

# NOTES



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## Chapter IV

# The Father of Faith

### UNDERSTANDING

*(for your preparation as a leader)*

Page 76 - 85

### DISCUSSION

*(to use with your group)*

Page 86 - 94

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UNDERSTANDING

## WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

We have seen Abram's great faith; now we must look at his great sin, as well as its long-term effects. For many modern readers of the Old Testament, the patriarchs and other heroes in the Bible appear to break the moral code without any reprimand from God. That seems to be the case with Abram in Genesis 16. Abram has intimate relations with a woman named Hagar, who is not his wife, and yet he seemingly goes unpunished.

While Abram came to believe that God would give him a child (Gn 15:6), he still doubts that this promised child will come through his own marriage. After many years of marriage and no children, Abram's wife Sarai appears to be too old to conceive. Even she admits this and says to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go into my maid; it may be that I shall take children by her" (Gn 16:2). Abram heeds Sarai's advice and has relations with Hagar, her Egyptian maid, and Hagar conceives a son named Ishmael.

This is a clear act of adultery, and yet Abram's sin seems to be unnoticed by God. However, a closer reading of the Biblical narrative reveals God's fatherly discipline. The son conceived from this extramarital affair becomes a point of contention in Abram's family, causing discord between Hagar and Sarai (Gn 16 and 21). The rest of Biblical history shows how this marital infidelity sows seeds of

division throughout the generations, all the way up to the present day. Ishmael, the son of Hagar through Abram's act of adultery, is considered a founding father of the Arabs; while Isaac, the son of God's promise eventually born to Sarai, will become the father of all the Israelites.

For thousands of years, these descendants of Isaac and Ishmael—the Jews and Arabs—have been in perpetual conflict. For the ancient Israelites, this account of Abram and Hagar would have been a painful reminder of the tragic consequences of Abram's marital infidelity.

### Getting Away with Adultery?

Moreover, the Biblical narrative highlights God's displeasure with Abram's adultery. Up until this time, God has been actively involved in Abram's life (Gn 12-15), but after Abram's liaison with Hagar, the Bible records no discourse between God and Abram for thirteen long years. Then, when God finally speaks to Abram, the Lord's first words challenge him to live by a high moral standard: "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless" (Gn 17:1). Abram's virtue must be on par with his heroic ancestors Enoch and Noah, who "walked with God" and were "blameless" (Gn 5:22; 6:9).

Abram is ninety-nine years old when God appears to him in this scene (Gn 17:1). In awe and reverence before the presence of the Almighty God, Abram "fell on his face" in worship, humbly lying prostrate (Gn 17:3). God assures Abram that His covenant is still with him and that he will really become the father of a multitude of nations. To underscore this promise, God changes Abram's name to Abraham, which literally means "the father of a multitude" (Gn 17:4-5). The Lord goes on to tell Abraham that he will be the father of great kings who will play an important role in God's covenant plan: "I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish my covenant

between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant” (Gn 17:6-7).

At this moment, Abraham must be thinking that his many descendants will come through Ishmael, but much to Abraham’s surprise, God says these promises of kings and nations will be bestowed on a child given to Sarai. First, God changes Sarai’s name to “Sarah,” which means “princess,” highlighting her association with the future kingdom promised to Abraham’s heirs. God then emphasizes how the covenantal promise will be carried out not through his adulterous relationship with Hagar, but through Sarah, Abraham’s wife.

I will bless *her*, and moreover I will give you a son by *her*; I will bless *her*; and *she* shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come forth by *her*. (Gn 17:16, emphasis added)

This pronouncement is abruptly interrupted by Abraham, who once again “fell on his face” (Gn 17:17), but this time he is not doing so out of worship: He is falling on his face in laughter! If Abraham doubted his wife could conceive a child thirteen years earlier, when he committed adultery with Hagar, the prospect of a ninety-year-old Sarah bearing a child now seems ridiculous to him. He says to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” (Gn 17:17). He then proposes to God that Ishmael be his heir: “Oh, that Ishmael might live in thy sight!” (Gn 17: 18).

But God is not laughing. The Lord reminds Abraham that He always intended the promised child to come from his marriage, not from adultery: “No, but Sarah *your wife* shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him” (Gn 17:19, emphasis added). God will bless Ishmael, too, but the covenant and the promise of future kings will remain with Isaac (Gn 17:20-21).

There is great irony in the name God instructs Abraham to give to this child: Isaac in Hebrew literally means “he laughs.” Every time Abraham calls his son, he will be reminded of how he laughed incredulously when God said Sarah would conceive. Though Abraham initially laughed at God’s promise, in the end, God will get the last laugh.

### Circumcision

In this scene, God also gives Abraham a new covenantal sign: circumcision. God instructs Abraham, “You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you” (Gn 17:11).

Many modern readers think of circumcision in the Bible as simply an ancient religious ritual, but it was more than that. It was a sign of the “everlasting covenant” God made with Abraham that day (Gn 17:13). As Israel’s history unfolds, it will serve as an important sign marking out the descendants of Abraham who are in covenant with God.

This particular sign probably also served as a painful reminder of Abraham’s lack of trust in God’s promise and his sin with Hagar that followed. In Genesis 16, Abraham committed adultery with Hagar; in the very next chapter, he is commanded by God to be blameless and to be circumcised. Think about what this would mean for Abraham: Here he is, a ninety-nine-year-old man, being told to cut off the flesh of his foreskin. Abraham might have been wondering, “Why can’t I receive a rainbow for a sign, Lord...like Noah?” For Abraham, circumcision probably would have felt, at least on some level, like a punishment—and the punishment fits the crime.

This ritual might also be seen as another test of Abraham’s faith: On the heels of the fresh wound of circumcision, this elderly man

and his barren wife are to have a son within a year? From a natural perspective, Abraham and Sarah have never before been *less* capable of fulfilling their call to become parents. The story reminds us that with God, nothing is impossible. Abraham is being called to trust in God's ability to overcome any obstacle.

### The Final Test

Even after God finally gives Sarah a child named Isaac (Gn 21:1-3), Abraham must face the climactic test of his faith. God says to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you" (Gn 22:2).

This request is almost incomprehensible. Imagine a man now in his second century who has waited his entire life for his wife to bear him a son. He probably loved nothing on this earth more than Isaac—and yet the Lord comes to Abraham and tells him he must be willing to give up even this, his very own son.

Nevertheless, Abraham obeys the Lord. He arose the next morning, cut wood for the sacrifice, saddled his donkey and traveled with his son to Moriah just as God commanded. Once they get there, they ascend the mountain with Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice on his shoulders. At the top of the mountain, Abraham prepares the altar, binds Isaac and lays his son on the altar of wood. This most weighty sacrifice is ready to begin.

Just at that moment, an angel from heaven intervenes, saying, "Abraham, Abraham!...Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from me" (Gn 22:10-12).

Here we finally see Abraham's faith perfected. Throughout his life, Abraham has been willing to follow God, but not totally. Afraid of putting his life completely in God's hands, Abraham doubted God's promises (Gn 15:2-3) and pursued his own plans rather than God's ways (16:2-4). But here, finally, Abraham puts everything on the altar, holding nothing back—not even his beloved son—from God. He trusts in the Lord, who promised him, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named" (Gn 21:12), even though he has no idea *how* God will keep His promise if Isaac is sacrificed. Abraham has come to trust that God *will* do so somehow, even if that meant He would have to raise Isaac from the dead (see Heb 11:16-19).

The account ends with God making an amazing covenant oath to Abraham, swearing to bless all the nations through his family: "and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves" (Gn 22:18). Abraham's family will become the instrument God uses to reunite in God's blessing the entire divided and rebellious human family. In fact, this covenant oath relates to the third of the three promises God made to Abraham all the way back in Genesis 12:3: the promise for the worldwide blessing ("and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" Gn 12:3).

### The Faith of Isaac

Many commentators on this passage focus on the faith of Abraham, but not as many consider the tremendous faith Isaac must have had. Imagine what Isaac was going through when he saw his own father tie him up, lay him on the altar and pull out a knife to slay him!

One interesting aspect of this account is that Isaac may have been in his teens at this time. He certainly was old enough to carry the wood up the mountain and to understand the intricacies for the kind of sacrifice being offered (Gn 22:7). If he could do that, he probably

was wise and strong enough to run away when he saw what was happening or resist his elderly father who was over one hundred years at the time. This perspective would shed light on what a number of ancient Jewish rabbis and early Christians just assumed: that Isaac was a voluntary victim who willingly submitted to be sacrificed. In this view, Isaac freely chose to obey God's command even if that meant his own death. What amazing faith Isaac must have had!

But as heroic as Abraham or Isaac's faith might have been, this passage is more than a story of heroic obedience. It also foreshadows how God will bring his saving plan for all humanity to completion. The particulars of this story prefigure what will happen in this same place some two thousand years later when Jesus Christ dies on the cross. Consider how the following details from this scene relate to Christ's own sacrifice on the Calvary: the mountain, the beloved son, the donkey, the sacrificial wood and the voluntary sacrifice.

The location of Abraham's sacrifice—*Mount Moriah*—is significant because it was a sacred place that later came to be associated with Jerusalem (see 2 Chron 3:1; Ps 76:1-3). Just as Abraham went to offer his *only beloved son*, Isaac, on Mount Moriah, so did God the Father offer his only beloved Son on Calvary, which came to be known as one of the hills of Moriah.

Similarly, just as Isaac traveled up to Moriah on a *donkey*, so did Jesus ride a donkey up to Jerusalem a few days before he died. Like Isaac who *shouldered the wood for the sacrifice* up the mountain, Jesus also carried the sacrificial wood—the wood of the cross—up to Calvary on Good Friday. Finally, Jesus willingly stretched out his hands, laid his body on the wood and allowed himself to be bound to the cross and offered in sacrifice—harkening back to Isaac's *offering of himself* on that same mountain.

Here we see how in the Bible, God uses more than words to communicate his plan of salvation. God doesn't just tell Abraham that the whole world will be blessed through him; He *shows* Abraham—and us—how He will do it. In this way, the suspenseful event of Abraham's sacrifice of his only beloved son on Mount Moriah serves as a ritually enacted statement about how God will bring his plan of salvation to completion through the sacrifice of His only beloved Son, Jesus Christ, on the mountain in Jerusalem on Good Friday.



DISCUSSION

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*Genesis 16:1-4, 17:1-21, Genesis 22:1-18,  
Hebrews 11:17-19*

1. Launching Question: Have you ever made great progress in something, thinking you had finally mastered it, only to find yourself messing up shortly thereafter?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Please read aloud:* We find progress, but also regression in the life of Abraham also. We have seen Abram's great faith; now we must look at his great sin, as well as its long-term effects.

### Read Genesis 16:1-4

2. Why do you think Abram decided to do this? Think back to God's promise to Abram.

*Answer: While Abram came to believe that God would give him a child (Gn 15:6), he still doubts that this promised child will come through his own marriage. After many years of marriage and no children, Abram's wife Sarai appears to be too old to conceive. Even she admits this and says to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go into my maid; it may be that I shall take children by her" (Gn 16:2).*

*Please read aloud:* For many modern readers of the Old Testament, the patriarchs and other heroes in the Bible appear to break the moral code without any reprimand from God. That seems to be the case with Abram in Genesis 16. Abram has intimate relations with a woman named Hagar, who is not his wife, and yet he seemingly goes unpunished.

This is a clear act of adultery, and yet Abram's sin seems to be unnoticed by God. However, a closer reading of the Biblical narrative reveals God's fatherly discipline. The son conceived from this extramarital affair becomes a point of contention in Abram's family, causing discord between Hagar and Sarai (Gn 16 and 21). The rest of Biblical history shows how this marital infidelity sows seeds of division throughout the generations, all the way up to the present day.

Not only that, but the narrative slowly reveals Abram's punishment.

### Read Genesis 17:1-21

3. This passage describes the next time God speaks to Abram. How old is Abram now? And how old was he when God spoke to him last? And what do God's words reveal about what he is expecting of Abram?

*Answer: Up until this time, God has been actively involved in Abram's life (Gn 12-15), but after Abram's liaison with Hagar, the Bible records no discourse between God and Abram for thirteen long years. Then, when God finally speaks to Abram, the Lord's first words challenge him to live by a high moral standard: "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless" (Gn 17:1). Abram's virtue must be on par with his heroic ancestors Enoch and Noah, who "walked with God" and were "blameless" (Gn 5:22; 6:9).*

*Please read aloud:* God assures Abram that His covenant is still with him and that he will really become the father of a multitude of nations. To underscore this promise, God changes Abram's name to Abraham, which literally means "the father of a multitude" (Gn 17:4-5). The Lord goes on to tell Abraham that he will be the father of great kings who will play an important role in God's covenant plan.

At this moment, Abraham must be thinking that his many descendants will come through Ishmael, but much to Abraham's surprise, God says these promises of kings and nations will be bestowed on a child given to Sarai. First, God changes Sarai's name to "Sarah," which means "princess," highlighting her association with the future kingdom promised to Abraham's heirs. God then emphasizes how the covenantal promise will be carried out not through his adulterous relationship with Hagar, but through Sarah, Abraham's wife.

4. Looking back at the passage, how does Abraham respond to God?

*Answer: This pronouncement is abruptly interrupted by Abraham, who once again "fell on his face" (Gn 17:17), but this time he is not doing so out of worship: He is falling on his face in laughter! If Abraham doubted his wife could conceive a child thirteen years earlier, when he committed adultery with Hagar, the prospect of a ninety-year-old Sarah bearing a child now seems ridiculous to him. He says to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (Gn 17:17). He then proposes to God that Ishmael be his heir: "Oh, that Ishmael might live in thy sight!" (Gn 17: 18).*

*Please read aloud:* But God is not laughing. The Lord reminds Abraham that He always intended the promised child to come from his marriage, not from adultery.

There is great irony in the name God instructs Abraham to give to this child: Isaac in Hebrew literally means "he laughs." Every time Abraham calls his son, he will be reminded of how he laughed incredulously when God said Sarah would conceive. Though Abraham initially laughed at God's promise, in the end, God will get the last laugh.

5. Additionally, what does God ask of Abraham and his descendants?

*Answer: In this scene, God also gives Abraham a new covenantal sign: circumcision. God instructs Abraham, "You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you" (Gn 17:11).*

6. Many modern readers think of circumcision in the Bible as simply an ancient religious ritual, but it was more than that. How does the sign of circumcision fit with Abraham's sin of adultery? And how does circumcision impact Abraham in relation to God's promise of a descendant?

*Answer: In Genesis 16, Abraham committed adultery with Hagar; in the very next chapter, he is commanded by God to be blameless and to be circumcised. Think about what this would mean for Abraham: Here he is, a ninety-nine-year-old man, being told to cut off the flesh of his foreskin. For Abraham, circumcision probably would have felt, at least on some level, like a punishment—and the punishment fits the crime.*

*This ritual might also be seen as another test of Abraham's faith: On the heels of the fresh wound of circumcision, this elderly man and his barren wife are to have a son within a year? From a natural perspective, Abraham and Sarah have never before been less capable of fulfilling their call to become parents.*

*Please read aloud:* Despite being circumcised, the Lord tells Abraham that within a year, he will have a son. The story reminds us that with God, nothing is impossible. Abraham is being called to trust in God's ability to overcome any obstacle. But, even after God finally gives Sarah a child named Isaac (Gn 21:1-3), Abraham must face the climactic test of his faith.

### Read Genesis 22:1-18

7. God makes an incredible request of Abraham. What do we finally see in Abraham that has been missing so far?

*Answer: Here we finally see Abraham's faith perfected. Throughout his life, Abraham has been willing to follow God, but not totally. Afraid of putting his life completely in God's hands, Abraham doubted God's promises (Gn 15:2-3) and pursued his own plans rather than God's ways (16:2-4). But here, finally, Abraham puts everything on the altar, holding nothing back—not even his beloved son—from God.*

Abraham does what God asks, but there's more to the story. How does God's command fit with his promise to give Abraham descendants? Let's look at how St. Paul interprets this passage.

### Read Hebrews 11:17-19

8. What does this passage tell us about Abraham's faith?

*Answer: Though he has no idea how God will keep His promise if Isaac is sacrificed. Abraham has come to trust that God will do so somehow, even if that meant He would have to raise Isaac from the dead (see Heb 11:16-19).*

*Please read aloud:* Many commentators on this passage focus on the faith of Abraham, but not as many consider the tremendous faith

Isaac must have had. Imagine what Isaac was going through when he saw his own father tie him up, lay him on the altar and pull out a knife to slay him!

9. What does Isaac do in this story? And what does this tell us about his age?

*Answer: Isaac may have been in his teens at this time. He certainly was old enough to carry the wood up the mountain and to understand the intricacies for the kind of sacrifice being offered (Gn 22:7).*

10. How might Isaac's age impact the way we understand this story? How did he also have faith? How did he also obey God?

*Answer: If Isaac could carry the wood, he probably was wise and strong enough to run away when he saw what was happening or resist his elderly father who was over one hundred years at the time. This perspective would shed light on what a number of ancient Jewish rabbis and early Christians just assumed: that Isaac was a voluntary victim who willingly submitted to be sacrificed. In this view, Isaac freely chose to obey God's command even if that meant his own death. What amazing faith Isaac must have had!*

*Please read aloud:* But as heroic as Abraham or Isaac's faith might have been, this passage is more than a story of heroic obedience. It also foreshadows how God will bring his saving plan for all humanity to completion.

11. What connections do you see between the story of Abraham and Isaac and the death of Jesus? There are at least 5 key parallels.

*Answer:*

1. *The location of Abraham's sacrifice—Mount Moriah—is significant because it was a sacred place that later came to be associated with Jerusalem (see 2 Chron 3:1; Ps 76:1-3).*

