

The Triumph of Faith



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 20:1–25:10.*

Memory Text: “Now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me” (*Genesis 22:12*).

In one of the greatest classics of Christian literature, *The Screwtape Letters*, British writer C. S. Lewis depicts a senior demon, Screwtape, who writes a number of letters to a junior demon, his nephew Wormwood. The letters are filled with advice on how to try to destroy the soul of a young man to whom Wormwood has been assigned.

In one section, Screwtape gives Wormwood the following advice regarding his charge: “Talk to him about ‘moderation in all things.’ If you can once get him to the point of thinking that ‘religion is all very well up to a point,’ you can feel quite happy about his soul. A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all—and more amusing.”—C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), p. 46.

What a powerful thought as we continue this week with Abraham, especially because among the things we cover is the story of him and Isaac on Mount Moriah, one of the most powerful and meaningful stories, not only in the life of Abraham but in all sacred history. Whatever his faults, whatever his failures, Abraham was a man of faith, a man whose religion was the foundation of all that he was, a man whose religion was, indeed, “very well up to a point”—the point being ready to sacrifice his son at God’s command.

Moderation in *all* things? Let’s take a look.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 2.*

Lying Through Silence *(Genesis 20)*

Soon after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham moved to a region near the border of Egypt, approximately eighty miles southwest from Hebron, before traveling north to Gerar, located in a fertile valley southeast of Gaza. The city-state of Gerar was then ruled by a Philistine named Abimelech.

Read Genesis 20. What does this tell us, again, about the humanity of even a great man of faith?

There are a number of fascinating elements in this story, one being the relationship between God and this so-called pagan ruler.

Read over the whole chapter again, focusing on Abimelech. What does this chapter tell us about this king’s knowledge of the true God? What recent event might have gotten the king’s attention regarding the reality of the true God?

Think how easily Abraham could justify his actions. If he were killed, the promise of a great nation coming from him would be lost, even though that promise alone—already given to him numerous times before—should have been more than enough to keep him from fear of a premature death (*Gen. 20:11*). Second, was he really lying? After all, Sarah was, as the chapter showed, his sister, or half sister. So, in one sense, by simply telling everyone “at every place whither we shall come” (*vs. 13*) that she was his sister, he wasn’t lying . . . was he?

What we can learn from this is that deception can come just as easily by what you don’t say. We can see here a great example of someone trying to stick to the letter of the law while missing the principle behind it entirely.

Someone once said that even “facts” come with interpretations and preconceived ideas. In what less-than-honest ways do you sometimes interpret the “facts”? Might you need to make something right in a case in which you, like Abraham, twisted the facts more by what you neglected to say than by what you actually said?

Key Text: *Hebrews 11:8-11*

Teachers Aims:

1. To show how God still works through human weaknesses.
2. To explain how true faith is revealed in actions.
3. To discuss Abraham's faithfulness even in his final days.

Lesson Outline:

I. A Promise Fulfilled (*Gen. 20:1-3, 21:1-21*)

- A. Abraham shows his human frailty in calling Sarah his sister for the second time.
- B. Isaac is born the "son of promise."
- C. Due to conflict in the home, Hagar and Ishmael are sent away.
- D. The Lord promises to make Ishmael a great nation.

II. A Test of Faith (*Gen. 22:2*)

- A. Abraham's faith is challenged when God asks him to sacrifice his "only son," Isaac.
- B. Isaac trustingly submits to his father, exemplifying the submission of Christ (*vss. 9-11*).
- C. God blesses through the obedience of faith (*vss. 16-18*).

III. Abraham's Final Years (*Gen. 25:8-10*)

- A. Sarah dies in Hebron and is later included among the faithful in the book of Hebrews (*Gen. 23:1, 2; Heb. 11:11*).
- B. Abraham commissions a trusted servant to find a wife for Isaac (*Gen. 24:2-4*).
- C. When Abraham dies, his sons bury him in the same tomb Sarah is buried in.

Summary: Abraham is faithful to the Lord until his death. Even in the midst of human weakness, God keeps His covenant with Abraham and gives him a son. This is the beginning of the promise to make a great nation from Abraham.

COMMENTARY

God's ways are frequently beyond human understanding. Finite human beings never can understand all the factors and reasons behind anything He does. But we can trust that whatever He does, its ultimate goal is always love, grace, and salvation. God abundantly rewards such trust and faith in Him. Nowhere can we see this better illustrated than in the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah.

A "Foreshadowing"

Early one morning Abraham and Isaac set off for Mount Moriah. It must have been difficult to keep the purpose of the journey from

The Birth of Isaac

Finally, after so many years, so many disappointments, so many triumphs and failures, the child of the promise was born (*Gen. 21:1-3*). They named him Isaac, which means “he laughs,” serving as a reminder of Abraham’s laughter of disbelief (*Gen. 17:17*) when told by the Lord that he and Sarah would have a child. Indeed, with the exception of the one letter used in Hebrew for the word *and*, his name is spelled exactly as the Hebrew in Genesis 17:17 reads, “and he laughed.” No doubt, too, the name was also to signify the joy that he and his wife would have with the birth of the promised child.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t all joy and happiness in the home. What follows is a painful example of what it means to live with the consequences of sin, even after that sin has been forgiven.

Read Genesis 21:9-21. What sad events eventually followed the birth of Isaac? How did the Lord help ease Abraham’s pain at having to send his son away?

Ishmael had lived for about seventeen years with his father Abraham. How could Abraham send him away? What a sacrifice! What a price the old patriarch had to pay for a well-meaning error on his part! How ironic, too, that Sarah, who had first told him to go to Hagar, would be the one to tell him to send them away.

How did Paul describe the incompatibility between Abraham’s natural and spiritual descendants, and what application did the apostle make? *Gal. 4:28-31*.

Again, however difficult for us to understand how Abraham could have done it, what should be clear is that it never pays to distrust the Lord, that disobedience leads to pain and suffering, not just for the one who sins but oftentimes for those closest to the one who commits the sin. Certainly at the time that Abram first took Hagar as a wife, he never envisioned things coming to this.

What’s the next hard decision you have to make? Are you going to make a choice that will come with bad consequences you can’t even begin to imagine? How can you be sure that you are following God’s will in making your choice?

Sarah. She and the rest of Abraham's large household must have been curious as he and Isaac loaded their pack animals. What would the youth's mother have done had she found out? Would she have denounced God as a cruel despot who gave then snatched away? Would Abraham himself have desperately longed to share his inner struggle with her? We can only imagine what Abraham's thoughts were going up the mountain.

Perhaps as he traveled up the mountain, his mind traveled back over the many years of God's faithful leading. Hadn't the Lord promised him far more than just a son to preserve the family line and pass along the family inheritance? Was he remembering how the son that God had asked him to sacrifice was the very one through which God promised to found a great nation? Isaac's name meant laughter. But as they walked up the mountain, Abraham may have thought that "grief" would have been a better name.

Abraham's son was reaching what the ancient world considered adulthood, of an age to soon marry and father children of his own. Abraham and Sarah would become grandparents and be assured that the family line would survive at least another generation. Furthermore, Abraham could see the beginning of that great nation that the Lord had vowed to make of him when He led him from his native land. Now God had decided to shatter everything.

Devastated, the patriarch listened in growing horror as the Lord asked him to sacrifice his special son, the child of promise. He knew about child sacrifice. It was a familiar custom even to him. The people of the surrounding nations considered it the greatest offering one could give to the gods, the most powerful sacrifice imaginable. The pharaohs depicted their military conquests through wall paintings and carvings. Some of them show besieged Canaanite cities. The ruler of the surrounded city, in an act of desperation, stands on top of the city wall, poised to hurl his son down as a child sacrifice. Surely the god he worshiped would deliver them from the Egyptians after such a sacrifice. But the God of Abraham—was He just like the other deities? Surely not!

But Abraham had heard His voice too many times for him to dismiss the divine command as only a hallucination. That voice had been too powerful a part of his life to ignore. In the past it had promised and predicted and then had demonstrated that it had the power to bring to pass what it said.

Abraham must have struggled in his mind over the Lord's summons to sacrifice his son. It would seemingly destroy all that He had promised, and, even worse, it threatened to throw into question everything the patriarch had come to understand about the divine character. But clinging to his memory of what God had done in the past, he bowed to what the Lord asked of him.

The reader of Genesis, however, knows something that Abraham does not. Biblical authors rarely comment on the significance of the

Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah

Read Genesis 22 prayerfully. What message, or messages, does the Word of God bring to you personally from this powerful story? What, if anything, can you take from it and apply to your own walk with the Lord?

Of the many Old Testament stories, this one is not only one of the most powerful, one of the most moving, and one of the most Messianic (in that we see the death of Jesus, God's Son, prefigured) but also one of the most difficult to understand. Even if we grasp that Abraham's need to display his faith (after so many repeated failures in that area), even when we understand his need to be willing to die to self and all that mattered to him—to be asked to do this by God? And to obey? Whatever else we can get from this story, it should show us all the paucity of our own faith and the realization that in the great controversy between good and evil we are dealing with issues that go far beyond what we, as sinners, can understand fully.

Danish author Søren Kierkegaard, commenting on this story, said that Abraham “left behind his worldly understanding, and he took along his faith.” What does that mean to you? How often, as a Christian, are you called to leave behind your worldly understanding and move only on faith? How are you supposed to do that?

And though in this story our focus is on Abraham, we mustn't forget Isaac's role too. Ellen White was so clear in *Patriarchs and Prophets* (p. 152) that though the young man could have fled, he submitted, even tried to help the pained and tormented old man do what he must. Isaac's ready submission typified the future submission of the Son of God. Once more in the region of Moriah, on a hill called Golgotha, a Father was to surrender His life in His Son. While Moses, looking forward by faith, wrote, “ ‘On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided’ ” (*Gen. 22:14, NIV*), we can exclaim in adoration and gratitude, “On the mountain of the Lord it has been provided.”

stories they tell. But when the author does say something, it is extremely important. The biblical author begins the Mount Moriah incident by announcing that God's command to sacrifice Isaac is only a test (*Gen. 22:1*). He wants readers to understand exactly what is going on so they will not misinterpret the divine character. But Abraham does not share that knowledge. He must deal with the Divine summons with only His past experience with God to guide him.

According to Hebrews 11:19, the patriarch concludes that somehow God would restore Isaac, perhaps through resurrection. (In

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Genesis 12:9-20, 20:1-7, 21:9, John 8:56, 1 Corinthians 1:25, Galatians 4:28-31*

- 1 In Genesis 20, we see Abraham, once again, resorting to old patterns of behavior and see similar rationalizations for engaging in them. Why would Abraham deliberately take this course of action, in spite of how poorly it had served him in the past? Have you ever felt compelled to repeat immoral or destructive patterns while knowing better?
- 2 While Bible students and teachers have felt free to embellish the story of Isaac and Ishmael, the Bible actually tells us little about the family relationships between Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar. What does the Bible give as Sarah's reason for wanting Hagar and Ishmael expelled from the family circle? (*See Gen. 21:9, 10.*)
- 3 In Genesis, the conflict between Isaac and Ishmael appears to be merely an unfortunate family drama or tragedy brought about by bad decisions. Paul, in Galatians 4:28-31, interprets the conflict as an allegory of the Old and the New Covenants. How does this interpretation enlighten our understanding of the covenants?
- 4 Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 is one of the more difficult episodes in the entire Bible. We live in a world where people commit all manner of violent or immoral acts, because they think God is telling them to do so. How would we distinguish Abraham's action from these? Could we? Explain.
- 5 What does the near sacrifice of Isaac tell us about faith? At some level, faith is understandable as a rational decision to trust God. Is there a point at which it goes beyond this? Does faith ever make sense only to the person who has that faith, even appearing foolish, immoral, or insane to the world?

Faith and Works

Read Hebrews 11:17-19. Considering Abraham’s previous distrust of God’s promises, what insights do these texts add to our understanding of this incident?

However incredible the story of Abraham and Isaac, whatever lessons we can draw from it, it should be clear that faith, saving faith, the kind of faith talked about in the New Testament (*Rom. 3:28, 5:1, Gal. 3:24*) is not a mere assent to beliefs, no matter how correct those beliefs are. Many of the lost will be those who knew propositional truths about God, or who even did things in His name (*Matt. 7:22, 23*). However intense this example, it shows that faith means obeying God and that only a faith revealed in works is a saving faith.

Read James 2:17-26. What’s the main message there? What point is he trying to make? What point is he not making? See also *Rom. 3:28; 5:1; Gal. 2:16, 17* to keep everything in proper balance.

Sure, we are saved by faith, but a faith that is expressed in actions, a faith that allows God to work through us. Notice what happened after the angel stopped Abraham. The “angel of the Lord” then called attention twice to Abraham’s obedience as the reason for the blessings pronounced (*Gen. 22:16, 18*). Because Abraham had demonstrated that he was trusting and trustworthy, God was able to bless him. The point is that it’s through an obedience generated out of faith that the Lord is able to bring upon us the blessings He has promised. Thus, faith and works are, really, inseparable in the life of a believer.

What exists in your life (if anything) that you might need to sacrifice, not to be justified before God but to show that you have already been justified by Him through faith in Christ?

fact, the New Testament writer considers the Lord's eventual halting of the sacrifice a "foreshadowing" of God's power to raise the dead.) But even so, resurrection would have been a difficult concept for the people of Abraham's time to grasp.

Abraham had faith in God because his years of relationship with Him had taught him that he could trust the Lord to always work things out. After all, God had already kept His promise that Sarah, though long past child-bearing age, would give birth to a son. In many other ways the Lord had demonstrated His trustworthiness.

The Lord had brought the son of promise into existence. If the God who had led Abraham to Canaan now asked for Isaac back, He would fulfill the divine promise another way. Even in his faith

Witnessing

Did you notice that chubby little toddler making his way up the church aisle last week? Clutched tightly in his little fist were dollar bills, given to him by church members who shared their thank offering with him. Remember how he struggled to stay on course, but his progress was unpredictable, at best? He'd take a wobbly step or two, and suddenly he'd find himself sitting down—hard! When that happened, you could tell he seemed bewildered about his lack of motor control. After a moment you watched him pick himself up and begin his unsteady progress back up the aisle. Suddenly, down he went again. Again and again he fell, picked himself up, and tried again.

Why was he so determined to reach the goal he had set for himself? You followed his line of vision to see what he was so focused on. His eyes were locked onto those of the pastor, standing at the head of the aisle, holding the children's offering basket. You knew then that the toddler's sole purpose for making his start-and-stop journey down the aisle was to reach the basket and to place in it his thank offering.

Finally, after a particularly hard tumble, he could not get up again. Suddenly, his father quickly came down the aisle, picked him up, and carried him to his goal. You sighed in relief as the toddler finally deposited his dollars safely in the basket!

Abraham had a painfully similar experience through life. His journey was often rough and filled with disastrous falls. Yet, although he frequently sinned miserably, he humbly and faithfully confessed his weaknesses to his heavenly Father and, once again, reconnected with Him.

These two children of God—one young and one old, witnessing some four thousand years apart—tell the same story: In the long run, the number of failures don't count; reaching the goal is what really matters. Don't let a day go by without sharing this good news with someone else!

The End of an Era *(Gen. 23:1–25:10)*

Abraham had returned to the land of Canaan and lived at Kiriath-arba, later known as Hebron. It was here that Sarah died. Despite her faults, Sarah was included among those whose faith looked forward to dwelling forever in a “better country” (*see Heb. 11:11-16*).

What does it say to us that Sarah should be listed, as she was, in Hebrews 11?

Three years after the death of Sarah, Abraham made preparations for the marriage of his son. Isaac trusted divine providence and his father to find a suitable wife. For him, the proper marriage of this son was of crucial importance.

Why did Abraham advise Eliezer to choose a wife from among his relatives rather than from the daughters of Canaan? Is not this being exclusive, or thinking yourself somehow superior to others? *See Gen. 24:3, 4; Deut. 7:3, 4; 1 Kings 11:4; 2 Cor. 6:14.*

After Abraham had appointed Isaac as his undisputed legal heir and had sent his other son away richly laden with gifts, he died at the age of 175 (*Gen. 25:1-8*). Ishmael and Isaac buried their father in the purchased tomb where Abraham had buried Sarah (*vss. 9, 10*).

Before proceeding with the line of the faithful, Genesis lists the generations of those who will fade from our view (*vss. 12-18*). The Bible is focused specifically on the line of Abraham, the line that would, however fitfully, keep alive the faith and knowledge of the true God.

Of everything that you’ve read about the life of Abraham, what’s the one point that strikes home the hardest? What’s the one lesson that, among all else, you have taken from this story that can help you in your walk with the Lord?

Abraham probably never understood the full implication of his statement to Isaac: “ ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son’ ” (*Gen. 22:8, NRSV*). But he knew God’s reliability, and that is the most important thing any follower of God must learn. It is the core of any true faith.

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: How would you draw a picture of a lie? What colors would you use? In Genesis 20, Abraham lives an unspoken lie. We know the end of his life story. He is considered the father of the faithful. In what ways does Abraham’s growing-in-Jesus experience give you hope? Whom do you know who needs to hear the story of positive life transformation through God’s power?

Thought Questions:

1 “Laughter” is born as God promised, right on time. (The name Isaac means “laughter.”) Abraham and Sarah, with their extended family, rejoice. And Sarah said, “ ‘God has made me laugh, so that all who hear will laugh with me’ ” (*Gen. 21:6, NKJV*). Yet, over the wonder of the celebration, a dark cloud looms. See Genesis 21:9. When have the bad choices you made early in your life come back to challenge you? Why do we still face the consequences even after we have asked for forgiveness and left a previous wrong lifestyle behind?

2 If you could choose how you would be remembered after your death, what words would embody your legacy? Sarah’s name is included among the great list of the faithful in Hebrews 11. It is said of her, “she judged Him faithful who had promised” (*vs. 11, NKJV*). Share a personal testimony of what you have learned about God’s faithfulness. As a class, organize a Sabbath worship service focused on God’s faithfulness. Invite your friends or neighbors to attend.

Application Question:

Relive the story of Abraham and Isaac’s testing on Mount Moriah as recorded in Genesis 22:1-17 and also in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, chapter 13. Take a sheet of paper and record your response to how Abraham may have been feeling. Do the same thing for Isaac. Through this journey, what have you learned about recognizing and obeying God’s voice? Ask God to lead you to a deeper relationship with Him so that you will know the sound of His voice, even above the roar of the daily challenges you face.

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 145–155, 171–176; *The SDA Bible Commentary*, comments on Genesis 20:1–25:18.

“The instruction given to Abraham touching the sacredness of the marriage relation was to be a lesson for all ages. It declares that the rights and happiness of this relation are to be carefully guarded, even at a great sacrifice. Sarah was the only true wife of Abraham. Her rights as a wife and mother no other person was entitled to share.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 147.

“At the appointed place they built the altar and laid the wood upon it. Then, with trembling voice, Abraham unfolded to his son the divine message. It was with terror and amazement that Isaac learned his fate, but he offered no resistance. He could have escaped his doom, had he chosen to do so; the grief-stricken old man, exhausted with the struggle of those three terrible days, could not have opposed the will of the vigorous youth. But Isaac had been trained from childhood to ready, trusting obedience, and as the purpose of God was opened before him, he yielded a willing submission. He was a sharer in Abraham’s faith, and he felt that he was honored in being called to give his life as an offering to God. He tenderly seeks to lighten the father’s grief, and encourages his nerveless hands to bind the cords that confine him to the altar.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 152.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How might the “sacrifice” of Ishmael in the previous chapter have helped prepare Abraham for the sacrifices and trials that would come next? What principle can you find here that could help us understand what it means to live by faith?
- 2 As a class, discuss the sacrifice of Isaac. How do we, in a modern context, understand this story? What lessons can we take from it for our lives today?
- 3 What advice do you have for someone who, in the faith, is thinking of marrying outside the faith? What cautions might be in order?