

The Story Series
Week 2: Abraham
God Builds A Nation

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In this *Story* series we are making our way through the Old Testament to discover the truths within the great stories of the Bible. Last week we look at creation, the Fall of Adam and Eve, and Noah. Today we continue on by looking at the life of Abraham.

Abraham's story covers 20 chapters in the Bible, Genesis 11-25, so please allow me to summarize his life story by concentrating on an amazing promise that God makes to Abraham.

In the last chapter we talked about Adam and Eve and the sinful choice they made of choosing their own desires and plans over the Grand Vision of God. God's Grand Vision was to walk beside Adam and Eve and to create a strong, lasting relationship with them. But Adam and Eve chose to disobey God and that disobedience jeopardized their relationship with God.

Our personal story reads much the same. Although we know the will and ways of God, we all too often disregard them and choose our own way. We put ourselves first rather than God. Our selfish, self-centered ways create this barrier between us and God, and our neighbor. We separate ourselves from God who is the very source of all life and goodness. We were created to be in relationship with God, but that relationship has been jeopardized because of our sinful human nature.

But then we heard God make a promise to us. God promises to win us back. God has developed a rescue plan. God's greatest desire is to restore our broken relationship. And the rescue plan commences with a man named Abraham.

Ten generations – 400 years – have past since the Great Flood. Just as it was in the time of Noah, as the earth becomes more populated, it also becomes more wicked. Rather than people desiring a relationship with God and living by God's ways, the Bible tells us that everyone does what is right in their own eyes. But God refuses to give up on us.

God speaks to a man named Abraham, a descendant of Noah, and God tells him to pack up his family and his belongings because it's moving day. "Go to the land that I will show you," God tells Abraham. Now, if God told me to do such a thing, I would have lots of questions. Exactly *where* are we moving to? *Why* are we moving there? And you picked *my* family because?

The amazing thing is that the Bible says that Abraham is 75 years old when God calls him to make this move. Most 75-year-olds I know just want to stay put. They want to stay where it is comfortable and familiar. But God tells Abraham that he has a special plan for his life, just as God has a plan for each of our lives.

I think God was intentionally vague with Abraham about this move because if God would have revealed all of the details, Abraham would have said, "You're nuts!" If you look at the map (see back page), you will find the city of Ur. Ur is Abraham's hometown. If you follow the Euphrates River north, you will come to the town of Haran. Haran was the first leg of Abraham's journey. God then leads Abraham westward towards The Great Sea (otherwise known as the Mediterranean), then south along the coastline through Samaria, Jericho, and finally to Shechem, just above Jerusalem – the land of Canaan.

The move that Abraham and his family make ends up being 800 miles. Now do you see why I think God didn't reveal all of the details of this move? Interestingly, caravans during biblical times averaged about 20 miles a day. So that means that Abraham's journey last 40 days. 40 days. That should ring a bell. We encounter lots of 40 day periods in the Bible. Noah and his family were on the ark and it rained for 40 days. Moses was up on Mt. Sinai for 40 days when he received the 10 Commandments. Jonah warns the people of Nineveh they have 40 days to repent otherwise God will destroy their city. Jesus is tempted by the devil in the wilderness for 40 days, and Jesus walks the earth for 40 days after his resurrection before he ascends into heaven.

Forty is a symbolic number in the Bible that represents a time where a major change or transformation is about to occur. So the fact that Abraham's journey took 40 days signals that God is about to do something new, something transformational. God is surely setting into motion his rescue plan of winning us back.

When Abraham and his family arrive in Canaan, God makes a promise to Abraham. God tells Abraham to look down at all of the desert sand; look into the night sky at all of the stars – far too many to count. That's how many descendants I will give you," God promises. "I will make you into a great nation." It sounds so wonderful. There's only one problem. Abraham and his wife Sarah are already getting up in age and they don't have any children yet. So Abraham says to God, "O Sovereign Lord, what good are all your promises if I have no son? No heir?"

So God reassures Abraham that he and Sarah will have a son to fulfill God's plan to make Abraham the patriarch of God's chosen people. And *The Story* tells us that Abraham believes what God promises, and the Lord considers Abraham righteous (right, A-OK, redeemed) because of his faith.

So already we learn of God's plan to save us. The Lord considered Abraham righteous **because of his faith**. To believe, to have faith in the promises of God cancels out our brokenness. If we put our trust and hope in the things God has

promised, then it no longer matters what our limitations are, or what mistakes we have made, or what the worries or doubts are that we carry around. Our faith in the promises of God is enough. Our belief that God will be true to his Word is sufficient. Faith overcomes.

The same God who made these powerful promises to Abraham has made promises to us. God has promised to forgive our sins when we ask for forgiveness with a repentant heart. God has promised to be with us always. God has promised to provide for our daily needs. God has promised to equip us with whatever we need to carry out what God is calling us to do. God has promised that our earthly death will not be the end, but rather the gate to everlasting life in heaven.

God has made abundant promises to us. Do we believe that the promises that God has made can be trusted? Does God consider us righteous because of our faith? When life is going well and we aren't facing many problems, it's very easy to believe in God's promise to take care of us and to provide for us. But it becomes a very different story when life becomes difficult, or when life isn't playing out like we think it should.

We see this happen in the story of Abraham and Sarah. Yes, God had promised them a son, an heir for their great nation. They believed that God would fulfill that promise, so they patiently waited for God to act upon that promise. They waited, and they waited, and they waited, but Sarah never conceived. When Sarah became well beyond child-bearing years, Abraham and Sarah did what we all do when God seems to be taking his sweet time. They took matter into their own hands.

Sarah tells Abraham, "The LORD has prevented me from having children. So go and sleep with our maid, Hagar, so that we can have children through her." Now, as odd and immoral as that proposal sounds, it was a custom during biblical times that a barren woman could offer her maid to her husband, and the child born of that union would be considered the wife's child, a legal heir to the inheritance. So Sarah was just following custom.

The problem is Sarah was no longer following the plans of God. God specifically told Abraham and Sarah that a child would be born from *their* union. That was God's plan. To make a long story short, Sarah did finally conceive – 25 years after God promised that she would bear a son. Kerri and I waited 12 years for Emma Grace to come along, and I know how extremely long that felt. So I can't even fathom the emotional toll upon Abraham and Sarah when it took 25 years to conceive.

Let's do a little math here. If Abraham was 75 when he started this journey, and it took 25 years for his first son to be conceived, that would make him a father at 100 years old. Sarah was 90 years old when she gave birth. Those poor, poor people!

But let's not miss the point of the story: God was able to do something that seemed humanly impossible – a 90 year old woman giving birth. God will be true to his promises, no matter how out of the question it seems.

The Bible is full of incidents where God does the impossible. God parts the Red Sea and allows his people to cross on dry land. A virgin conceives. Jesus walks on water. The dead are brought back to life.

Maybe God has made a promise to you that seems outlandish, impossible. Just remember: God has a track record of doing the impossible to prove his power and faithfulness. Whether it seems impossible, or that it's taking way too long, keep the faith. The story of Abraham and Sarah remind us that God's promises can be trusted. God means what he says. God is true to his Word. God will do exactly what he has promised.

Remember I said earlier that God initiates his rescue plan through Abraham? Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac, becomes the person by which God multiplies the population of his chosen people (referred to as the people of Israel in the Bible). And, many generations later, from this great nation, from the descendants of Isaac, another important person will be born. His name? Jesus Christ. In fact, in the opening chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, the names Abraham and Isaac are the first two people listed in Jesus' genealogy. The promise of God to rescue his people from their sin and brokenness will find its final fulfillment in a baby born in a stable in Bethlehem. The entire story of the Bible – Old and New Testaments -- is indeed one, interconnected story. It is God's rescue plan to save us from sin and death.

The birth of Isaac brought about a renewed faith within Abraham and Sarah. But their faith would soon be tested again by what happens next. Fast forward the story to Isaac's teenage years. God speaks to Abraham once again and asks him to do the unthinkable: to offer up his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. Knowing how long Abraham and Sarah waited to welcome Isaac into the world makes it all the more heartbreaking.

This would be the supreme test of their faith. Remarkably, Abraham obeyed the request and made the necessary preparations. It was as if Abraham had reached a point in his faith journey where he fully believed that God would not thwart his own purposes. If God desired the life of Isaac, then God would provide another. It's faith at its most intrinsic level – to trust that God will do whatever is necessary to fulfill his promises. Faith is to understand that God's ways are not always our ways, but that God will – somehow, someway – be true to his Word.

God asks Abraham to go to Mt. Moriah and to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Geography is important once again. Mt. Moriah can be found in the city of Jerusalem (just south of Shechem where Abraham's journey ended). Jerusalem, of course, is the place where Jesus is crucified. It is on that same hill, 2080 years later, that God's Son, Jesus Christ, will offer his life on the cross for the sin of the whole world.

When we take a look at the language of the sacrifice of Isaac and compare it to the crucifixion of Jesus, the language is very similar. God tells Abraham in Genesis 22: “Take your only Son who you love so much and sacrifice him as an offering.” Compare that to the words of John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” The words are nearly identical. It is as if God is foretelling us the climax of *The Story* in these beginning chapters of Genesis.

The other interesting thing to note is that just as Abraham is about to thrust the knife into the chest of Isaac, an angel of God stops Abraham and provides a ram for him to substitute in Isaac’s place – a substitutionary sacrifice. This is exactly what happens upon the cross of Calvary. It was us – you and me – that deserved death upon the cross. But God provides a substitute – his very own Son, Jesus Christ – to be killed in our place so that our life would be spared.

In the story of Abraham, we get a foretaste of the plan of salvation that God is setting into motion. We see a God who is active in the world, setting into motion everything that needs to happen in order to win us back. We experience a God who makes promises that can be trusted, no matter how outlandish they seem. We encounter a God who will stop at nothing in order to welcome us into his heavenly kingdom at the end of time.

This is *The Story* of God. It’s our story. Thanks be to God!

The World of Ancient Israel

