



ABRAHAM ONE TRIBE SYMBOL: STARS



UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

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Goal: That all participants would be in awe of God, recognizing the amazing way He fulfills promises through His final covenant with Abraham.



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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read Genesis 16:2-4, 17:1-11, 22:1-18

CONTEXT

Context in the Story of Salvation: Abraham Continued

The story of Abraham continues.

Context for Our Story Today: Taking Matters into Their Own Hands

Genesis 16:2-4

Ten years go by, and Abram still has no heir. In a moment of desperation, Sarai tells Abram to take matters into his own hands: Sarai gives her maid, Hagar, to Abram to start a line of descendants. Abram doesn't object; he sleeps with Hagar, as a kind of "surrogate mother." She conceives a son, Ishmael. This was not what God had in mind, but because this child is Abram's offspring (and God keeps His promises), Ishmael's descendants will become an entire nation: traditionally, the Arab people.

Initially, God seems silent about Abram's behavior, but the consequences will be revealed later in the details of the narrative. Immediately after the Hagar incident, the narrative jumps 13 years — to the next time Abram hears God speak.

Genesis 17:1-11

This time, God has a different tone: “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless...” (Gn 17:1). At this point, Abram reverently falls prostrate. God refers to His second promise: that He will expand His covenant so that Abram’s line will bring forth not just a nation, but a royal kingdom — and He makes another covenant to prove it. At first, it may seem like Abram’s misbehavior is rewarded. However, a closer look shows that, like a good father, the Lord is using this as a teaching moment for Abram.

God spells out the terms for this covenant: circumcision. It is a sign of the covenant, but it is also God’s response to Abram’s sin. Where the crime was committed, there also the punishment is given.

God also changes Abram’s name to Abraham — from “exalted father” to “father of many nations.” Sarai’s name is changed to Sarah. A change in name signifies a change in mission, and these “many nations” will be the fruit of both his sons, Ishmael and Isaac (who is not yet conceived). In other words, God will bless Abraham with descendants, but His plan includes Sarah as the mother.

Abraham and his household respond with obedience. God is faithful, and within the year, Sarah at last conceives and gives birth to Isaac, the son of the promise (Gn 21:1-3).

CLIMAX: ABRAHAM’S FINAL TEST

Genesis 22:1-18

Years pass, and God gives Abraham one final test to prove his trust in his Father’s plan. This time, God calls Abraham to take his son Isaac, heir of the promises, and sacrifice him as a burnt offering. In the

past, Abraham had kept his backup plan, but here we see something different: silent obedience.

Abraham straps the wood of the offering to Isaac's back, and together they go up the mountain. When Isaac asks his father, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham responds with total trust: "God will provide Himself the lamb" (Gn 22:7 – 8). Abraham then builds an altar and lays Isaac upon it.

Abraham then lifts the knife to slay his son — but at the last minute, an angel calls to him: "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Gn 22:12). Abraham is finally willing to trust the Lord in everything. Ultimately, a ram caught in the thicket is used for the burnt offering instead of Isaac.

God tests Abraham's willingness to detach himself from his own plan. Seeing this internal change within Abraham's heart, God seals His final promise with a covenant oath: Abraham's descendants will be the means by which all the families of the earth are brought into the covenantal blessing — the family of God.

APPLICATION: THE LORD WILL PROVIDE

More than just a test of wills, God the Father offers these events as a foreshadowing. As, you can see in the chart below, the near-sacrifice of Isaac parallels the future sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Sacrifice of Isaac	Sacrifice of Jesus
Sacrifice to take away sins	Sacrifice to take away sins
Abraham's only son	God the Father's only Son
Rides a donkey to the mountain of sacrifice	Rides a donkey into Jerusalem to die (Palm Sunday)
Isaac carries wood to the top of a mountain	Jesus carries a cross of wood to the top of a mountain
Sacrificed ram caught in thorns	Jesus crowned with thorns as He is crucified
Agrees to be sacrificed, does not resist	Agrees to be sacrificed, does not resist
Mt. Moriah outside the city of Salem	Mt. Calvary (of the hills of Moriah) outside Jerusalem
God will provide the lamb	Jesus is the Lamb of God

The sacrifice of Jesus not only parallels the story of Isaac, but it also fulfills it.

The sacrifice of Isaac took place near the city of Salem. Because God provided a ram for the sacrifice, Abraham called the place by that name: "So Abraham called the name of that place The Lord will provide; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord, it shall be provided'" (Gn 22:14). But, notice that the verse reads "shall be provided," not "was provided." God not only provided for Abraham, but He will provide in the future. Abraham trusted that God would provide the worldwide blessing He promised.

Therefore, to remember how God would provide, the Israelites changed the name of the town of Salem: They added the prefix *yireh*, which means, "the Lord will provide." As a Jewish midrash puts it, Abraham called it "yireh" and Shem called it "salem," so the two names were combined (Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* vol. 1). This is likely where we get the name Jerusalem, from "yireh-salem."

God's promise was so important to the Israelites that they changed the name of the city.

Now, how was God going to provide? As we read in the story, Abraham trusted that "God will provide *Himself* the lamb" (Gn 22:8. Note: Some translations omit this phrasing; the Revised Standard Version [RSV] captures it well). Not only was God going to provide a lamb one day, but He also intended to give Himself.

In Jesus Christ, these promises reach their fulfillment. Jesus is the true Lamb of God, God Himself, offered as a sacrifice for sins. God stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, but He would not stop the sacrifice of *His own* beloved Son. Additionally, Jesus' sacrifice happens outside the city of Jerusalem, not far from the place of the near-sacrifice of Isaac. Finally, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is the promised blessing for the entire world, saving humanity from sin and death.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we learned that, after taking matters into his own hands and failing, Abraham finally obeys God's command without question, agreeing to sacrifice Isaac, his son and heir. At the last minute, God intervenes and saves Isaac. He then forms a covenant with Abraham, extending it to his entire tribe. This covenant is dramatically fulfilled by Jesus Christ; He is the Lamb that God provides. The symbol of stars reminds us of how amazingly God fulfills His promises.

Special thanks to and recommendations for further reading:

Hahn, Scott: *A Father Who Keeps His Promises*. Cincinnati: Servant Books, 1998.

Gray, Tim, and Jeff Cavins: *Walking with God*. West Chester: Ascension Press, 2010.

Sri, Edward and Curtis Martin: *The Real Story*. Golden: Epic Publishing, 2012.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 16:2-4, 17:1-11, 22:1-18

Reminder to the leader of the goal of this chapter: That all participants would be in awe of God, recognizing the amazing way He fulfills promises through His final covenant with Abraham.

OPENER:

1. Have you ever been in complete awe of something? What was it, and what made it so amazing?

(Share aloud with your group.)

Today we are going to continue with the story of Abram. When we left off, Abram was staring up at the sky, in broad daylight, hearing God say that his descendants would be like the stars. Abram believed in God. Today, we are going to look at the amazing way God fulfills His covenant with Abram.

CONTEXT: TAKING MATTERS INTO THEIR OWN HANDS

Read Genesis 16:2-4

2. What does Sarai tell Abram to do?

Answer: She tells him to sleep with her maid, Hagar, in order to start a line of descendants.

3. Abram has been walking with God for a while now. By sleeping with Hagar, what do you think Abram was trying to do?

Answer: It is another instance of coming up with an alternative plan, taking matters into his own hands instead of waiting upon the Lord to act.

Read Genesis 17:1–11

4. After Abram's disobedience, God renews His covenant with him. Does it seem to you like Abram is getting off the hook without any punishment?

Allow the group to discuss.

5. What does God tell Abram, now Abraham, that he must do as part of this covenant, and why is this a fitting action after his sin with Hagar?

Answer: He and his entire household must be circumcised. Abram's punishment is given where the crime was committed. God wants Abraham to remember where he failed in trust — and so He gives a sign, with Abraham's own body, as a reminder that he should not repeat the same action again.

CLIMAX: ABRAHAM'S FINAL TEST

Read Genesis 22:1–18

6. What does God ask Abraham to do in this passage?

Answer: He asks Abraham to kill Isaac — to sacrifice him as a burnt offering.

7. This is extreme. What do you think Abraham was thinking when he heard this command from God?

Allow the group to discuss.

8. When Isaac asks Abraham about the lamb to be sacrificed, how does Abraham respond and what does this response tell us about Abraham?

Answer: Abraham says, "God will provide Himself the lamb." An internal change has taken place within Abraham. With strengthened trust, he now fully believes that God will provide and that, somehow, He will fulfill the promises He has made.

9. After Abraham proves his trust, God makes His third and final covenant with Abraham. What does He promise?

Answer: God promises that all nations will be blessed through Abraham's line of descendants. Through Abraham's seed, the whole world will be invited into the covenant family of God.

APPLICATION: THE LORD WILL PROVIDE

(Share aloud with your group.)

This is a pretty incredible story — but what is perhaps even more amazing is the way that God fulfills the promise that he makes to Abraham. Let me share with you how it happened.

More than just a test of wills, God the Father offers these events as a foreshadowing. As you can see in the chart below, the near-sacrifice of Isaac parallels the future sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Sacrifice of Isaac	Sacrifice of Jesus
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10. Looking at all of these parallels and the amazing way God fulfills His promises, what stands out to you the most, and why?

Allow the group to discuss.

11. Last time we talked about our “Lot” in life, and this week we were able to see the amazing way God fulfilled His promises once Abraham was completely faithful. Have you seen God’s blessings in your life as you tried to be more faithful to Him?

Allow the group to discuss.

SUMMARY

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In this chapter, we learned that, after taking matters into his own hands and failing, Abraham finally obeys God's command without question, agreeing to sacrifice Isaac, his son and heir. At the last minute, God intervenes and saves Isaac. He then forms a covenant with Abraham, extending it to his entire tribe. This covenant is dramatically fulfilled by Jesus Christ; He is the Lamb that God provides. The symbol of stars reminds us of how amazingly God fulfills His promises.

