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A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

PROMISES FULFILLED (17:1-22:24)

Read Chapter 2 in our textbook, “The Whole Bible Story” as part of this study.

The Place of the Passage

God promises that Abram, now re-named Abraham, will be “the father of a multitude of nations” (Genesis 17:5). God calls Abraham to “walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly” (Genesis 17:1-2). God’s intention to bless the nations through Abraham is evident throughout this section as Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Gomorrah and brings blessing to the Philistine king Abimelech. Also, we see both the miraculous birth of Isaac and later Abraham’s offering of Isaac. Throughout, God’s faithfulness is clear.

Covenant and Circumcision

— God reiterates His covenant promises to Abraham in Genesis 17:3-8. These promises revolve around the blessings of offspring, land, and God’s presence. In terms of offspring, God promises, “I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you” (Genesis 17:6). For the land, “I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession” (Genesis 17:8). God’s presence is promised, since “I will be their God” (Genesis 17:8). God’s promise demands a response — circumcision.

Question: After reading Genesis 17:9-14 carefully, since God’s promises revolve around the promise of offspring, why do you think this sign is chosen as a sign of the covenant? In what ways is this sign uniquely appropriate?

— God changes Abram’s name to Abraham (meaning “exalted father”), and he changes Sarai’s name to Sarah. God then reiterates his promise to bless Sarah and bring a child from her womb.

Question: Based on Genesis 17:15-21; 18:9-15, how do you see Abraham and Sarah’s disbelief in the face of God’s promise?

— Even in the face of his disbelief, Abraham still responds to God’s promise with obedience and circumcises his son Ishmael and the men born in his house. Notice that the covenant of circumcision does not only cover his own biological children but also includes “all those born in his house or bought with his money” (Genesis 17:23).

Question: How might this begin to reflect God's promise that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3)?

Abraham and the Nations

— God's purpose for the nations continues to be seen in the second half of Genesis 18. In Genesis 18:1-8, the Lord appears to Abraham with three men, and Abraham immediately responds with generous hospitality to them. After reiterating his promise in Gen. 18:9-15, God's judgment is sure against Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:20). But Abraham seeks to bring blessing to these nations by interceding for them (Gen. 18:22-33), a back and forth conversation between the Lord and Abraham. We clearly see Abraham's persistence here, asking six times for God to lower the threshold for his judgment. Abraham's relationship with God allows him to ask questions of God and shows a remarkable persistence.

Question: What lessons can we learn about the nature of prayer from this? Why is it important to have an "Abraham" type figure to intercede in the face of God's judgment?

Read the description of the sinfulness of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-11. In light of this, Lot leaves Sodom with his immediate family in Genesis 19:12-29, though his sons-in-law do not believe in the impending destruction. They flee to the city of Zoar, and the Lord rains down sulfur and fire from heaven to destroy the cities and the valley they have left behind. Lot's wife turns back during this time of destruction and is turned into a pillar of salt.

Question: Why do you think this story is included in the overall story of Abraham? How does this help us understand the promise, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"?

The problems of the nations do not end with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. We see Abraham's interactions with the nations in Genesis 20.

Question: How does he bring blessing to the Philistines, even though he lies about the identity of his wife? What do we learn about Abraham and about the nature of sin when we compare Genesis 20:1-18 with Genesis 12:10-20?

Promise Fulfilled and Tested

— In Genesis 21:1-7, Isaac is finally born. After waiting twenty-five years, Abraham is given a son.

Question: What irony can be seen in the name of Isaac, "he laughs"?

— Now that Isaac is born, conflict arises with Ishmael, the son of Hagar. Sarah in particular tells her husband, "Cast out this slave woman with her son" (Genesis 21:10). God promises Abraham, even in the midst of his displeasure and frustration, that "I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring" (Genesis 21:13). Observe carefully what happens to Hagar as she is sent away.

Question: How does Genesis 21:8-20 show God's blessing resting on Ishmael and his descendants because of Abraham?

A final step of painful obedience is seen in Genesis 22:1-24. "God tested Abraham" (Genesis 22:1). This sets the tone for the entire chapter, as God calls him to "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 of which I shall tell you" (Genesis 22:2). This test is painful, but Abraham obeys immediately.

Question: How do you see Abraham taking deliberate steps of trusting obedience here?

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Intercessory/Intermediary

Appealing to one person on behalf of another, often used with reference to prayer. As God reveals his impending judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham steps in as an interceder and intermediary. Six times he comes before God and intercedes on behalf of those cities. Similarly, when Israel sinned by making a golden calf and God was going to destroy them completely, Moses interceded for them, saying, "But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written" (Ex. 32:32). He stood "in the breach" (Ezekiel 22:30) and cried out for God's grace for Israel just as Abraham did for Sodom and Gomorrah. Paul too cried out in his own day on behalf of the Israelites, "I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Romans 9:3). All these serve to point to Jesus, the ultimate intercessor and intermediary, who stood in the breach for us—he "redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13).

Sacrifice of Isaacs, Sacrifice of Jesus

The sacrifice of Isaac looks forward to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. God commands Abraham, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and . . . offer him there as a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:2). This wording foreshadows the words in John's Gospel, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Also, God commends Abraham, because "you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Genesis 22:12), just as he himself "did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all" (Romans 8:32). Abraham prepares to sacrifice his only beloved son, Isaac, but a ram is provided instead. Ultimately, however, God actually does offer his only, beloved Son as a sacrifice for us.

Circumcision

The mark of the covenant of Abraham was circumcision. Circumcision is a picture of the need for cleansing. When Israel crosses the Jordan to enter the Promised Land in Joshua's day, a whole generation is circumcised. When that is done, the Lord declares, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you" (Joshua 5:9). Circumcising the foreskin is an important

reminder that the offspring is blessed from generation to generation. It is not only blood children but even foreigners who are circumcised, showing God's plan from the beginning for the nations. A failure to circumcise would lead to that person being "cut off from his people" (Genesis 17:14). Circumcision is a physical branding of people as formally members of God's covenantal people, but it is meant to signify a spiritual effecting of inclusion among the people of God; Moses tells the people, "Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart" (Deut. 10:16). God promises that after the exile, "the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring" (Deuteronomy 30:6). Physical circumcision alone is not enough (cf. Jeremiah 9:25-26), and the circumcised Jews in Jesus' day are "uncircumcised in heart and ears" (Acts 7:51). Paul underscores that circumcision is meant to signify inner spiritual renewal, so that the presence of physical circumcision in the absence of spiritual circumcision is of no benefit at all (Romans 2:25-29).

Testing

By asking him to sacrifice his beloved and only son Isaac, "God tested Abraham" (Genesis 22:1). This testing is not unique to Abraham. Later, God led Israel for forty years in the wilderness "that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not" (Deuteronomy 8:2). God tested Israel to show them the reality of their heart, so that they might learn humble dependence on God's provision and that "man does not live by bread alone, but . . . by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 8:3). Israel, of course, failed their test in the wilderness, and this point is underscored in Deuteronomy 6-8. Jesus similarly is tested and tried in the wilderness, and Jesus is found faithful where Israel failed. Jesus' faithfulness in the place of Israel's failure is underscored as Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6-8 at his temptation (Matthew 4:1-11). We who believe in Jesus are also tested with hardships: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you. . . . But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings" (1 Peter 4:12-13). Even our failings as God's children in our testings, however, need not throw us into despair, for Jesus has passed the ultimate test on our behalf.

Judgment

God's judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah becomes a picture of the totality and severity of God's judgment throughout the Bible (e.g., Deuteronomy 29:23; Isaiah 1:9; Jeremiah 23:14; 50:40; Amos 4:11). God compares rebellious Israel to Sodom, who "had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (Ezekiel 16:49). Jesus looks back to the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah and says that the sin of those who rejected him would be even greater: "I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you" (Matthew 11:24; Luke 10:12). God is unswervingly just. Every evil deed will either be paid for by Christ's sacrifice or punished personally and eternally in hell.

Everlasting God

In Genesis 17, God makes an "everlasting covenant" with Abraham (Genesis 17:7), marked by the sign of circumcision. Also, after the birth of Isaac and the treaty with Abimelech, Abraham plants a tree at Beersheba and "called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlast-

ing God" (Genesis 21:33). After waiting twenty-five years, Abraham sees the promise fulfilled and experiences God's provision and protection time and again. As a result, he calls on the name of the Lord, who is the everlasting God. He does not change over time. His promises are everlasting and trustworthy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Please read the respective chapters prior to answering the following questions:

Genesis 17

1. How old was Abram when the events in this chapter occurred (17:1), and how long was it after Ishmael had been born (16:16)?
2. What name is used for God (17:1), and what does this tell us about God's character?
3. What promises were made regarding Abram's descendants — 17:2-8?
4. What change was made in Abram's name?
5. What sign should Abraham's descendants observe — 17:9-13?
6. When should it be done?
7. What change was made in Sarai's name — 17:15,16?
8. What promise did God make regarding her?
9. Some people say, "There's nothing in a name." What can we learn from this chapter about the attitude of God toward names?

10. How did Abraham react to God's promise regarding Sarah, and what request did he make — 17:17,18?

11. What name did God say Abraham should give the promised son, and what promise did God make regarding him — 17:19-21?

12. How did Abraham demonstrate obedience to God's command — 17:23-27?

Genesis 18

1. Who visited Abraham — 18:1,2? Who did the visitors turn out to be?

2. What acts of hospitality did Abraham offer to the visitors — 18:2-8?

3. What can we learn about eating these various kinds of food?

4. What prediction did the visitors make regarding Sarah — 18:9,10?

5. How did Sarah react to this prediction and why — 18:11,12?

6. What did God say about Sarah's reaction? How did Sarah then respond — 18:13-15?

7. What did God know Abraham would do for his household and children — 18:19?

8. What did God say He intended to do regarding Sodom and Gomorrah — 18:20,21?

10. What request did Abraham originally make regarding Sodom, and what was his final request which God granted? — 18:23-33?

Genesis 19

1. Who met the angels at Sodom and what did he do for them? — 19:1-3?

2. Who came to the house later and what did they want to do — 19:4,5?

3. What is the meaning of the expression “know them,” as used in older translations? Find and explain 2 other passages that show God’s attitude toward homosexual practices.

4. How did Lot attempt to discourage the men of the city — 19:6-8?

5. What did the angels do to protect Lot from the people — 19:9-11?

6. Why had these angels come to Sodom, and how did this event help accomplish their purpose — cf. 18:20,21?

7. What did the angels warn Lot to do and why — 19:12,13?

8. Whom did Lot try to warn to leave, and how did they react — 19:14? What does this show about other family members Lot had besides his wife and two daughters?

9. What further instructions did the angels give Lot — 19:15-17?

10. What concession did they make to Lot — 19:18-22?

11. Describe the destruction of the cities — 19:23-25.

12. Where else does the Bible refer to the destruction of these cities?

13. What lessons can we learn from the destruction of these cities?

14. What happened to Lot's wife and why — 19:26?

15. Where does the New Testament refer to Lot's wife?

16. What lessons should we learn from her?

17. Where did Lot go after the cities were destroyed? Why? Where did they live — 19:30?

18. What sin did Lot's daughters commit after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah — 19:31-35?

19. What was the result of this sin? What nations began as a result — 19:36-38?

20. What lessons should we learn from Lot and his family?

Genesis 20

1. To where did Abraham move next — 20:1?

2. Who was king in that area — 20:2?

3. What deceit did Abraham do? Where else in Genesis did he do a similar thing?

4. What did God say to the king about it and how did the king respond — 20:3?

5. What did God say He had done to keep the king from sinning, and what did He tell the king to do about the situation — 20:4-7?

6. What did the king say to Abraham about it — 20:8-10?
7. How did Abraham justify his conduct — 20:11,12?
8. What arrangement did Sarah and Abraham have that led to this deceit — 20:13?
9. What did Abimelech do to compensate Abraham and Sarah — 20:14-16?
10. What did Abraham do for Abimelech and his people? Why was this needed — 20:17,18?

Genesis 21

1. How old was Abraham when the promised son was born — 21:1-5? What name was given to the child? What did the son's name mean?
2. Describe Sarah's reaction to the birth of her son — 21:6,7.
3. What promises and commands of God were fulfilled in — 21:1-7? Why might God had waited so long to give this child?
4. What problem arose regarding Ishmael — 21:8,9?

5. What did Sarah want to do with Ishmael and why — 21:10?

6. How did Abraham feel about Sarah's intention regarding Ishmael, and what did God say about it — 21:11,12? What lessons can we learn about Abraham, Sarah, and God?

7. What did God promise to do for Ishmael — 21:13?

8. Where is this event referred to in the New Testament, and what lessons is it used to teach?

9. When Hagar and Ishmael left, what problem did they face — 21:14-16? How old was Ishmael at this time?

10. How was the problem solved? What promises did God repeat to Hagar — 21:17-19?

11. What happened to Ishmael as he grew — 21:20,21?

12. What problem had developed between Abraham and some servants of Abimelech — 21:22- 26? Who was Abimelech?

13. What agreement did Abraham and Abimelech make, how did they symbolize it, and what was the place named — 21:27-34?

Genesis 22

1. What test did God give Abraham — 22:1,2?
2. Why would this be hard for Abraham to do?
3. Despite the difficulties, how did Abraham show his willingness to obey — 22:3,4?
4. What question did Isaac ask regarding the proceedings and how did Abraham answer — 22:5-8?
5. How far did Abraham go with the sacrifice, and why did he stop — 22:9-12?
6. What did he offer instead of Isaac — 22:13?
7. What did God say regarding Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac — 22:14-18?
8. If Abraham is an example of faith, what can we learn from him about the relationship between faith and obedience?
9. List similarities between the sacrifice of Isaac and the death of Jesus.
10. Which of Abraham's relatives was also having numerous descendants — 22:20-24?