

THE PATRIARCHS ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB



STUDY 1 - ABRAHAM WEEK 7 The Promise Tested

Last study Abraham and Sarah were awaiting the long hoped for birth of their son, who is to be called Isaac, - 'Laughter', - but Abraham does already have one son, his eldest son, Ishmael, who he has fathered through the wife Sarah gave him. God however, has told Abraham that although the promise that Abraham would be the father of a great nation and a source of blessing for all nations, that promise is not to be fulfilled through Ishmael, but specifically through Isaac. God has also shown Abraham that to be able to truly live in this promise, Abraham must be 'Righteous' and 'Just' Now Abraham is to be required to invest Faith in the God of Promise, - not once, but twice...

Abraham's Faith is to be '— — — — —'?

Read Genesis 21;1-7...

Sarah is 'singled out' by God and at last Abraham has his 'Son of Promise' and all is well. Isaac, whose name means 'Laughter' brings laughter with him. Sarah laughs with joy and says a short poem based on the word itself. Those who laughed at the very idea that dry, barren old Sarah would ever give birth to a son now laugh on the other side of their face, but also there is a darker laughter alluded to - that of derision! **Read 8-13...**

How do the various parties react to this 'joyous' birth?...

Abraham?...

Sarah?.....

Hagar?.....

Ishmael?....

What does God ask Abraham to do next? and what might it tell us about Abraham's trust (faith?) in God?

Read 14-21... - NB - this bit is some time later at Isaac's weaning.

This is the second time that Hagar has been found in the wilderness. She walked out the first time, but this time she is sent out. **Where does she go?.....?**

Abraham has, through the promise, a destination in mind, but Hagar has no such purpose. For this part of the story the themes of Righteousness and Justice have been laid aside, and we go back to an old theme - of hearing and being heard, which are often synonyms for 'knowing and being known'

By now Ishmael is, by my reckoning, about 13 years old, so unlike so many pictures of the scene, no longer a baby! Abraham and Hagar though use the word for small child or one just born. It is only when God speaks that Ishmael is acknowledged as being a 'Lad' He is old enough now to die slowly in the wilderness, and Hagar cannot bear to watch and thrusts him away from her, retreating to avoid seeing him die. She cries what must be some of the most bitter tears to be found in the Bible and weeps out loud, yet the mother is not heard - there is no-one to hear her!

God, however, does hear the Lad's cries and whimpers, and He calls out to Hagar, who hears Him, as He re-assures her about the future by telling her that he has heard the Lad. They are both known by God and know God. They are not alone despite their dire circumstances, but we will not hear of Ishmael again until the two brothers bury their Father, many years later.

Back at Abraham's home time passes. Abraham has lost one son, so you can imagine that Isaac is very careful about him, and expends great love upon him. For a few years all is well, and Abraham is so settled that as he lives in Beersheba, he invests in the land by planting a tree, probably near a well that his growing tribal unit has settled around whilst the child grows up.

Then...

Read the story found on the separate sheet - **Genesis 22...**

First read round the group verse by verse and as we do, try to imagine yourself somewhere in the story - as a member of the cast, or as an on-looker - and think about how you or your character feels.

Who are you and how do you feel?

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Now listen to the story being read, but from the second sheet with coloured words, and see which words or phrases catch you eye or heart.

What words or Phrases are you drawn to, and why?

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Abraham's first test of faith is the sending out of his eldest son, Ishmael and Hagar. Usually an act such as this would be seen as a sentence of death, but with an element of the possibility that 'God's Will' would prevail and against all odds those thrust out to fend for themselves in such desperate circumstances might live. There may be some similar idea in the action of Moses' mother setting him afloat in the ark on the Nile waters.

But this second test of Abraham's faith is darker. Whilst the first scenario has an element of hope, here there appears to be none. And yet...

After three days Isaac's father turns to the servants and tells them to wait where they are. **'We will go and worship and then WE will come back to you'** Have you ever noticed that before? 'We will go,... and WE will come back...' Unless Abraham is being deliberately misleading, he has no intention or understanding that they will do anything other than both of them return...

This is not a 'Pass / Fail' test of Abraham's faith! Not really. It is a test of Abraham's faith, but one where the outcome is really never in doubt! Would Abraham sacrifice his son? Yes! Of course he would! The very existence of Isaac in the first place is a miracle of God's divine mercy, and Abraham, his Friend, trusts God implicitly, but not blindly. He knows God is faithful! And so he knows that God's promises are faithful. He doesn't know how, and can't see a way through, but Abraham will see those promises fulfilled - he knows they will be! But he cannot know the outcome yet, or otherwise his faith will not be 'tried' It needs the white hot heat of crisis to test Abraham's faith, not in order to see whether or not Abraham is up to it, but rather, to refine Abraham's faith through the testing and trying of God's faithfulness. And so, even though Abraham would sacrifice his son, 'His only Son', (for he already knows the pain of the loss of one son! - and in that it might be said that this Friend of God is one step ahead of God!, unless of course you consider Adam, the lost son of God), God knows, that Isaac will not die on Mount Moria, and we are let in on the secret.

It is **God's Testing, God's Knowledge and God's vulnerability** that are at the heart of this story, and for the reader, Abraham stands in the place of God, and God becomes an Abraham! God is, indeed already has, put so much on the line with Abraham that He has made himself the vulnerable one. Friendship is like that, isn't it! The Befriender is always the most vulnerable when compared to the Befriended. As someone much better than I at putting things like this into words has said... *'God took the risk that Abraham would respond. Abraham took the risk that God would provide'* (E. Roop).

And that 'risk taking' - that Faith - is accounted by God to Abraham as Righteousness.