

Abraham and the Only Son Genesis 17:19; 22:1ff

Introduction

A man named Jack accidentally fell off the edge of a steep cliff. On the way down he was able to grab ahold of a branch, which temporarily stopped his fall. He looked down and to his horror discovered that there were hundreds of feet between him and the bottom of the canyon. He couldn't hang onto the branch forever, and there was no way for him to climb up the steep wall of the cliff. So Jack began yelling for help, hoping that someone passing by would hear him. "HELP! HELP! Is anyone up there? "HELP!" He yelled for a long time, but no one heard him. He was about to give up when he heard a voice.

"Jack, Jack. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, yes! I can hear you. I'm down here!"

"I can see you, Jack. Are you all right?"

"Yes, but who are you, and where are you?"

"I am the Lord, Jack. I'm everywhere."

"The Lord? You mean, GOD?"

"That's Me."

"God, please help me! I promise if, you'll get me down from here, I'll stop sinning. I'll be a really good person. I'll serve You for the rest of my life."

"Easy on the promises, Jack. Let's get you off from there, then we can talk."

"Now, here's what I want you to do. Listen carefully."

"I'll do anything, Lord. Just tell me what to do."

"Okay. Let go of the branch."

"What?"

"I said, let go of the branch." Just trust Me. Let go."

There was a long silence.

Finally Jack yelled, "HELP! HELP! IS ANYONE ELSE UP THERE?"

What is faith? Here is the way the Bible defines it: "**Faith is the assurance of what we hope for and the certainty of what we do not see**" (Heb. 11:1; BSB). Abraham became known for that kind of faith, but it took a lifetime for him to get to the place of utter dependance upon God. I am not sure what Abraham's hopes and dreams were before he met God, but his home was in the City of Ur where Nanna, the Mesopotamian Moon god, was worshiped and his wife and family lived. Although childless, Abraham was prosperous, settled, and old. What he may or may not have known was that he was a descendant of Noah – ten generations removed.

When Abraham first heard God's calling, he was seventy-five years old, and his wife Sarah was sixty-five (see Gen. 12:4; 17:17). Despite their advanced age and the fact that they had no children, God gave Abraham a remarkable promise: **“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”** (Gen. 12:1-3). This was a profound and hopeful message, especially considering that Abraham’s birth name was Abram, meaning “Exalted Father”—a title that must have felt ironic for a man with no children at seventy-five, and a wife (Sarai) ten years his junior. The name Abram brings to mind other individuals who have been given ironic or unfortunate names, such as the character mentioned in the following well-known song lyric:

Well, my daddy left home when I was three
Didn't leave very much to my mom and me
Except this old guitar and an empty bottle of booze
Now I don't blame him 'cause he run and hid
But the meanest thing that my daddy ever did
Was before he left, he went and named me Sue¹

God made three foundational promises to Abraham: first, He pledged to give him a land of his own; second, He vowed that Abraham would become the father of a vast multitude of descendants; and third, He assured that all nations would be blessed through him, signifying God’s plan of redemption. Trusting in these promises, Abraham left his home in Ur and journeyed to the land that God would reveal to him.

The Promise (Gen. 17:1-9)

Before we get to Genesis 17, I need to help you appreciate what Abraham (still Abram) was feeling and experiencing. When we come to Genesis 15, Abraham and Sarah are still childless about 10 years after they were promised a child! Abraham followed God out of obedience and brought his wife with him on the basis of a promise made by God that included many descendants, land, and a legacy that would bless multitudes in the future! At 85ish years old, God reassured Abraham (Abram), but what God’s reassurance was is up for debate based on the different ways Genesis 15:1 can be translated. Consider the ways NASB and the NKJV translated this verse:

“Do not fear, Abram, *I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.*”
(NASB2020)

“Do not be afraid, Abram. *I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.*” (NKJV)

So what is it? Based on God’s promise in Genesis 13:1-3 and how He will reiterate the promise later in Genesis 15, I think it is both. Here is one way you could paraphrase this verse: “Because I am your reward, your reward will be great.”

¹ Johnny Cash, “*A Boy Named Sue*,” performed by Johnny Cash, written by Shel Silverstein, recorded at San Quentin State Prison, 24 Feb. 1969, released on *At San Quentin*, Columbia Records, 1969.

Abraham was about ready to give up on believing the promise include a biological son, but then God swore on behalf of His own name that He would honor the promise He made to Abram and Sarah. God then entered into what is called a unilateral covenant of which He was obligated to honor that was not conditioned on anything that Abram did or did not do. God swore to Abraham (Abram), **“One who will come from your own body will be your heir”** (15:4b).

What was Abraham’s response? We are told in Genesis 15: **“Then he believed in the Lord; and He credited it to him as righteousness.”** Then about a year later, Sarah (still Sarai) developed a plan for her husband to get her maid, Hagar, pregnant; to have the heir God promised through her. After all, God said the promised heir would come from Abraham a year ago but did not seem to mention Sarai! So again, the forces of darkness were at work to prevent the Descendent promised to Adam and Eve, who would crush the head of the serpent from ever being born.²

Hagar did get pregnant with Abraham’s child, but all that did was bring more dysfunction into Abraham’s home, among other problems. Abraham (still Abram) was 86 and Sarah (still Sarai) 76, with no child to show for the promise God made long ago.

Now we come to the promise made yet again in Genesis 17, but this time it is 24 years since the couple left Ur and 13 years since the whole mess they create with Hagar and the birth of Ishmael. Before I go any further, let that settle in your heart and mind for a moment. For 24 years Abraham and Sarah waited, longed, hoped for the son that Almighty God promised them. Then 13 years later while Ishmael had reached the age of maturity and Abram resigned that there would be no heir by Ishmael, God appeared to Abraham (still Abram) and spoke yet again: **“I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless. I will make My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly”** (17:1-2). It is in this moment that God gave Abram the name Abraham which means “father of a multitude.”

The blessing would not come through Ishmael, but through another son. So that there would be no room for confusion, God said to Abraham: **“As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her by the name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her”** (17:15–16). Abraham’s response is understandable: **“Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, ‘Will a child be born to a man a hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, give birth to a child?’”** (v. 17). Nearly one year later, when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90 years old, she gave birth to Isaac, the son of promise (Gen. 21:1-8).

² “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had not borne him a child, but she had an Egyptian slave woman whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, “See now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Please have relations with my slave woman; perhaps I will obtain children through her.” And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.” (Gen. 16:1–2)

The promise made to Adam and Eve, to Noah, and to Abraham would now come through Isaac. A promise that included land, descendants (a great multitude), and the blessing of the nations. Abraham received the promise when he was 75 and his wife past menopause which means to have a child together would have been a miracle at their respective ages, but for 90-year-old Sarah to carry the child of her 100-year-old husband was impossible! And that is the point, isn't it? There was nothing that Abraham or Sarah could do to make God's promise possible, they could not make it happen sooner, they could not adjust God's timing, all that they could do is trust and wait for God to do only what He could in His own timing. Their part in God's promise was to trust, obey, and wait.

The Promise of a Better Son (Gen. 22)

We are not told how many years it was after Isaac's birth, but when we come to Genesis 22 we are told that God spoke to Abraham and said some of the most horrific words Abraham would ever hear: **"Then He said, 'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you'"** (Gen. 22:2). Things were different this time; Abraham was different this time, for he had known God for many years since he was first called out of his homeland. The Bible tells us that that Abraham, **"...got up early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place of which God had told him"** (v. 3).

There were no arguments, no debate, no protest... Abraham simply obeyed because He believed if he followed through with the sacrifice of his own son; God was big enough to raise him up from death to life. This is why when Abraham took Isaac up the mountain, he told the young men he brought with him: **"Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey, and I and the boy will go over there; and we will worship and return to you'"** (v. 5).

Although the exact number of years between Isaac's birth and God's command for Abraham to sacrifice his son is not specified in the text, we can make a reasonable estimate based on several clues about Isaac's age. First, Isaac was old enough to walk alongside his father for the entire three-day journey while Abraham, advanced in years, rode a donkey. Second, Isaac had the strength to carry the wood for the burnt offering up the rugged slope of Mount Moriah after days of travel. Third, Isaac was old enough to make a critical observation: **"Isaac spoke to his father Abraham and said, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' And he said, 'Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'"** (v. 7). These details suggest that Isaac was not a small child; my guess is that he was at least 13 years old.

There is something else you should be aware of about Abraham and Isaac's journey and what was said to the young men just before Abraham and Isaac made their way up Mt. Moriah:

1. The journey would take 3 days to get to the place of Isaac's sacrifice.
2. Most scholars believe that Mt. Moriah was the site where Jerusalem would eventually be built.

3. On the third day, Abraham said to the young men, **“Stay here with the donkey, and I and the boy will go over there; and we will worship and return to you”** (v. 5). In other words, Abraham believed that there would be a resurrection after he slaughtered his son... ON THE THIRD DAY!

So what happened? Did Abraham follow through with what God commanded? Abraham had seen too much to doubt God's ability and character to do what He had promised. God promised a child through whom would come a great multitude and the nations would be blessed. Here is what happened:

Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. And Abraham reached out with his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not reach out your hand against the boy, and do not do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram caught in the thicket by its horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in the place of his son.

Abraham would have followed through with killing his one and only son had God not stopped him because no longer did he put God in a box... He was too big for any boxes because now He knew His God. What was God's response? He simply reiterated His covenant promise: **“By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand, which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice”** (Gen. 22:16-18).

Why did God command Abraham to sacrifice his son, and why did He refer to the child as, **“your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac”** (v. 2)? The significance lies in the foreshadowing of a greater Son who would come from Isaac's lineage—Jesus Christ, God's own Son. In other words, Isaac's story points forward to a future sacrifice on another mount known as Golgotha, God the Father would do what He prevented Abraham from doing: He would slaughter His only unique Son, whom He loved, for the sins of the multitudes to redeem a people for himself by the blood of the greater and more perfect Isaac!

While the "lesser Isaac" was confused and unsure of the purpose for the wood he carried, the "greater Isaac," Jesus Christ, carried a wooden cross fully aware of why He was doing it and with unwavering commitment to die in our place as the Lamb of God. Where God provided a ram to spare Isaac, Jesus willingly became our substitute, submitting to the Father's will and taking on the penalty for our sins. Isaac had to be bound before being placed on the altar, but Jesus

embraced the cross freely, allowing sinful men to bound Him to the cross on our behalf. Oh dear brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ is the true and better Isaac of whom the Scriptures testify: **“God made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God”** (2 Cor. 5:21).