



Guarding Faith

Lessons from Abraham, the Father of Faith

Genesis 12-25

Midweek – Summer 2019

Name:

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CHURCH

Introduction to Genesis 12-25

To discuss:

What is faith? How would you define it? What does it look like to trust God's promises wholeheartedly and why does it matter? What's at stake?

(1) God has promised to reverse the Fall...

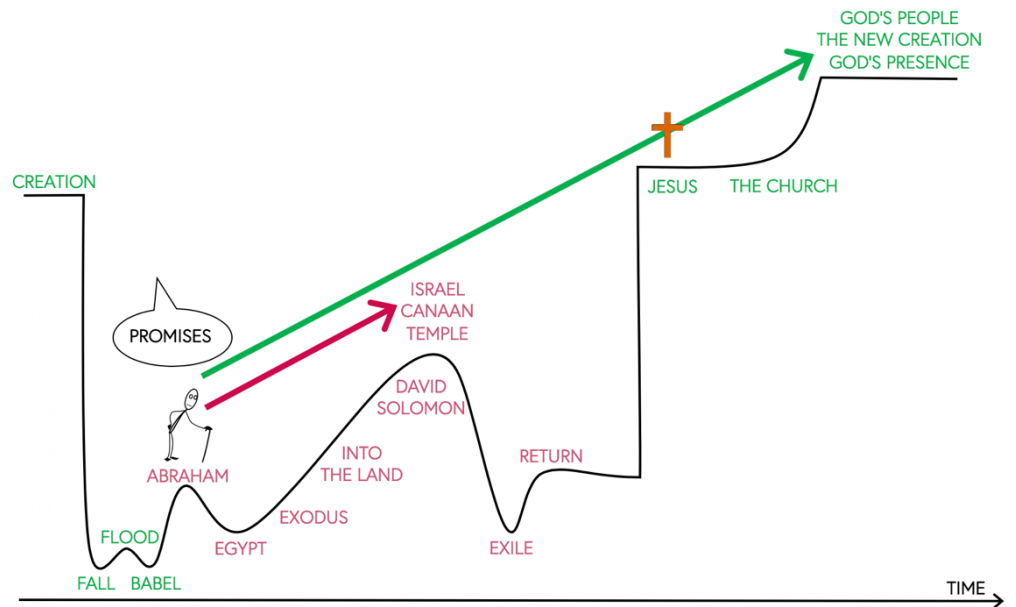
- Out of Eden: the sad story so far (Gen 1-11)

| event (put these in the correct order) | order |
|---|-------|
| Creation | |
| Jacob's family goes to Egypt | |
| Jacob has 12 sons | |
| the Fall | |
| Abraham goes to Canaan | |
| Cain kills Abel | |
| Israel on the way to Canaan | |
| tower of Babel and scattering of people | |
| Israel slavery in Egypt | |
| Noah and the flood | |
| calling of Abraham | |
| Abraham goes to Egypt | |
| Lot moves to Sodom | |
| birth of Jacob and Esau | |
| Isaac marries Rebekah | |
| Abraham almost sacrifices Isaac | |
| Sodom & Gomorrah destroyed; Lot rescued | |
| Abraham goes back to Canaan | |
| birth of Isaac | |
| death of Abraham | |
| death of Sarah | |
| birth of Ishmael | |
| Israel rescued from slavery in Egypt | |

| | people | land | blessing |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|----------------|---|
| Genesis 3-11 | death scattered across the earth | away from Eden | under curse relationship with God ruined |

• Out of the blue: God makes promises to Abraham and his offspring (Gen 12-25)

| Gen 12-25 | people | land | blessing |
|------------|--------|------|----------|
| 12:2-3, 7 | | | |
| 13:15-16 | | | |
| 15:4-5 | | | |
| 17:4-8, 16 | | | |
| 22:17 | | | |



Abraham's physical family

- God
- Abraham
- Abraham's offspring/Isaac
- Abraham's family
- the surrounding nations
- Canaan

-
-
-
-
-
-

Abraham's spiritual family

- God
- the man of faith, foreshadows Jesus
- Jesus (Gal 3:16)
- those who share in Abraham's faith
- the godless world (but also some believers)
- the New Creation

(2) Like Abraham, trust God to receive the blessing for yourself...

- the encouragement

To discuss:

- *In what ways can our own faith be shaky and half-hearted?*
- *How does it assure you and warm your heart that God is committed to achieve his promises independent of our actual righteousness and regardless of how wobbly our faith is?*

(3) ...and be wholehearted to ensure you will pass it on to the next generation and the nations!

- the challenge

To discuss:

- *What would it look like for us to be more wholehearted in our faith?*
- *Do we ever think about that our wholeheartedness matters to be useful to God in passing on the blessing to the next generation and the nations? In what ways is this a real privilege as well as a real responsibility?*

- The original readers / hearers of Genesis were the great, great, great (etc.) grandchildren of Abraham who were on their way from Egypt to finally inherit the land of Canaan. Lots of them found it really hard to trust God's promise, and they constantly wanted to return to Egypt (even though they had been slaves there). Why do you think Moses begins Abraham's story with this passage and how should it have comforted, encouraged and rebuked the Israelites?
- Throughout the Bible God's promises to Abraham are revealed to encompass a permanent home in a whole new creation that is better than Eden, or any human city. This blessing is for everyone from any nation who believes God's promises to Abraham. In the light of this fuller revelation, is this passage still as relevant today as it was to its original audience? Why / why not?

Apply!

- How should we feel about God's promises to Abraham and us? Share with each other which of the promises gets you most excited and why!
- What makes it hard to keep believing God's promises?
 - What are the different kinds of disconnect we experience between God's promises and our day-to-day reality?
 - What alternatives to sticking with Christ can look more attractive, and why do they look more attractive?
- What do we need to do to keep persevering in joyful, obedient belief in God's promises (despite the disconnect, and the attractive alternatives)?
- What does persevering, joyful, obedient belief look like in practice for us? Living in a tent in the south of Israel? If not this, then what?

Study 2 – Genesis 14-15

Starter question:

- In twos and threes, discuss what struck you from this passage last Sunday?

OR

- Why do you think so many of us find it easier to focus on pleasing our human bosses, more than on pleasing God?

What?

- God is called Possessor of Heaven and Earth in 14:19 and 14:22. What difference does this make to the way Abraham interacts with different kings and kingdoms in chapter 14?

- Despite his amazing belief in God in chapter 14, Abraham still seems to be having doubts about God's promises in chapter 15. What are the different things that God does to build his faith and reassure him in this chapter?

- How should God being possessor of Heaven and Earth help Abraham believe the promises in chapter 15?

- Gen 15:6 shows us that Abraham's faith is the kind of faith that justifies a person before God (i.e. when someone trusts God like this, God treats them as though they are righteous, even though they are not!). How would you summarise from these two chapters what justifying faith looks like?

Why?

- Why are we shown the way Abraham's faith changed the way he related to the various kingdoms around him (note that the psalms and the NT teach that Melchizedek foreshadows the Priestly King Jesus)?

- Why do you think Abraham still found it a struggle to trust God with his future (in chapter 15), even though God had helped him so mightily in the recent past (in chapter 14)?

- Why do we need to see Abraham's trust—and *battle to trust*—God?

Apply!

- God's promise to Abraham has come to us too, only magnified: God promises us eternal life in a new earth with innumerable hosts of believers from down the ages. What makes it hard for us to believe this promise today? How does this passage persuade you to trust God anyway?

- How do God's promises and new covenant in Christ help strengthen our faith even further?

- How should we feel about the future, knowing that the possessor of Heaven and Earth has promised us that we will inherit the Earth, even a new Heavens and Earth?

- How should faith in God alone change the way we relate to the kingdoms of this world (who we align with, who we resist, who we acknowledge as making us rich)?

Study 3 – Genesis 16-17

Starter question:

- In twos and threes, discuss what struck you from this passage last Sunday?

OR

- Would you rather receive a windfall of £2000 today, or £200,000 in fifteen years from now? Why?

What?

- Read 16:1-6. Abraham and Sarah seem to trust God's promise of offspring, but come up with a plan to make it happen. There are lots of allusions in these verses to Genesis 3 (e.g. compare v3+5 with Gen 3:6, think about who blames whom, etc). What do these allusions expose about Abraham and Sarah?

- Compare and contrast what God promises about Ishmael and Isaac?

- Why does God choose to bring about his promises through barren Sarah (14 years later!) and not through Ishmael?

- Given the context, why do you think God chooses circumcision as the particular mark of his covenant with Abraham? How does this capture the heart of what God wants Abraham to learn?

Why?

- Why is it important that Israel / the church learn to trust God's way and timing in bringing about his covenant promises?

- How is this lesson in faith similar / different to what we have seen so far in chapters 12-15?

Apply!

- Why is it so hard to trust God's way and timing in fulfilling his covenant blessings?

- In what ways might God-given blessings that we can bring about today make us lose sight of the better covenant blessings? Can you think of examples in your own life?

- The go-getter / best-life-now attitude is very engrained in our culture. What counter-cultural attitudes towards ourselves / our lives / towards God and his covenant promises are necessary to trust God's way and timing instead?

- How do our covenant signs of baptism / the Lord's Supper remind us:
 - it is not our own intervention that saved us but God's divine solution?
 - God wants more for us than just blessing in this life?

- Why is God's way of fulfilling his covenant blessing a good thing (even if we find it frustrating to keep waiting impotently)?

Apply!

- Why is it easy to stop believing that God really does see the wickedness in this world and will surely judge it?

- As those who belong to Abraham's (Jesus') family, how should we feel about and respond to God's coming judgment of the world?

- How does seeing the impact of Abraham's actions on others encourage us to keep pursuing the personal righteousness that flows from justifying faith?

- In light of God's coming judgment, what will it look like this week to keep God's way in doing righteousness and justice, and to model that to our children / church family?

Study 5 – Genesis 19

Starter question:

- In twos and threes, discuss what struck you from this passage last Sunday?

OR

- If you have, or were to have, a family, which of your character / physical traits would you be least happy about passing on?

What?

- How does Lot in this chapter compare to Abraham in chapter 18? (How does his concern for others compare to Abraham's?)

- Is Lot a real believer (justified by faith) with real personal righteousness? What's your verdict on him? Discuss first and at the end look up God's verdict in 2 Peter 2:7-9.

- How does Lot's rescue confirm that he is really righteous (remember Abraham's prayer in 18:23!)

- Although Lot has some real personal righteousness, how has living in Sodom compromised him and his household?

Why?

- Lot clearly is drawn to and flirts with godless Sodom, but seeing that he is ultimately saved, does it really matter that he got so involved in Sodom? Why is this so serious and tragic?

- What should Israel / the church learn from Lot's story?

Apply!

- Do you ever think about how much our godliness matters for the salvation of the next generation? What does it show about the world's influence on us if we don't think more broadly than just "my salvation"?

- Lot was both disgusted by the godless world as well as attracted to it. Why do you think this is? How can you see such ambiguity in your own life?

- In what areas are you flirting with the godless world? What would it look like for you take steps to separate yourself and be more distinct?

- Hopefully by now you are feeling deeply convicted about the ways you have compromised with the unrighteousness world around you, and the danger that poses for people in your sphere of influence. It is a great comfort for all of us that God justifies and rescues us not fundamentally on the basis of our personal righteousness, but simply because we believe him. How does God's amazing mercy spur us on to pursue more wholehearted faith and godliness (and to be less attracted to the world)?

Study 6 – Genesis 20

Starter question:

- In twos and threes, discuss what struck you from this passage last Sunday?

OR

- Why is it so easy for Christians to look down on others, and what is so wrong about this?

What?

- What is so scandalous about Abraham's behaviour in this grubby episode?

- Abraham has acted like this before (remember chapter 12), but how does the narrator underline his unrighteousness even more this time?

- What is so surprising about the difference between Abraham and Abimelech in this passage?

- What is so surprising about God's instructions here, especially in the light of Abraham's sinfulness and Abimelech's innocence?

Why?

- In the last passage we saw God judge Sodom and Gomorrah for their unrighteousness. What wrong conclusions has Abraham drawn from those events? How does today's passage guard us from those same wrong conclusions?

- Why does this passage affirm Abraham's importance as a prophet to the nations (despite his relative unrighteousness to some of them)?

Apply!

- What's the potential danger of understanding the need to resist the unrighteous influence of the nations? Can you see ways in which you have given up on the world / been too fearful of their sinful influence?

- Can you think of ways that your fear of the world can even lead to you sinning against the world (deceiving others, not being open with others, positively hurting others etc.)?

- How can we fight our unhelpful prejudice towards people outside the family of faith? What truths about ourselves, others and God's plans do we need to remember?

- What comfort is there in this passage for believers who feel crippled in their witness to the world by their sin and shaky belief? Next time you feel like you can't pray for or proclaim to the world because of your hypocrisy, what do you need to remember?

Study 7 – Genesis 21

Starter question:

- In twos and threes, discuss what struck you from this passage last Sunday?
- OR
- What does it feel like to be excluded from an invitation when you want to be included?

What?

- What's so joyful about Isaac's birth for Sarah? What's so joyful for the whole world about this birth given the context of the whole of Genesis so far?

- From v8 onwards, what does Sarah get right, that Ishmael, Abraham and Hagar all fail to understand?

- Does Isaac's unique status as heir of the Abrahamic covenant mean that Ishmael could never share in the covenant blessing promised to Abraham?
 - How do God's general blessings to Ishmael strongly suggest that he is willing to bless him even with the covenant blessing?
 - What would Ishmael have to do to share in the covenant blessing inherited by Isaac?

- What do verses 22-34 teach us about how Abimelech comes to share in God's covenant kindness to Abraham?

Why?

- Why are we shown the stories of both Ishmael and Abimelech straight after the birth of Isaac?

- Why are we shown *both* the exclusivity of the heir of the covenant, *and* the availability of sharing in the covenant blessings?

Apply!

- Why is it important to understand both that God's blessing can include anyone from any nation, but also that blessing comes ultimately through just one offspring of Abraham (i.e. Jesus)?
 - What is the danger of underemphasising the exclusivity of God's means of blessing?
 - What is the danger of underemphasising the inclusivity of God's offer to bless anyone?

- The beginning of this passage is full of laughter. Isaac's name even means "he laughs." As a member of the family of faith do you experience real joy at seeing God's promises fulfilled for you in Jesus' birth, death and resurrection?

- Does the mockery of others ever puncture your joy the way it punctured Sarah's? What motivates people's mockery of our joy, and how does it help us to stay joyful when we understand their motivations?

- This passage also shows some real despair, as Hagar thinks God has given up on her and Ishmael. What stops people from thinking God would be willing to bless them through Jesus today? How might this passage help someone who feels that way?

- What does it look like for someone to enter into a covenant with Jesus today? What kind of attitude and actions towards Jesus and God demonstrate that someone has truly joined the family of faith?

Study 8 – Genesis 22-23

Starter question:

- In twos and threes, discuss what struck you from this passage last Sunday?

OR

- What do you think of this investment advice from the US banker Warren Buffett: "Opportunities come infrequently. When it rains gold, put out the bucket, not the thimble."

What?

- In v22:1 we read that God tests Abraham. What exactly is it that he tests Abraham for? What does he look for?

- What convictions made Abraham willing to sacrifice Isaac, the child of promise? (Read also Hebrews 11:17-19.)

- Chapter 23 is a whole chapter on Abraham purchasing a plot of land with a cave. What seems to be important to Abraham as he negotiates for this land with the Hittites?

Why?

- How are Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and his purchase of Sarah's burial place driven by the same convictions?

- The place in Moriah (v2, 4, 9, 14) is the same as Mount Zion in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 3:1). How does this story point forward to how God will ultimately give life to those in Abraham's family?

- Why did Israel / does the church need this example of deep conviction about God's ability to give life to the dead?

Apply!

- Abraham is so convinced of the future life in the promised land to come that he is willing to invest fully into this future. How much are we willing to invest into the future life to come?
- What does it suggest about our faith in God's future if we are holding back in our investment?
- How does this passage encourage you to put all your eggs into the "future life" basket?
- What would it look like practically to fully invest into the future to come? What would be the "buying a cave in Canaan" equivalent for us (think about how you spend your time, your money, what life choices you make, etc)?
- Ultimately, it is through God's provision of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb who died in our place, that we are given the certainty of future resurrection life. How does this warm your heart?

Study 9 – Genesis 24:1-25:11

Starter question:

- In twos and threes, discuss what struck you from this passage last Sunday?

OR

- What are the top three things on your bucket list?

What?

- This final account in Abraham's life draws together much of what we've seen in the previous chapters about what it means to be people of wholehearted faith who are included in God's covenant blessing. How do we see such faith modelled in this passage by:
 - Abraham
 - his servant
 - Rebekah
 - Rebekah's family
- What are all the different convictions that motivate their behaviour, e.g. convictions about God, his promises, the world at large, the family faith etc.?
- How do we see God's steadfast love and sovereignty in action here?

Why?

- Why is Abraham so keen that Isaac marries, and that he marries a wife from within the family, but that he doesn't venture to Ur himself?
- Why is it important that Israel / the church know that God is sovereign and committed to passing on the promise to the next generation?

- Why does the account of Abraham's faithful life finish with this passage?

Apply!

- How does this passage encourage us in godly priorities for the next generation of believers (whether in our physical family, or church family)?
 - What would it look like practically to want them: (a) to share in the covenant blessing for themselves and (b) to stay safe from the influence of the world?
 - What other things would be less important to us for them?

- Many of us are the next generation of believers (we're quite a young church!). How should Rebekah's example (which might remind you of a younger Abram) encourage us to commit to the family of faith regardless of the cost? What do you think might hold you back from a wholehearted commitment to membership of Christ's family, the church?

- What's scary about wholehearted faith? How does God's steadfast love and sovereignty encourage you to be all in in your commitment?

- Can you think of people in your physical / church family, who through their godly priorities for you have helped you in your membership of the family of blessing? Take a moment to give thanks for them and pray God would help you follow in their footsteps!

Genesis 12-25 – Summary Notes

Theme:

God has promised to reverse the fall through Abraham's seed.

Purpose:

Like Abraham, trust God to receive the blessing for yourself and be wholehearted to ensure you pass it on to the next generation

Structure:

12-13 God promises to bless, Abram leaves his country and kindred
Abraham goes to Egypt, comes back and settles in Canaan, Lot in Sodom

14-15 Abram rescues Lot, Melchizedek versus king of Sodom
God makes promises and swears oath

16-17 Hagar and Ishmael
birth of Isaac promised

18 "Will you destroy the righteous?" Abraham pleads for Sodom

19 God judges the wicked but rescues the righteous

20 "Will you destroy the righteous?" Abimelech pleads to God

21 Birth of Isaac
Hagar and Ishmael, Abimelech

22-23 Resurrection of Isaac
God makes promises and swears oath
Sarah dies and Abraham buys land

24-25 Abraham sends servant back to his country and kindred, Abraham dies, God blesses Isaac

Study 1 – Genesis 11:27-13:18

Purpose: Persevere in trusting God's promises to bless through Abraham, even when godless options appeal more

11:27-32 Abram's back story

12:1-3 God promises to bless Abram, and all nations through Abram.

12:4-9 Abram and Lot go together in faith to the land of Canaan.

12:10-20 Abram goes to Egypt in fear, but God still blesses Abram.

13:1-13 Abram and Lot separate: A stays in Canaan; L goes to Sodom.

13:14-18 God promises Abram innumerable offspring who will own Canaan.

This passage marks the beginning of a new story that will now run in parallel with the story of mankind's sin and God's curse that dominated Gen 3-11. God promises to bless Abraham and through him to bless all the families of the Earth. This blessing suggests that God will in some way

counter the curse of Gen 3 through Abram. Abram will be a blessing, and blessing will be available to all in him. Abram must be pretty special then, right? No! He was the son of some chap, Terah. His brother Haran died in his prime. And his wife, Sarai, was barren. Abram was as much affected by the curse of death as anyone else, and by implication he was a sinful man just like anyone else. God chose a nobody to begin his great sin-defeating work. Why? So that we would learn it is God's initiative, power and grace that will ultimately solve the fall, not man's merit, greatness or strength. God chose Abram out of the blue, in order to teach us to depend on God in faith, rather than on ourselves in pride, as we seek a return to paradise.

How then did Abram, and others, respond to God's promises to Abram? In faith? The responses are mixed. First in 12:4-9 Abram and his nephew Lot obey God and go to Canaan. This act of belief in God's promise is breathtaking: as the passage repeats, the land was already inhabited by many Canaanites, but when they arrive Abram doesn't lose heart, rather he worships God.

After such a good start in 12:10-20 Abram very quickly seems to lose confidence in God's promises. Although God has promised him such an amazing future, he flees to Egypt for food in face of a famine. Moreover, whilst there he also risks his wife's purity by pretending she is his sister to avoid the Egyptians killing him. So much for trusting that God will bless him and will curse those who curse him. It is a great irony that he ends up being made rich by Pharaoh, and not by God in 12:16 (remember this dynamic when it comes to the next passage, where we will discover that Abram has made some progress in his faith). Despite Abram's failure of faith, once again God proves that his promises to Abram are not based on merit: God protects Abram and gets him out of Egypt and back into the promised land by striking Pharaoh and Egypt with plagues (and not for the last time: the Israelites set free from Egypt should be struck by this parallel, and resist Abram's mistake of thinking safety is found in Egypt, rather than trusting God's promises).

After Egypt Abram is back on track in his faith. He returns again to his first altar and prays to God (13:4). But now it is Lot's turn to make a serious error of judgment. With their increased wealth after Egypt, Lot and Abram are struggling to live side by side. Abram rightly says the land is more than spacious enough for both of them, and offers Lot first dibs on which part of the land he will choose. Instead of choosing a part of Canaan, Lot leaves the land for the Jordan valley (n.b. the contrast between Abram and Lot in 13:12 implies the Jordan Valley is outside Canaan). This is almost a carbon copy of Abram's flight to Egypt: Lot explicitly chooses the Jordan Valley because it is "like...Egypt" (13:10). But this decision will later prove disastrous: as 13:13 tells us, the people of Sodom were great sinners against God, and Lot will get caught up in their sin in spine-chilling ways.

For Abram, who has chosen the way of faith, the future looks bright, even if camping in Canaan seems harder for now than settling in the city of Sodom. In 13:14-17 God promises Abram the land of Canaan and innumerable descendants to possess and live in it. And Abram once again worships God in faith (13:18).

Study 2 – Genesis 14-15

Purpose: Given God's track record, trust the owner of the universe alone to bless you

14:1-16 Abram rescues Lot, the kings of the Jordan Valley and all their possessions from the Chaldean kings

14:17-24 Abram accepts the blessing of the Possessor of the universe, but refuses a reward from the king of Sodom.

15:1-21 God promises Abram innumerable descendants who will dispossess great kingdoms (including the Canaanites).

Abram's sojourn in Canaan is soon interrupted by geo-politics. The various kingdoms in 14:1-9 can seem irrelevant to Abram's story, but they set the stage for a quite amazing act of faith on Abram's part. And through this act of faith Abram teaches us to rely fully and solely on God for our future blessing.

14:1 introduces four kings from Shinar (Babel: see Gen 11:1-9) and environs. These are evidently the big powers of the region, because at least one of them (Chedorlaomer) is receiving tribute from the kingdoms of the Jordan Valley (Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Zoar.) The Babylonian kings declare war when the five Jordanian kings stop paying tribute (14:4). En route to the battle in 14:5-7 we see the Babylonian kings fight and defeat other kingdoms including the Amalekites and Amorites. And then, as if they hadn't just fought several other battles, they swiftly dispatch the four Jordanian kings too (14:10). We are meant to see that these kings are very mighty. Indeed, they take all the possessions of the Jordanian kings, and they take Lot and his possessions too. When Abram finds out, despite only having 318 trained men in his household, he sets off in pursuit, and defeats them. Lot and his possessions (not to mention the possessions of the Sodom/Gomorrah) are saved. This is an astonishing rescue, an act of faith.

Understandably the king of Sodom wants to repay Abram richly. The king of Salem, Melchizedek, also comes to meet him to acknowledge his defeat of the Babylonian kings. Much is revealed about Abram's relationship with God in the contrasting ways he treats the king of Sodom and Melchizedek in 14:17-24. Melchizedek blesses Abram for his victory, bringing bread and wine, but above all he blesses him in the name of God. Melchizedek, it transpires, is God's priest, and acknowledges that it is the king of Heaven who has given Abram victory over these earthly kings. Abram for his part contributes a tenth of the spoils of war to Melchizedek. Next the King of Sodom wants to reward Abram with all the material possessions that Abram recovered. But whereas Abram accepted Melchizedek's blessing, he refuses this offer from Sodom. His rationale? He doesn't want the king of Sodom to be able to claim that he has made him rich. Why not? The clue is in the name he gives God: Possessor of Heaven and Earth. This same name was used by Melchizedek. God, as possessor of all things, is the one upon whom we should depend for provision. Receiving blessing from Melchizedek (whose name means "king of righteousness", and who righteously acknowledges God's rule) is a very different prospect from receiving reward from a notoriously sinful king who rejects God. Abram appears to have learnt from his time in Egypt: he wants to depend on God alone for blessing.

As if to commend Abram's refusal to be enriched by the King of Sodom, God appears to Abram in 15:1 and assures him that he is Abram's shield and that his reward shall be very great. This language of shield and reward ties chapter 15 to all the action of chapter 14 (the word translated "shield" in 15:1 is the same root word as that of "delivered" in 14:20). But God's commendation prompts Abram to question whether he can be certain about God's promises: defeating kings is one thing, but if Abram is to be a great nation there is still the matter of his childlessness to solve. God reaffirms his promise of offspring, and that is good enough for Abram: he believes God in 15:6. Nevertheless Abram still seeks some pledge that God will really give his offspring the land. God obliges by cutting a covenant with Abram (compare the scene with the animals here to that in Jer 34:8-19) whereby he, as it were, promises him on the pain of his own being cut in two, that he will give Abram's children Canaan to possess. The road to that future may be long, and even involve Abram's children becoming slaves (albeit with the promise that they will ransack the possession of

their masters they eventually leave) but the future is certain. God is the possessor of Heaven and Earth, and he can and will give Abram all he has promised.

Study 3 – Genesis 16-17

Purpose: Don't settle for common blessings you can get your way today; keep trusting God's way and timing for his covenant blessing.

Structure:

16:1-6 Sarah + Abraham take matters into their own hands

16:7-15 God makes promises to Hagar about Ishmael, but he's not the child of promise

17:1-8 God pronounces blessings over Abraham + name change

17:9-14 Covenant of circumcision

17:15-17 God pronounces blessings over Sarah + name change

17:18-21 God makes promises to Abraham about Ishmael, but he's not the child of promise

17:22-27 Abraham obeys God and circumcises his household

16:1-6 Abram and Sarai at first glance seem to trust God's plan for offspring, but in the face of 10 years of waiting and Sarai's barrenness, they come up with their own plan to produce a son. Their behaviour exposes their lack of trust in God to make the seemingly impossible happen. Numerous allusions to Genesis 3 underline this point. First, Sarai blames God for her barrenness (God is not good), then she sees a solution, takes Hagar, the Egyptian slave, and gives her to her husband (just as Eve sees, takes the forbidden fruit and gives it to her husband). Abram listens to her (just as Adam listen to Eve). When Hagar conceives and therefore mocks Sarai, Sarai blames Abram (just as Adam and Eve blame each other). The situation ends in a mess and Hagar flees.

16:7-15 God, through his angel, shows compassion on Hagar and promises her to multiply her offspring. Even though the promises sound similar to his promises to Abraham, the angel also makes clear that Ishmael is not the child of promise – he won't be a blessing to others, but will be in conflict with them (v12). Hagar returns to Abraham and Ishmael is born the following year.

17:1-17 God keeps Abram waiting for another 13 years, and then confirms and expands his covenant promises and commitment to him. He changes Abram's name to Abraham' (father of a multitude of nations) and Sarai's name to Sarah (mother of nations) and tells Abraham, that it is through his offspring with Sarah (v16) that the royal line will be established.

God then gives Abraham circumcision as a mark of his covenant with him. The nature of the covenant mark serves as an almost ironic reminder that Abraham's attempts to make offspring for himself, is not the way God will fulfill his covenant promises. It's a reminder to every male offspring in every generation of human impotency to bring about God's promises and a sign of humbly trusting in God's ways and timing.

17:18-21 But Abraham is still not convinced and laughs at God's suggestion that Sarah might have a child. He still wants to settle for Ishmael as his heir here and now. God repeats his promises to bless Ishmael and make him into a nation, too, but also makes it clear once more that not Ishmael is the child of promise, but Isaac, whom Sarah will bear. Abraham should trust God's way and timing and not settle for lesser blessings now.

17:22-27 The chapter ends with Abraham finally trusting God and obeying his command to circumcise his household.

Study 4 – Genesis 18

Purpose: Knowing God the righteous judge, live righteously for the sake of the family of faith and the whole world!

Structure:

v1-15 Abraham shows his righteousness by showing hospitality to strangers

v16-33 Abraham shows his righteousness by pleading for strangers in Sodom

v1-15 In chapter 17 Abraham didn't trust God's way and timing which led to him acting unrighteously by abusing Hagar. Here in contrast, Abraham is seen as a faithful follower of God who trusts in God's promises and acts righteously. He welcomes the strangers and shows them lavish hospitality and respect (Hebrews 12:3 tells us that hospitality towards strangers is a hallmark of righteous behavior and suggests that Abraham didn't know initially that the visitors came from the Lord). Abraham's righteous actions are copied by Sarah and his whole household who join in with preparing the feast for the visitors.

In v9-15 we see that also Abraham's unrighteous behavior from before filters down to his family. When the visitors repeat God's promise to Abraham that barren Sarah will bear him a son, Sarah who overhears the conversation, laughs in unbelief, just as Abraham did in 17:7.

We see in these verses that both Abraham's belief / unbelief and his resulting righteousness / unrighteousness seep into his household. While Abraham's personal righteousness is not what justifies him (15:6), it nonetheless really is seen to matter for the sake of his family's righteousness.

18:16-33 As Abraham sees the visitors off, God reveals to him his plans to judge the wickedness of Sodom. He chooses to let Abraham in on his plans of judgment, because of his promises to bless Abraham, give him many offspring and bless the nations through him (v18). God highlights the importance of the family of faith keeping the way of the Lord in doing righteousness and justice in order to bring about these promises. We have already seen in the previous verses how Abraham's personal righteousness affects his family for better or worse. Now we see Abraham's personal righteousness leading him to plead for Sodom. He appeals to God's own righteousness and justice not to sweep away any of the nations who might belong to the family of faith along with the wicked. His lengthy dialogue with God does not suggest God changes his mind (he was always going to act in righteousness and justice), but shows us Abraham's own commitment to righteousness and justice and how God will work through Abraham to bless the nations.

Study 5 – Genesis 19

Purpose: As God's saved people, don't flirt with the unrighteous world and compromise the promise for your offspring

Structure:

v1-11 Lot lives in Sodom; he shows some righteousness in his hospitality to visitors but is also clearly compromised by living in godless Sodom

v12-22 Lot believes the warning about the coming judgment and is rescued

v23-26 God brings judgment over Sodom and Gomorrah; Lot's wife perishes

v27-29 God answers Abraham's prayer to save the righteous

v30-38 Lot lives in a cave near godless Zoar; Lot's daughters walk in the way of Sodom and become like the godless nations

v1-11 Lot here is put side by side with Abraham in 18:1-15. Like Abraham he shows real righteousness in welcoming the strangers and preparing a meal for them. He protects the visitors from gang rape, and is "greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked" (2 Peter 2:7). However, he is much less wholehearted than Abraham. His hospitality is less lavish and it's clear that the unrighteousness of Sodom has rubbed off on him: It seems inconceivable that he would offer up his own daughters to be raped instead of the visitors, rather than trusting the Lord's protection. Mercifully, the angelic visitors intervene and save Lot's household from the mob.

v12-22 The visitors warn Lot of his coming judgment. Again, Lot is presented in an ambiguous light in his response to their warnings. On the one hand he believes that God's judgment will indeed come, sends word to his sons-in-law (who think it's all a joke) and leaves town. But on the other hand, when the visitors exhort him that a clean and quick break from Sodom is needed, he lingers almost magnetically drawn back to wicked Sodom and ends up asking to stay nearby in Zoar, rather than escaping to the safety of the hills. He's sole concern seems to be for himself – a stark contrast with Abraham who pleads for Sodom in the previous chapter. The angelic visitors graciously grant Lot's request and Lot escapes to Zoar.

v23-26 As announced, God's judgment now falls over Sodom and Gomorrah. Tragically we find out, that Lot's wife does not share Lot's belief in God's coming judgment. She looks back (which is not so much a mere glancing back as an actual desire to return) and perishes.

v27-29 Why is Lot saved? God's faithfulness in answering Abraham's prayer to save the righteous, confirms that Lot is indeed one of the righteous. Despite his ambiguity and his wavering belief, he is a true believer (as seen in some real righteousness – see above) who is counted righteous by his faith and saved by God's mercy.

v30-38 Lot is saved, but we now see the real tragedy flowing from his half-hearted belief and his flirting with Sodom. He still hasn't fully broken with the ways of Sodom, has fled to Zoar which turns out as wicked as the previous town and so he chooses to live in a nearby cave with his daughters. Why does he not return to Abraham, we wonder? His daughters, deceiving themselves into thinking that they will never now have husbands, decide to rape their father. In that they act just like the wicked people in Sodom, and the final comment in v37-38 underlines that indeed they have become actual historical godless nations, Ammon and Moab. Lot's lack of wholehearted belief and failure to separate himself from the wicked world means that he has failed to command his household to "keep the ways of the Lord". While saved himself, his household perishes and does not received the promised blessings of the family of faith. Just as we have seen the effects of Abraham's wholehearted belief and personal righteousness in the previous chapter (leading to righteousness in his household and intercession for the nations), so now we see the tragic effects that half-heartedness has.

Study 6 – Genesis 20

Purpose: Don't be so scared of the nations that you give up on them – they could be more righteous than you

20:1-2 Abraham almost makes his wife commit adultery with Abimelech

20:3-7 God confronts innocent Abimelech and saves him from sin

20:8 Abimelech tells his servants, who fear God very much

20:9-16 Abimelech confronts guilty Abe, proving himself/Sarah innocent

20:17-18 Abraham prays for the healing of Abimelech's wives

In 20:1-2 we see Abraham move again within Canaan to Gerar, the land of the philistines. And not for the first time (see 12:10-20), he almost makes his wife commit adultery to save his own skin. Although not as severe, this is uncomfortably reminiscent of Lot's willingness to give his daughters up to be raped to save himself/his guests. Abraham displays a lack of faith in God's protection, and a resultant sinfulness that comes from taking matters into his own hands. This sin creates a platform for a remarkable contrast that upends our expectations of God's chosen one vis-a-vis the Canaanite nations. The rest of the passage leaves us in no doubt that Abimelech, king of Gerar, has taken Sarah in complete innocence, whereas Abraham has committed a real sin.

In 20:3 God confronts Abimelech with his adultery and threatens him with death. Abimelech immediately protests innocence (with words that, ironically, are reminiscent of Abraham's intercession for Sodom in chapter 18:23-25.) Moreover, God affirms Abimelech's innocence: Abimelech claims "integrity of heart" in 20:5 and in 20:6 God uses these very words back to him, justifying him as honest. The great surprise of this conversation is that God still wants Abraham (who has acted so wrongly) to pray for innocent Abimelech to save him from death (20:7).

In the last two chapters we have seen Abraham and Lot respectively leading their households in either righteousness/unrighteousness. At the heart of this passage, 20:8, we see a king leading his kingdom in righteousness to fear God. Given the view of the nations conveyed by the judgment of Sodom in chapter 18 and statements like that in 15:16, we might find the actions of Abimelech surprising. We are being warned against assuming that Abraham is more righteous than the nations simply by virtue of being chosen to be God's blessed one. In fact, Abimelech will now prove more righteous than Abraham.

In 20:9-16 Abimelech confronts Abraham as he was previously confronted by God. Through his exchange with Abraham he vindicates himself, proving that he gave no cause for Abraham to act the way he did in 20:9-10, and then in 20:14-16 making payment to Abraham to prove Sarah's innocence and inviting Abraham to dwell where he wants in Gerar (in marked contrast to pharaoh in 12:20!) Abimelech is prepared to care for Abraham and does not want to take his wife by force. Abimelech could not be less like the Sodomites. Note however that, although both Abimelech and Sarah are vindicated as innocent, Abraham is not. When confronted his reasons for his actions are weak: Abimelech asks him what he saw that made him act so wrecklessly, but Abraham saw nothing, so he can only say, "I thought, 'There is no fear of God at all in this place...'" 20:8 has already undermined this view. If Abraham had looked he would have seen a God-fearing kingdom. But instead of looking he prejudged, and his prejudice almost destroyed an innocent king, but for God's intervention. But Abraham has yet one more justification: Sarah really is his sister. In the ears of the Israelite readers, this revelation of Abraham's incest would only have worsened, not mitigated his guilt.

Finally, Abraham does pray for and heal Abimelech. Although less righteous than Abimelech, he is still God's chosen blessed one through whom the covenant to bless the world will be worked out. Abraham is chosen not for his righteousness, but by God's grace.

Study 7 – Genesis 21

Purpose: Humble yourself before God's blessed one to share in the joyful blessings of the covenant.

Structure:

21:1-7 The promised son is born: joy to the world!

21:8-21 Ishmael is blessed with many blessings, but cut off from the covenant blessings through his contempt for Isaac

21:22-34 Abimelech makes (and remakes) a covenant with Abraham (and his offspring) out of faith and respect

Sarah's laughter of disbelief and incredulity in chapter 18 at God's promise of Isaac is now turned into laughter of pure joy: the promised son is born. God has proved faithful and powerful to fulfil his promises, bringing life out of death, blessing out of curse. Isaac's name means "he laughs". This birth is cause for joy. And as Sarah says in v6 the joy is for everyone who hears what God has done for her and laughs with her. After all, this boy is the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise to bless all families of the earth through Abraham's seed.

Ishmael however appears to laugh with contempt. Ishmael probably thinks Sarah's weaning party is making a big deal of a son who is destined to play second fiddle to him, Abraham's true firstborn and heir. Sarah's response is to tell Abraham to cast out Ishmael, whom she pointedly calls "the son of this slave woman [Hagar]." Sarah may have mixed motives (partly jealousy, perhaps also partly faith in God's promise that Isaac is the covenant heir (see 17:19)). Nevertheless God confirms Sarah's demand (even if not her motives) because Isaac *is* the heir of God's covenant with Abraham.

Although Ishmael is cast out, in 21:14-20 God is careful to demonstrate that he still loves Ishmael. God hears Ishmael's voice in v17 (just as he will later hear the cry of the Israelites in the Exodus!) He provides water from a well to sustain his life in the wilderness. God even promises to make him into a great nation in v18, just as he has promised to do for Abraham and Isaac. God loves Ishmael and blesses him. And yet, these blessings are not *the covenant blessings*. They are akin to the way that God treats all people, righteous and faithful or unrighteous and faithless, by sending life-giving rainwater to all of us and providing countless blessings to all in this life. Nevertheless the fall-reversing covenant blessings come exclusively through Abraham's seed. Ishmael ought to trust God's love for him, but also God's promises to Abraham. Without faith in God's covenant with Abraham, which requires humility before Abraham's seed, nobody can share in the the redemptive blessings of the Abrahamic covenant no matter how many other blessings they have in this life.

Finally the passage shows anybody can share in the covenant blessings, if only they *will* acknowledge God's unique relationship to Abraham. Abimelech, whom we met in chapter 20, now wants to secure a covenant between himself/his offspring and Abraham (and by implication, Abraham's offspring.) Abimelech's contrast with Ishmael reveals much about the purpose of this passage, as he models faith in God's promises to Abraham and humility before the chosen family of blessing.

The rest of the interaction between Abraham and Abimelech affirms their covenant relationship. The occasion for this is a dispute about a well. Abraham wants Abimelech to acknowledge his innocence in this dispute, which Abimelech gladly does (note that whereas in chapter 20 Abimelech pays Abraham to prove his innocence, here the payment travels in the other direction). Abraham's payment of seven lambs is a wordplay: seven sounds like swear/oath in Hebrew. The point is that the swearing of the covenant between the two men in 21:23 demands that they must live in peace. Both are willing, so their earlier covenant is reaffirmed in 21:31.

In v33 Abraham plants a tree in Beersheba, perhaps as a sign that he expects to sojourn here for the long term (see v34), perhaps as a symbol of his eternal stake in a land in where he is still only a nomadic shepherd. Abimelech's humility as the land's rightful king before this nomad shepherd only makes sense if Abraham's future is to become the land's true owner. And because the God on whom Abraham calls is the everlasting God, Abraham (and Abimelech) can be sure that Abraham's family will one day be greater, no matter how long the wait.

Study 8 – Genesis 22-23

Purpose: Trusting the Lord who raises the dead through the sacrifice he provides, invest fully in the promise of future life to come

Structure:

22:1-19 Abraham trusts God to resurrect Isaac

 v1-3 God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac

 v4-8 Abraham goes to the place confident that God will provide and Isaac will live

 v9-13 Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac

 Angel intervenes: Abraham fears God

 God provides a substitute ram for sacrifice

 v14 Abraham calls the place "the Lord will provide"

 v15-19 Abraham has passed the test, God restates his covenant promises to him

 v20-23 God raises up Rebekah

23:1-20 Abraham invests fully into the future resurrection life in the promised land

 v1-2 Sarah dies in Canaan

 v3-9 Abraham seeks to buy a burial place in Canaan but away from the Hittite's burial places

 v10-18 Abraham seeks to buy a burial place in Canaan but insists on pay full price for it

 v19-20 Sarah is buried in Canaan

22:1-19 This chapter is probably the best-known story about Abraham's life. God tests the wholeheartedness of his faith by asking him to do the unimaginable: sacrifice his only son Isaac, the child of promise. But Abraham shows that he has really learned to trust God: He courageously takes Isaac and goes up to mount Moriah to do as God has commanded. What convictions drive him to do this? Abraham is confident that both he and the boy will come back (v5) and that God will provide what's needed (v8). Hebrews 11:17-19 sheds further light on this: Abraham so trusts in God's commitment and promise that Isaac is the child of promise that he is convinced that God can even raise Isaac from the dead. The God of life can keep the line of promise alive. Just as Abraham is about to kill Isaac, God's angel intervenes. A ram miraculously appears that is sacrificed instead of Isaac. God has indeed "figuratively speaking" raised Isaac from the dead, just as Abraham believed (Hebrews 11:19). God repeats the oath he has sworn by himself in chapter 15 and reconfirms his promises to Abraham.

The provision of the substitutionary lamb that dies instead of Isaac gives us a first a hint for how God will bring about his promises of giving life to his people and reversing the curse of sin and death. No doubt the story will have overtones for its first readers, the second Exodus generation, and remind them of God's provision of the Passover lamb to spare them from death and judgment. But for us NT believers we are being pointed forward to the substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross in Jerusalem (incidentally, the same place as Mount Moriah [2 Chronicles 3:1]) which makes it possible for God to give the promised life to the believer.

22:20-23 The chapter ends with the news that Abraham's brother has had offspring, among them a granddaughter called Rebekah. Not only has God raised Isaac, he has also been working behind the scenes to raise up a faithful wife for Isaac as we will see in the next chapter. God's promises to Abraham's family and Isaac, his offspring, really stand.

23:1-17 This chapter at first seems quite disconnected from what has just happened, until we dig deeper. At the heart of the story is Sarah's death and Abraham's endeavours to buy a suitable burial place for her. We see that Abraham's main concern is (a) that Sarah's burial place is in Canaan (v4, 19), (b) that her burial place is not amongst the tombs of the godless Hittites (v6-8), and (c) that the burial place is not a gift from the Hittites, but that he pays the full price for it (a lot of money!) and legally owns it. Why is all this so important for Abraham? The answer once more lies in Abraham's conviction that God is able to raise the dead (just as we have seen in chapter 22) and will keep his promises to him: Even though he is still a sojourner and foreigner in the land (v4), he trusts that God will give the land to his family and so he makes sure that Sarah is in the land and will be part of that promise. He knows God will keep his promises to give him the land by judging its godless inhabitants (15:16), including the Hittites (15:20) and so he is concerned that Sarah is buried away from the Hittites' dead and that he distances himself from an alliance with them. Abraham's trust in God lead him to fully invest into the future of his family in the promised land.

Study 9 – Genesis 24:1-25:11

Purpose: Keeping the way of the Lord, trust God to draw in others and guard his blessing for the future generations

Structure:

24:1 God has blessed Abraham in everything

 v2-9 Abraham instructs his servant to find a wife for Isaac from his kindred

 v10-14 the servant prays for God's steadfast love to be shown in prospering the search for a wife

 v15-29 God answers the servant's prayers by arranging for Rebekah to appear

 v30-49 the servant recounts how God answered his prayers by arranging for Rebekah to appear

 v50-60 Laban and Rebekah recognise God's will in all this, Rebekah is willing to go with the servant

 v61-67 the servant returns with a wife for Isaac

25:1-11 God blesses Isaac after Abraham's death

24:1-67 This final account in Abraham's life draws together much of what we've seen in the previous chapters about what it means to have wholehearted faith in the promises of God. It also emphasises the sovereignty and steadfast love of God in ensuring the line of succession and passing on the blessing to Isaac after Abraham's death.

As Abraham's life comes to an end, he is concerned about finding a wife for his son Isaac, in line with God's promises that it is through Isaac and his offspring that the blessings will come. Abraham shows real faith in God's sovereignty and his promises here: He makes plans to ensure that Isaac marries from within his kindred and not the Canaanites (unlike Hagar who finds a wife for Ishmael from among the Egyptians [21:21]), and that Isaac does not participate in the search lest he leaves the promised land. Abraham therefore sends his servant back to Ur and makes him swear an oath to follow his instructions. But he also trusts in God's sovereignty that if no woman

can be found in Ur who is willing to come to Canaan, the servant will be released from his oath to find a wife for Isaac from his kindred.

The servant gets on his way and commits the search for a wife to God trusting in his sovereignty and steadfast love towards his master Abraham. What follows is an extraordinary story of how God prospers the servant's mission and sovereignly leads him to find Rebekah, who turns out to be the daughter of Abraham's nephew Bethuel. Rebekah and her brother Laban invite the servant home where he recounts the extraordinary way in which God, in his sovereignty and steadfast love for Abraham, has led him to find Rebekah. While it is hard for Rebekah's family to let go of her, and no doubt hard for Rebekah to leave her family behind, they all recognise the Lord's hand in this and agree for Rebekah to depart with the servant to marry Isaac. Again we see how wholehearted faith in God drives the believer to fully invest in God's promises, no matter the cost. The servant returns home with Rebekah who marries Isaac. The succession is now guaranteed even though Sarah has died and Abraham is old.

25:1-11 The short account of Abraham's other offspring through his second wife Keturah and his concubines emphasises once more that it is through Isaac's line that God's blessings will come. Even though Abraham provides for his other children generously, Isaac is the one to inherit his fortune. After Abraham dies, God passes on his blessings to Isaac. From now on it is through him that God will work to fulfil his promises.