

## God's Promise to Abraham: Genesis 17, 18:1-15, 21:1-7

### *Leader's reflection*

This is a story about promises. Specifically about God's promises, human disbelief, and God's fulfilment of his promise despite that disbelief.

At the start of this story we find Abram as an old man aged 99. God appears to him and declares that he will make a covenant, an agreement, with Abram. Abram's first response is encouraging, with him bowing down to the ground in reverence to God. God goes on to speak of his promise to Abram and the sign of that agreement, circumcision. This is to be the outward sign of the covenant in the same way that the rainbow was the sign of a covenant between God and Noah, and is to be passed down from generation to generation. God's promise is not just for Abram, but for all of his descendants, with the extra promise of being cut off from God if the sign is not kept by Abrams' people.

Abram at this point has his name changed to Abraham. There is interesting use of language here. Abram means "honoured father" in Hebrew. The end of the word Abraham sounds like the beginning of the Hebrew word for many. So "honoured father" becomes "honoured father of many".

So far so good. Abraham is happy with the big picture promise that God is giving to him. He already has a son, Ishmael born to one of his servants Hagar, so it doesn't seem unreasonable that this will happen at this point. Then we get into the nitty gritty of how it is going to happen, and Abraham doesn't accept this so well. Ishmael is not going to be part of the promise, but rather a new son born to Abraham and Sarai (now Sarah). At this point Abraham's bowing down to the ground becomes less reverential and can almost be read to be doubled over with laughter. He is filled with disbelief and asked himself how this can happen with him being nearly 100 and Sarah being 90. He goes so far as to ask God to make Ishmael part of the covenant, his disbelief is palpable.

But God says no. Ishmael will have many descendants, but they will not be the chosen people of God. They will come from Isaac, who's name sounds like the Hebrew for "he laughed", a permanent reminder to Isaac of the way his father reacted when he was told what would happen.



Once the circumcision is completed, God appears again to Abraham, though this time in the form of three visitors. It is interesting that Abraham only refers to them in the singular, never the plural. In the custom of hospitality, they are invited to eat and given the best that Abraham has to offer.

Here God repeats his promise to Abraham, within hearing of Sarah. And, like Abraham, she laughs. She cannot believe that a woman of her age will be able to give birth. And God hears her. At both points of Abraham and Sarah laughing, God simply re-asserts what he has already said. He seems to accept that it might be unbelievable for these people, but, importantly, doesn't demean Himself by bartering with or explaining Himself to them. He merely states what will happen, and allows time to persuade them of the truth of this.

And when we return to Sarah in chapter 20, she has a son. They name his Isaac, as they were told they would, and Sarah seems to look back on her laughing with wryness, as she says that the laughing of disbelief has turned to laughter of joy, because she has a son of her own.

**Aim** Trusting in God's promises even when they seem unbelievable.

**Main points to cover**

1. Abraham and Sarah were made a promise by God.
2. Abraham and Sarah did not believe God's promise.
3. God's promise came true

**Focus On** Abraham and Sarah's response to God when he tells them what will happen. When God promised Abraham what would happen for his descendants, Abraham did not believe because of his age. When Sarah heard what God said would happen in a year, she did not believe because of her age. Both of these things happened in time.

**Activity ideas**

Select a variety of trust activities with varying degrees of trust needed. Start with some easy ones and move up to more difficult ones. See at which point the young people say no and find out why they reached the limit when they did.

Explore what makes us trust certain people. Who do we trust and why? Have a variety of authority figures ready to suggest to them (use pictures if you can), and see if they trust them or not. It may be that the young people do not trust traditional authority figures, and if this is the case have the young people make suggestions of figures they do trust. Explore with them why they might trust them, and then explore the story. Ask the young people why they think Abraham and Sarah might have struggled to have faith in what God was telling them would take place.

Promises of God that seem unbelievable: Print out a selection of promises of God from the Bible. Look for things like, *God promises to meet all your needs*, *God promises to work all things for your good*, plus some others. Explore these promises with the young people and ask whether they find these easy to believe or not, and why. To finish, ask the young people to pick one promise they find most difficult to trust and spend some time asking God to help them see how that promise is true. To finish, remind them that Abraham and Sarah couldn't see how God's promise would work out, yet it did. The same is true for us.

**Abraham and his foolish plan: Genesis 12:10-20, Genesis 20*****Leader's reflection***

The first reading here takes place immediately after Abram has been called by God to leave Haran. At this point he is not a young man, being 75. He sets off obediently, but there is a famine in the land he has moved to, so he needs to go somewhere else to find food. Because of the richness of the land around the Nile delta, Egypt would be a great place to go to find almost guaranteed food.

So off he goes, but there is something bothering him. His wife (still Sarai at this point), is a very beautiful woman, and Abram fears that if the men there know they are married, they will kill him so that they can take Sarai for themselves.

It's interesting to note here how important Abram must have been, as when they arrive in Egypt they are taken to Pharaoh's court. This seems to indicate they were some sort of aristocracy, as very few people who arrived in Egypt would have been taken to see the royals.

As Abram had worried, the Egyptians find Sarai very beautiful and so Pharaoh makes her his wife and, believing Abram to be her brother, gives him sheep, cattle, donkeys, camels and servants.

But all is not well. Because Pharaoh has taken an already married woman as his wife, God sends "terrible diseases", on Pharaoh and his court and family. We never find out how Pharaoh learns the truth about what has taken place, presumably Sarai comes clean to Pharaoh, and he sends for Abram and has him and Sarai escorted out of Egypt because of what they have done. Despite what has happened, and possibly out of fear of what would happen otherwise, they are allowed to keep their belongings.

Fast forward to the second reading, and it seems nothing has changed apart from location. This time they are in Canaan and Abraham is still telling people that Sarah (now Sarah), is his sister.



Abimelech hears of this, and because Sarah is so beautiful makes her his wife. But this time God speak directly into the situation and speaks to Abimelech. Abimelech is horrified by what has happened and so sends for Abraham and asks why he has done this. What reason could he have for bringing this trouble to his kingdom?

It is a recurring theme in Scripture that the people who we expect to be faithful and honourable are not, and those we expect to be devious and sneaky, are not. Normally we would expect Abraham to do the right thing and tell the truth, but Abimelech, a pagan king, has the moral compass which Abraham seems to be lacking.

Abraham responds that his actions were based on his fear of what would happen if people knew Sarah was his wife. But this time, instead of throwing them out, Abimelech allows them to choose some land to take and gives them sheep, cattle and slaves.

The interesting thing to note here is how little Abraham's approach seems to change over these two encounters. Often we talk about the way people in the Bible are transformed after a name change, but here Abraham is still showing some very Abram tendencies.

<b>Aim</b>	Trusting in God's protection, rather than focusing on our own plans
<b>Main points to cover</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Abram had been called by God.</li><li>2. Abram did not trust God's protection so came up with his own plan.</li><li>3. Abram's plan led to problems not just for him but also for those around him.</li></ol>
<b>Focus On</b>	We are changed by God but that doesn't mean we won't make the same mistakes we did before and it doesn't mean that God will abandon us.

**Activity ideas**

**Why do we lie? Prepare pieces of paper or boxes with reasons for lying written on them. These could be: "to get out of trouble", "to get a brother/sister in trouble", "to get something I want". Try and have five or six. Have the young people as a group work to put them in order of the reasons we lie. Make it clear that we all lie sometimes, and they won't be in trouble for their answers.**

**What was Abraham missing? Ask the young people what they think Abraham was missing here. Let them give any answers they want, and if they don't come up with it themselves guide them towards God's promise to make Abraham the father of many nations. If this was the case, what did Abraham need to do? Survive. If God's promise was true then He would also keep Abraham safe to allow that promise to come true. It can be easy for us to see these things from the outside, but much more difficult for us to see where we do this. Explore the idea with the young people that God has promised each one of us to protect us, provide for us, and to bring the best for us, but we often struggle to actually believe this.**

**What things scare us? Ask the young people the things that they come across in normal life that scares or worries them. It might be easier to do this anonymously, so have a box, paper, and pens ready for the young people to write their answer on and put it in the box. Look at Nahum 1:7 in the Good News Translation. It shows us that God protects us and we will be safe because of Him. Go through the worries of the young people and ask them which is bigger; the worry, or God. This will become repetitive quickly and this will help reinforce the point you are making. At the end, lay each of the worries out on the floor and ask God to help the young people to give this worries over to God and to not let them be the focus of their attention. Finish by repeating the Nahum verse, to reinforce to the young people how much greater God is than the worries and stresses of the world.**

## Abraham's faith is tested: Genesis 22:1-19

### *Leader's reflection*

This is the most famous of the stories of Abraham and one of most famous in the Old Testament. It is regularly used by those arguing against the idea of God, or trying to point to God as a vicious sadistic being. For these reasons this story, particularly when exploring it with young people, needs to be handled sensitively and we need to be open to their questions.

A lot of the time when we look at this story we can do it in the wrong way. It has often been a story used to tell us we need to have more faith. We look at Abraham and we see a man blindly following what he has been told to do. We take the story out of context and look at it by itself. But in doing that we miss the wider story of Abraham and we don't look at him as a complete person.

When we take a step back and look at Abraham we see a man who has:

1. been called and chosen by God.
2. left his home country to go where God has told him to go.
3. escaped death in two royal courts.
4. made a covenant with God.
5. had a son born to him and his wife in their old age.

He has been through a lot with God, and seen the things that God has done for him. He has witnessed God's goodness and protection first hand, and has grown through his experiences in his relationship with God.

When we look at this wider context we don't see a man blindly doing what he has been told but rather, because of his experiences of God up to this point, he has confidence that God has a plan for what will take place, and that plan is for good. We can see this confidence in his answer to Isaac's questions in verse 8. When asked where the sheep is for the burnt offering, Abraham replies, "God will provide a sheep



for the burnt offering my son.” It is possible to read this in a number of ways. Was Abraham lying to Isaac because he didn't want to tell him what was going to happen? Was Abraham hoping desperately that that is what would happen? Or is Abraham confident that God has all this in hand and it will be alright? After all, Abraham would remember the covenant God has made with him, that his descendants would be numerous and would be born from Isaac's line.

Isaac is tied to the altar, Abraham reaches for the knife to kill his son, and at the last possible moment, the Angel of the Lord appears and tells Abraham to stop. There is an interesting line from the Angel that appears to Abraham, “Do not hurt him in any way, for now I know that you truly fear God.” This seems a strange thing to say. Did God need Abraham to go through this so He knew? Or was this about showing Abraham what God already knew about him? Often, we don't know how much we rely on God until everything else is lost, was this about showing Abraham how strong his belief and reliance on God was?

This story also gives us a window to view the sacrifice of Jesus through. A father, willing to sacrifice his son; A son, carrying the wood for his own sacrifice to the top of the hill; God stepping in to give a ram as a substitute; the small detail that when the ram is found, its head is caught in a thicket of thorns.

All of these point us towards Jesus, and show us that instead of being the rescue plan drawn up at the last minute, Jesus was the culmination of God's plan that had been in place from the start of time.

However there is a further point to be made here. After this point, human sacrifice is never again mentioned as something that followers of God will do. It is mentioned as something that other nations do, and is a sign of their absolute moral depravity, but never in relation to God's chosen people. In this story, God is drawing a line in the sand and saying that He will never ask His people to do this. God's way is different to the 'gods' of other nations, a theme that will appear again and again throughout His story.





<b>Aim</b>	Remembering that God has a plan, even when we don't see it.
<b>Main points to cover</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Abraham had a long experience of seeing what God had done.</li><li>2. Abraham had a relationship with God that involved him trusting in God completely.</li><li>3. God provided everything Abraham needed for His plan.</li><li>4. God's plan in the end was to show the way to Jesus.</li></ol>
<b>Focus On</b>	The journey of realisation that Abraham went through in this story

## Activity ideas

Read the story through twice. Once at the start of the session to see what the young people think of it. Get them to write these ideas down. Then look at the other things we know about Abraham and his life with God up until this point, making the point of what Abraham had seen and experienced of God. Then re-read the story and see if their perspective has changed at all.

On a flip-chart write, "God" and on the other side "Us". Get the young people to suggest characteristics of God and characteristics of people. Use this to show how much better God's plan is for us than our own plan is. As a response to this, if it feels right, have the young people write or draw on a piece of paper a situation in their lives where they need to listen to God more. Pray about these things.

Using the points in the leader's reflection as back up, ask the young people to make the link between the story of Jesus' crucifixion and this story, seeing if they can spot the connections before you tell them.