac is just as much a hero of the faith in this chapter as is his father.

Imagine yourself as Isaac during the three day walk with Abraham to Moriah. What are you thinking? What are you feeling?

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- C. *The Lord*. What kind of God would give a test like this? Is he cruel? capricious? irrational? Or is there more going on than is going on?
1. It is impossible to miss the foreshadowing of **Calvary** in the drama played out on the neighboring mountain. Abraham and Isaac are not the only Father/Son team involved.
    - a. Isaac **carried the wood** for the sacrifice up the mountain (Gn 22:6; see Jn 19:17).
    - b. When John the Baptist introduced Jesus as "the **Lamb of God**" (Jn 1:29), he was surely thinking of Genesis 22.
    - c. The **loving relationship** between Father and Son as they work in unison is a profound picture into the triune purposes of God in the atonement worked out on the cross.
  2. Elie Wiesel (Jewish holocaust survivor and author) writes with perhaps greater wisdom than he knows concerning Genesis 22:

*And so the father and the son walked away together—the one to bind and the other to be bound, the one to slaughter and the other to be slaughtered—sharing the same allegiance to the same God, responding to the same call. The sacrifice was to be their joint offering; father and son had never before been so close.*<sup>6</sup>
  3. Better yet, words from the New Testament help us to understand how Mount Calvary and Mount Moriah go together:
    - a. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his **only Son**, that whoever believe in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16).
    - b. "He who did not spare his own Son but **gave him up** for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom 8:32).

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<sup>6</sup> Wiesel, 88.



- c. "For this reason the Father loves me, because **I lay down my life** that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:17–18).
  - d. "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mk 14:36).
  - e. "Although he was a son, he **learned obedience** through what he suffered" (Heb 5:8).
4. A sermon by Henry Clay Morrison (1857–1942), as told by Dennis Kinlaw, gives a poignant description of what is really going on in Genesis 22.

*The Triune God was looking on at the sacrifice of Isaac. One member of the Godhead said to another one, "This is not the last time we're going to be on this mountain, is it?" And the First Person of the blessed Trinity said, "No, it will be about two thousand years and we will be back, right here." And the Second Person of the blessed Trinity said to the First Person, "And when we come back next time, it's not going to one of them on that altar, is it?" And the First Person of the blessed Trinity said, "No, when we come back the next time it won't be one of them—it will be one of Us." And then the Second Person of the blessed Trinity said to the First, "And when they put me on that altar of sacrifice, are you going to say, "Stop, don't touch the lad?" And the Father said, "No. We never ask them to do in symbol what we haven't been willing to do in reality."<sup>7</sup>*

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. With which character do you more identify: Abraham or Isaac? Is God asking you to surrender something you love? Or perhaps do you feel that *you* are the one being sacrificed?
2. Is your all on the altar? Does God have you in some kind of a "test" to make sure that you do indeed come to a place of full surrender?
3. How important is it for children to understand that though their parents love them dearly, they love God more?
4. What is the meaning of the ceremony at church when children are dedicated to the Lord?
5. Describe the loving unity of the Father and the Son as one is the Offeror and the other is the Offering. Which one suffers the most? How does this act of worship make possible the salvation of the world?

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<sup>7</sup> Kinlaw, 190.



# Father Abraham

## *The Obedience of Faith*

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# Father Abraham

## *The Obedience of Faith*

### ANSWERS

#### ***The Call***

- I. [Genesis 1–11 column] the seed of the woman; sin; judgment; [Genesis 12–50 column] the Hebrews; hope; election; City of God; chosen; covenant; (B) Abraham; Jacob; Joseph
- II. (A) model; (B) biological; spiritual; (C1) Covenant; relationship; circumcision; (C2) Journey; tent; strangers; exiles; (C3) Worship; first-generation; diluted; altar; (C4) Family; husband; father; (C5) right with God (righteous); friend; before; justification by faith; (C6) faith; first step; his call
- III. (A1) command; Go from; Go to; (A1a) words; hearing; (A1b) two-fold; repentance; faith; (A2) promise; conditional; obedience; (A2b) great nation; barren; (A2d) name great; (A2g) the world; (B) mental assent; obedience; (C) appeared; land; Canaanites; famine
- IV. (A) listening; (A1) calling; (B1) initiated; chosen; (B2) most important; rearview mirror; (B3) journey; walked; burial plot; (B4) relationship; with him; to be; to do; (B5) cost you everything; (B6) not about me; favoritism; manure; (C) hearing

#### ***The Test of Faith***

- I. (A1) please God; (A2) work; (A3) saved; (A4) shield; (A5) sin; (A6) hell; (B1) impossible; (B2) prayer; (B3) overcome; (C1) believers; (C2) The Faith; (D1) Optimism; (D2) Sincerity; (D3) Mental assent; (D4) A leap in the dark; (E1) Trust; intellectual; emotional; volitional; (E2) obedience; (E3) the link; by grace; through faith; for good works
- II. (A) many children; land of Canaan; Canaanites; (B) tests; supreme test; Now I know; (C) why; steadfastness; perfect; praise and glory and honor
- III. (A) adversity; disappoints; underperforms; F; (A1) Death Valley; (A2) logical; Egypt; (A3) deepen the crisis; (A3a) Sarah; (A3b) Lot; (A3c) Abraham; Hagar; (B) self-interest; danger; F; (B1) selfish; (B2) half-truth; (B3) plagues; curse; (B4) ironic; morality; (C) back to Bethel; another change; (D) conflict; strife; conflict; A; (D1) pulling rank; (D2a) eyes; Worldliness; (D2b) near; (D2c) in; (D2d) the gate; (D3) motivation; (D3a) relationship; (D3b) trust God

#### ***A Lot to Remember***

- I. (A) commandment; (B) serious; (C) act; do something; dismember; (D) nephew; heir; God; Abraham
- II. (A1) first choice; (A2a) eyes; trusted; (A2b) Egypt; worldly; (A2c) chose for himself; (A2d) near; in; (A2e) outside; could not inherit; (A3) greatest mistake; downhill; (A3b) selfish; (A3b) external appearances; (A3c) logical; (A3d) coping; (B1) in the city; Sodomite; (B2) no grudges; (B3a) God still loves; repent; (B3b) rebuild the relationship; (B3c) dangerous; raise my family; (C1) civic leader; (C2) angels; hospitality; (C3) Great Prostitute; (C3a) great; the Lord; very grave; outcry; abomination; (C3b) pride; gluttony; laziness; poor and needy; (C3c) defiling passion; despise authority; (C3d) Xenophobia; Sodomy; incest; (C4a) lingered; (C4b) family; (C4c) negotiates; city; (C4d) drunk; sleep with him; reborn; (C5) get Sodom out of Lot

- III. (A) Second-hand; (B) eyes; (C) he can resist; slippery slope; (D) Double-mindedness; unstable; (E) Hypocrisy; (F) through fire; not even ten; his family
- IV. (A) opportunities; (B) sin; (C) judgment

### ***Ground Zero***

- I. (A) Genesis 15:6; faith; behavior; orthodoxy; piety; (B) doubts; believe; faith; believe
- II. hardest; talks back; (A) first; promise; hearing; (A1) I am; Himself; (A2) very own son; offspring; (A3) this land; (B) huge obstacles; (B1) 70; barren; 20; (B2) inhabited; 400; be sure; believe anyway; (C) covenant; binding agreement; (C1) dramatized curse; (C3) unilateral; (D) Amen; (D1) knows God; character; (D2) righteousness; faith alone; God was able
- III. faith in the promises; revolutionary; right relationship; (1) grace; (2) provision; (3) hope; (4) strength; (5) victory; (6) peace; (7) cleansing; (8) rest; (9) the Holy Spirit; (10) guidance; (11) assurance

### ***How to Birth a Donkey***

- I. (B) fourth; (B1) A; (B2) F; (B3) A; (B4) F; walk; tested; muscle; (C) context; (C1) promise; believed; (C2) impossible situation; (C3) solution; surrogate; (D) human; Arab-Israeli
- II. (A1) help themselves; (A2) in the flesh; (A3) dysfunction; (A3a) manipulative; (A3b) passive; wimp; (A3c) deny their marriage; (A4) bitter old woman; do something; (A5) God's will; power of the flesh; (B1) preincarnate; (B2) God hears; God sees; sees me; (B3) wild donkey
- III. work of the Spirit; power of the flesh; (A1) my way; (A1) means; goal; (A2) your own understanding; fool; (A3) My Way; (A4) God; (B) my time; (B1) to wait; 15 years; (B2) trust/believe; not doing; wait; Wait; (B3) passivity; (C) my power; (C1) human resources; (C2) wrong weapon

### ***An Old Man Gets a New Start***

- I. (A) unilateral; unconditional; (A1) descendants; (A2) Canaan; (A3) all nations; (B) passive; believed; righteousness; (C1) Canaanites; famines; burial plot; (C2) old; barren; donkey; (C3) plagues; (D1) right relationship; (D2) monotonous; predictable; unfruitful; (D3) fresh work of grace; entire sanctification; walk in the flesh; (D4) pregnant
- II. (A) understanding of God; (A1) 25 years; marriage; concept of God; (A2) all-sufficient; impersonal; (A3) mercenary; motives; (B) identity; (B1) transformation; (B2) find ourselves; lose ourselves; (C) sense of humor; (C1) doubled over; (C2) hard; hilarious; (C3) God is laughing too; (C4) Sarah's laugh; (D) sacramental symbol; (D1) circumcision; sign of the covenant; reality; (D2) children; males; permanent; baptism; (D3) spiritual reality; (E) commandment; (E1) undivided; perfect; (E2) walking in the flesh; wholehearted; (E3) my face; perfection of love; (E4) entire sanctification; be

### ***Is Anything Too Hard for the Lord?***

- I. rhetorical; (A) omnipotence; God Almighty; (A1) all things; whatever; his will; upholds the universe; (A2) too hard; all things; impossible; (B1) Yes!; (B2) hmm, I'm not so sure; (B2a) divine omnipotence; (B2b) human sin; resist; (B2c) justice; divine dilemma

- II. (A1) three persons; theophany; (A2) hospitality; angels; (A3) Sodom; intercessor; (A4) unbelief; (B1) investigate; (B2) himself; overhear; (B3) all the nations; justice; social justice; crucial; (B4) confrontational; responsibility; (B5) remnant; dubious
- III. the cross; (A) God; (A1) invited; already occurring; (A2) inner turmoil; friend; (A3) talk to himself; (B) wrestling with God; (B1) argumentative; (B2) shouting match; (B3) passive; preordained; at the end; (C) change his mind; (C1) repent; (C3) different outcome; (D) glory of God; (D1) personal agenda; (D2) God's glory; (E) self-giving love; (E1) risking his relationship; (E2) costliest; (E3) love
- IV. rare; just one

### ***Abraham Had Two Sons***

- I. (A) Discerning the truth; (B) harder than you think; (C) two; weeds; wheat; life and death; (D) learn to discern; Jews; Muslims; Christians; Christians; self-deception
- II. (A) 25 years; covenant faithfulness; (B) circumcised; (D) innocently; abusing; persecution; (E) motives; instincts; (F) give up (sacrifice)
- III. (A) not enough; litmus test; works; (B) allegorically; remarkable; (C) begin; Mount Sinai; rereading; misunderstood; (D) contrast
- IV. (A) Listen; (B) falling back; fallen; severed; (C) Walk; keep in step; (D) Crucify; Cast out; (E) main thing; faith working through love; love your neighbor; new creation

### ***Abraham's Final Exam***

- I. (A) twice; (B) the Gospel; holy ground; (B1) place; Solomon's Temple; (B2) persons; (B3) action
- II. (A) test; (A1) temptation; (A2) reveal; burn away; prepare; (A3) trust; never; (C) holocaust; totally consumed; (D) pleaded; raise him; (E) lamb; ram; after; (F) oath; promise; oath
- III. contemplative; (A1) everything; (A2) Ishmael; (A3) only son; set the standard; (B1) old enough; (B2) victim; willing; (B3) circumcision; (B4) God; (B5) more; (C1) Calvary; (C1a) carried the wood; (C1b) Lamb of God; (C1c) loving relationship; (C3a) only Son; (C3b) gave him up; (C3c) I lay down my life; (C3e) learned obedience

## **I Want a Principle Within**

By Charles Wesley (1749)

*I want a principle within  
of watchful, godly fear,  
a sensibility of sin,  
a pain to feel it near.*

*I want the first approach to feel  
of pride or wrong desire,  
to catch the wandering of my will,  
and quench the kindling fire.*

*From thee that I no more may stray,  
no more thy goodness grieve,  
grant me the filial awe, I pray,  
the tender conscience give.  
Quick as the apple of an eye,  
O God, my conscience make;  
awake my soul when sin is nigh,  
and keep it still awake.*

*Almighty God of truth and love,  
to me thy power impart;  
the mountain from my soul remove,  
the hardness from my heart.  
O may the least omission pain  
my reawakened soul,  
and drive me to that blood again,  
which makes the wounded whole.*



## **O for a Closer Walk with God**

By William Cowper

(Sung to the tune *It Came upon the Midnight Clear*)

*O for a closer walk with God  
A calm and heavenly frame  
A light to shine upon the road  
That leads me to the Lamb.  
Where is the blessedness I knew  
When I first saw the Lord?  
Where is that soul-refreshing view  
Of Jesus and His word?*

*What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!  
How sweet their memory still!  
But they have left an aching void  
The world can never fill.  
Return, O holy Dove! return  
Sweet messenger of rest!  
I hate the sins that made Thee mourn  
And drove Thee from my breast.*

*The dearest idol I have known  
Whate'er that idol be  
Help me tear it from Thy throne  
And worship only Thee.  
So shall my walk be close with God  
Calm and serene my frame  
So purer light shall mark the road  
That leads me to the Lamb.*



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