



Week 4 - Abraham

Week 4, Day 1 - Genesis 16:1-16

¹ Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, ²and Sarai said to Abram, 'You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³So, after Abram had lived for ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. ⁴He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. ⁵Then Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!' ⁶But Abram said to Sarai, 'Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.' Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.

⁷ The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸And he said, 'Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?' She said, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.' ⁹The angel of the Lord said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit to her.' ¹⁰The angel of the Lord also said to her, 'I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.' ¹¹And the angel of the Lord said to her,

*'Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;
you shall call him Ishmael,
for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.*

*¹² He shall be a wild ass of a man,
with his hand against everyone,
and everyone's hand against him;
and he shall live at odds with all his kin.'*

¹³So she named the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are El-roi'; for she said, 'Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?' ¹⁴Therefore the well was called Beer-lama-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bored.

¹⁵ Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

Understanding the Passage:

It's been ten years since God called Abram out of his homeland, and still, there's no child. Imagine his disappointment, and Sarai's disappointment, too. They left everything they knew for a promise, for words that Abram heard, or thought he heard, from someone they trusted. Did Abram hear wrong? Were they wrong to trust God? Was God making it up? The conflict between Abram and Sarai is borne of the disappointment of unrealized expectations. They expected one kind of life, but the reality falls short. Any married couple whose life situation is not what they planned for can sympathize and understand why Abram and Sarai would be bitter toward each other. The same goes for anyone in a relationship where the relationship falls short of expectations. It's up to us to either manage expectations to fit the reality, or manage the conflict in a healthy, respectful way.

Abram and Sarai have another problem: if they don't have a son soon, they might die of old age and forfeit their property to another family. They've amassed substantial wealth by now but don't have children who can inherit it. So, Sarai orders Hagar into Abram's bed, hoping Hagar will give Abram, and Sarai, an heir. That way, Sarai might die childless but not heirless.

The plan works, but Sarai is surprised to find that Hagar is not happy with the arrangement. Who can blame her? Hagar is pregnant against her will, and if the child lives to full-term, and that's a big if in ancient cultures, she will be that child's mother in name only. Sarai will get to claim the child as hers. Hagar gets all of the pain of pregnancy and childbirth and none of the rewards. No wonder she's mad.

But Sarai, bitter and disappointed by her life, beats Hagar, and Hagar runs away into the desert, pregnant and alone. Anyone who's read the story of Mary in the Gospel of Luke will see the parallel. A pregnant young woman runs away from home because she's scared of what her family will do to her and the child she's carrying.

The angel appears to Hagar, like Gabriel showing up for Mary, and gives Hagar a promise: the child she's carrying will be the father of a multitude. He will be Ishmael, the ancestor of all the tribes of the Arabian desert. Arabic-speaking Muslims trace their lineage to Ishmael, the son of Hagar, and Jews trace theirs to Isaac, the son of Sarai.

Hagar gives God a name: El-Roi, which means, "God sees me." Hagar is the first person in the Bible to give God a name. Who is the God of the Bible? The God who sees the hurting, the abused, the invisible, and the lonely.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. When have you felt seen by God? What difference did that make for you?
2. When have you had to manage expectations with your loved ones when life didn't turn out the way you had imagined?
3. When have you been Hagar – the invisible and the abused? When have you been Sarai – the bitter and the wrathful?

Week 4, Day 2 - Genesis 18:1-15

¹ The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Madre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. ³ He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.' ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.' ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

⁹ They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' ¹⁰ Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' ¹³ The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" ¹⁴ Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.' ¹⁵ But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.'

Understanding the Passage:

Note the change in names since yesterday's reading. Now Abram is Abraham, which means "Father of multitudes" and Sarai is Sarah, which means "Princess." God renamed his chosen servants in Genesis 17 when God appeared to Abram and gave the commandment to circumcise himself, all the males in his household, and his descendants. Circumcision is the "sign of the covenant," meaning the visible marker of the invisible promise that God would bless Abraham and his descendants forever.

Abraham is ninety-nine years old now. It's the middle of the afternoon. He and his servants are taking a break from work because it's so hot. He sees three strangers appear as if from nowhere.

It's a test: will Abraham and Sarah be a blessing to these strangers? That is their purpose, after all, to be blessed *so that* they will channel God's blessing into the world. The test takes the form of hospitality. Custom (and good manners) dictates that strangers on a journey are to be offered food, water, and rest.

Abraham makes haste to set a table for the strangers. Sarah does her part, too. Then this ordinary act of hospitality becomes extraordinary. One of the strangers makes a prophecy: Sarah will have given birth to a son by the time the strangers return this time next year. The text doesn't note the change, but the three strangers are gone. It's the Lord talking now. The three strangers have become one God.

It's easy to see why Christian interpreters for all of church history have seen the Trinity in this story. Three strangers who are somehow the same God, it's basic Trinitarian theology. If that's the case, then Jesus himself was there in the tent, making a prophecy about his own great-great grandfather, Isaac.

The son born to Sarah will be named Isaac, which means "God laughs." Sarah laughed at the Lord when she heard she's to be a mother after menopause. But her cynicism will be replaced with joy in a year's time. As the Yiddish proverb says, *Man plans, and God laughs.*

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What does "sign of the covenant" mean in your own words?
2. Where have you seen genuine hospitality to strangers? Where have you seen it lacking?
3. Describe a time when God turned your cynicism to joy.

Week 4, Day 3 - Genesis 21:1-21

¹The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. ²Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. ⁴And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.' ⁷And she said, 'Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.'

⁸The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰So she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.' ¹¹The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹²But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after you. ¹³As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.' ¹⁴So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

¹⁵When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said,

'Do not let me look on the death of the child.' And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' ¹⁹Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. ²¹He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Understanding the Passage:

There are two stories of God asking Abraham to sacrifice a son. The more well-known is Genesis 22:1-24, the binding of Isaac. But first comes this one, the exile of Ishmael. In both stories, God makes an absurd request of Abraham that would directly result in the death of one of his sons. God doesn't explicitly ask Abraham to kill Ishmael, as he will with Isaac, but it's the same effect. God gives a commandment, Abraham must choose to obey the commandment or not, and if Abraham does, one of his sons will end up dead. We can consider Ishmael to be "sacrificed" because God is asking Abraham to surrender his son's fate to God's purposes. All sacrifice involves surrender to God's purposes, even if we can't see the purposes at the time. In both stories, Abraham goes along with the plan and God intervenes to save the sons.

However, it would be unfair to the passage if we didn't consider the cruelty of Abraham and Sarah's actions. Sarah finally gets her wish: she becomes a mother to a biological son, and how does she celebrate? By telling Abraham to banish his fifteen-year-old son, Ishmael, and his mother, Hagar, who have done nothing wrong. Abraham is understandably upset by this request, but not enough to tell Sarah no! As far as Abraham can tell, Hagar and Ishmael will die in the desert. Nothing in the passage tells us that Abraham hears of Hagar and Ishmael's miraculous salvation, so we can safely assume that Abraham assumes that Hagar and Ishmael die in the desert. He'll find out years later that Ishmael lives, but for most of the rest of his life, he'll have to live with the fact that he sent his son and the mother to their deaths.

What could this story possibly teach us? Let's leave it at one thing: God hears the voice of the suffering. Ishmael never says a word in the story, he's silent, but God hears his voice anyway. Most of the world's suffering people go unheard and unnoticed, and most of the world is either oblivious to their condition or we refuse to listen. God is different. God hears the voice of the suffering and does something about it. God hears all the pain we won't speak aloud. God is on the side of the overlooked.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Imagine you're Sarah. What do you want from God?
2. Imagine you're Abraham. What do you want from God?
3. Imagine you're Hagar. What do you want from God?

Week 4, Day 4 - Genesis 19:1-29

¹ The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. ²He said, 'Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.' They said, 'No; we will spend the night in the square.' ³But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. ⁴But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; ⁵and they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.' ⁶Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, ⁷and said, 'I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.' ⁹But they replied, 'Stand back!' And they said, 'This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.' Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. ¹⁰But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. ¹¹And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

¹²Then the men said to Lot, 'Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place. ¹³For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it.' ¹⁴So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, 'Up, get out of this place; for the Lord is about to destroy the city.' But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting.

¹⁵When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, 'Get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or else you will be consumed in the punishment of the city.' ¹⁶But he lingered; so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the Lord being merciful to him, and they brought him out and left him outside the city. ¹⁷When they had brought them outside, they said, 'Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, or else you will be consumed.' ¹⁸And Lot said to them, 'Oh, no, my lords; ¹⁹your servant has found favour with you, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, for fear the disaster will overtake me and I die. ²⁰Look, that city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there—is it not a little one?—and my life will be saved!' ²¹He said to him, 'Very well, I grant you this favour too, and will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken. ²²Hurry, escape there, for I can do nothing until you arrive there.' Therefore the city was called Zoar. ²³The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar.

²⁴ Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire from the Lord out of heaven; ²⁵and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. ²⁶But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

27Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the Lord; 28and he looked down towards Sodom and Gomorrah and towards all the land of the Plain, and saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace.

29So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled.

Understanding the Passage:

The two angels are two of the three strangers that visited Abraham and Sarah in chapter 18. We learn why these strangers arrived on the scene: first to test Abraham and Sarah's hospitality and, if they pass, to announce the birth of Isaac; then to travel on to Sodom and Gomorrah to test the hospitality of those cities and, if they fail, to destroy them. Let's consider the story in three parts.

1. **The wages of sin is death.** Paul uses that phrase in Romans 6:23 to describe the inevitable consequences of sin. Paul meant a spiritual death in this life *and* an everlasting death in the next life, both as a result of the sin we commit. Thank God, Jesus's grace cancels out the wages of our sin and pays out the wages of everlasting life instead.

It's likely that Sodom and Gomorrah were not actual cities but were poetic devices intended to teach us about sin. In any case, the ruins of those cities have not been discovered and they're not attested to by any known historical source. They're supposed to be the worst of the worst places, where sin reigns supreme and no one cares. What was the sin? There are two in this story alone: the failure to bother to welcome a stranger, and gang rape. The men of these cities had every intention of raping the two strangers. Note that the angels entered the city as a kind of final exam. Would the people of the cities welcome these strangers or not? Abraham and Sarah passed the exact same test in Genesis 18; Sodom and Gomorrah fail miserably. Had they passed the test, Sodom and Gomorrah might not have been destroyed.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is meant to teach us that sin is serious business because sin always leaves a trail of harm behind it. There's no such thing as a victimless sin; all sin of all scope and scale will leave a mark on creation, from the way we merely look at and think of other people, to how we treat people, to the consequences of sin committed long ago for the current generation. Sin is a big deal and will, always and everywhere, have consequences.

2. **Be like Abraham.** One person and one person alone passes the test: Lot. Lot is Abraham's nephew. He alone shows hospitality to the strangers. He welcomes them into his home. He's an embodiment of the warning in Hebrews 13:2, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." And where did Lot learn this? Abraham. Another lesson of the story is that Abraham's blessing rubs off on people. When we're like Abraham, the original "blessed one" of the Bible, it always pays off in the long run.

3. **Don't look back.** Lot's wife looks back on Sodom and Gomorrah. We're not told why. She looks at what she cannot change about her past when she was supposed to be attending to what she can change about her present, with the result that she's stuck in the spot forevermore. How often do we fix our gaze on what we can't change about our past, leaving us stuck in the present?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Imagine there are angels in your life expecting to receive hospitality from you. Who would those angels be?
2. When have you seen sin leave its wages on people? Or on you?
3. When have you been stuck because you dwelled for too long on the past?

Week 4, Day 5 - Genesis 22:1-14

¹ After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' ²He said, '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 on one of the mountains that I shall show you.' ³So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. ⁴On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.' ⁶Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' ⁸Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together.

⁹When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. ¹¹But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' ¹²He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.' ¹³And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt-offering instead of his son. ¹⁴So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'

Understanding the Passage:

This story is the second of two where God asks Abraham to sacrifice a son. God has already told Abraham to send away his firstborn son, Ishmael, which is a kind of sacrifice in that Abraham must surrender Ishmael and his mother's fate completely to God when Abraham casts them out into the desert. Now God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in the most literal sense as a burnt offering. This is the Akedah, Hebrew for "binding." Abraham doesn't kill his son, but he does bind him like he'd bind a lamb for slaughter, and Jews to this day

remember that unthinkable act whenever they call Genesis 22 the Akedah, which means “the binding.”

What can we glean from a story about near human sacrifice?

1. **The importance of testing.** This is the tenth and final occasion of God testing Abraham. In every test, we see what Abraham is made of, what kind of person he is, and if he’s really committed to being God’s *one and only* source of blessing in the world. God is betting the future of humanity on Abraham. Sin is a major problem, humans are hurting one another and they’re not showing any sign of stopping, and God has already tried one solution: flooding the earth and eliminating all people except Noah and his family. But sin stuck around, and God had promised not to destroy people ever again, so Abraham is God’s solution to dealing with sin without doing any more harm. Abraham and his family are to bless away the sins of the earth. That’s a lot of pressure! God needs to know if Abraham is serious about this. Apparently, God didn’t know already because God says in the passage today, “Now I know.” (Genesis 22:12)

What does that mean for us? It doesn’t mean God necessarily *causes* the testing in our lives, but it does mean that a *consequence* of testing is the refinement of our commitments. Are we as committed as we say we are to our families? To our work? To our friendships? And how can you tell? When times are hard and you either back away from your commitments or you double-down.

2. **The importance of trust.** The story hinges on verse 5. Abraham tells his servants, “The boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” The word “we” makes all the difference. He believes, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that he and Isaac will come back down the mountain. Now, you could say that Abraham was lying to the servants, that of course he’d say that so as not to frighten them, but it would have been a weak lie; they’d know instantly when Abraham came back down the mountain alone that he was lying. The only way the Akedah makes sense is if Abraham believes Isaac will survive. He puts his total trust in God to provide a way out of this impossible situation. He believes that God will make a way out of no way.

Does that mean we shouldn’t be concerned if someone says, “God told me to sacrifice my child”? Of course, we should be concerned! Call the police! The point of the story is radical surrender to God, not child abuse. Abraham surrenders the most precious thing in his life to God’s purposes. He’s like his descendent, Jesus, who prays, “Not my will, but your will be done.”

Questions for Understanding and Reflection:

1. Imagine you’re Abraham’s servants. What’s going through your mind?
2. Imagine you’re Abraham. What’s going through your mind?
3. Imagine you’re Isaac. What’s going through your mind?

Video Questions:

1. What is the “big idea” from this lesson?
2. What does it mean for God to test Abraham? What sort of tests are these?
3. Why would Hagar be unhappy with the situation Abraham and Sarah put her in?
4. How are Hagar and Mary the mother of Jesus similar?
5. When have you had to surrender your children or other loved ones into God’s care?
6. Why is the gift of hospitality so important for Abraham to have?
7. How can looking back on the past make us stuck?
8. What is the good news in the Akedah- the story of the binding of Isaac?

Prayer requests and other notes.