

A person is standing in a river, looking up at the towering, layered rock formations of a canyon. The scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of a low sun, creating a dramatic and awe-inspiring atmosphere. The rock walls are composed of large, rounded boulders and vertical columns, showing clear signs of erosion. The river is calm, reflecting the light from the sky. The overall mood is one of vastness and natural beauty.

# *Believe*

STORIES OF FAITH  
FROM FATHER ABRAHAM

SUMMER 2023 | PART 4

WRITTEN BY DR. STEVE JONES

# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

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## LESSON 14 | ISAAC IS BORN: CELEBRATING GOD'S BLESSINGS

### GENESIS 21:1-8

Have you noticed that every day seems like a new national holiday? National Hotdog Day. National Left-handers Day. National Taco Day. The list goes on and on. If you like something, there is probably a day to celebrate it. Some people don't need much excuse to celebrate. Others find it hard to stop and celebrate. It seems wasteful, boastful, or something like that.

While it's true that, as with anything, it is possible to celebrate wrongly, it is equally necessary to underscore the importance of learning to celebrate well. Many people think a celebration is just a day not to work and to overindulge in some specific food or activity. But the truth is that celebration is more than that.

Celebration is a time to stop and mark the significance of important milestones. It is a moment to take stock of your blessings and recommit yourself to trusting God in the future. We all need to learn to do it more and better.

Today we are going to look at how Abraham and Sarah celebrate the birth of their long-awaited son. Hopefully, as we look at how they celebrated God's victory in their lives, we will learn how to do the same.

#### **REMEMBER HIS PROMISES (v1-2)**

Verse 2 says, "Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age." This seems like just the reporting of an important event. But the verse preceding it adds an important detail. Verse 1 says, "Then the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had promised." The Lord took note of Sarah. The Lord did as He said he would. The Lord did as He promised.

This is an essential dimension of learning to celebrate. Too often, we aren't able to celebrate God's blessing in our lives because we have forgotten what He has promised. He answers prayers that we forgot we prayed. Study, Prayer, and Worship are the necessary prerequisites to being able to celebrate God's blessings.

• **Study:** Abraham and Sarah remember the promises God made specifically to them. All of Scripture contains the promises God has made to those who follow Him. Before we

can celebrate his blessing, we have to know what He has promised. To do that, we have to immerse ourselves in God's word.

- **Prayer/Worship:** Besides knowing God's promises, it is crucial to recall them. This is where worship and prayer come in. When we worship and pray, we say and sing to God and remind ourselves who God is, what He has already done, and what He has promised to do.

Many of us don't know how to rest in God's promises because we haven't grounded ourselves in what they are. So, we go through life plagued by worry, doubt, and fear. But as 1 Corinthians 13:13 reminds us, faith, hope, and love are the three things that abide. Faith and hope grow when we realize that God's promises can be trusted, and we begin to hope that God will do what He says.

### **OBEY HIS COMMANDS (v3-4)**

The next attribute of celebrating is to do what God has commanded. Verses 3 and 4 say, "3 Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac. 4 Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him." "As God had commanded."

In addition to promises, the Bible is also full of commands. They are there because God loves us and shows us how to experience the abundant life He has for us. The promises are His statements to us about what He will do. The commands are his statements about what He wants us to do.

These commands are not transactional. What is amazing about the God of the Bible is that He continually demonstrates his love and faithfulness to us even when we aren't faithful to him. We aren't supposed to obey to try to earn God's favor. We are supposed to obey in response to who God is and what He has promised to do. Notice Abraham's obedience comes after. He doesn't do what God says to convince God to act on his behalf. His obedience is a response to what God does. God has fulfilled his promises. So now Abraham has the opportunity to respond with obedience.

Sadly, we often don't make this connection. Remember that old saying, "There are no atheists in a foxhole." At times, we are tempted to use our obedience to bargain with God, but once the trial has passed, we don't hold ourselves to the vows we made. The truth is that, like Abraham, our obedience should be in response to who God is and what God has done.

Often, we miss celebrating because we don't respond to God's goodness with gratitude. Like in the story of the ten lepers Jesus heals in Luke 17:11-19. Only one returns to praise and thank Jesus for healing him. The others went on with their lives. Like us, when we receive goodness from the Lord, we take it and keep heading in the direction we want to go in. Instead, like Abraham, like that one leper, we need to turn back in gratitude and do what we can in response to what we have received.

### **ACKNOWLEDGE HIS EQUIPPING (v5-8)**

God does more than act on our behalf. Often, His primary act is to equip us to do what we could not do before. That is what Sarah and Abraham celebrate next. After mentioning that Abraham was one hundred when Isaac was born, Verses 6 and 7 give Sarah's celebration of what God has done for her: "6 Sarah said, 'God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.' 7 And she said, 'Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.'"

She had been unable to bear children until God intervened. Now she is not just equipped with the ability to do what she wasn't able to before. She is imbued with the power to do what should be impossible for anyone in her position. She is amazed that, at her age, she has been able to bear a child and nurse him. Clearly, this ability was divinely given.

But God does something more for Sarah, which she acknowledges. Verse 6 says, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." Remember back in Chapters 17-18, both Abraham and Sarah laughed when God told them they'd have a child. But they laughed for different reasons. Abraham laughed out of joy, amazement, excitement, and worship. Sarah, at the time, laughed in ridicule and scorn. She was bitter in her heart, and God had to confront her about it.

But here, she admits God has changed her heart. We celebrate when God turns mourning into laughter. But here, he turns laughter into laughter. The laughter of scorn becomes the laughter of joy. Sarah celebrates that God did for her what she couldn't do for herself. He changed her tune.

This is something we frequently forget that God is in the business of doing. He wants to do more than change our circumstances. He wants to settle our souls. In Psalm 3:3, God is called "the One who lifts my head." In Psalm 40, after describing out the psalmist cried out to God and was delivered, verse 3 says, "He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God."

God does that for Sarah. In Genesis 18:15, Sarah denied laughing at God. Here she admits it and says her laughter will become a contagious act of worship and celebration for all who hear it.

### **COMMEMORATE HIS GOODNESS (v8)**

The last aspect of celebration that this passage shows us is in verse 8: “The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.” Abraham threw a party. He stopped. He gathered friends and family. He commemorated a significant milestone in the life of his son.

Many times, we can't be bothered to stop and celebrate. Many of us simply move on to the next thing on our to-do list. But this is a critical culmination to the story of Isaac's birth. Birthdays, anniversaries, and other milestones are important because they remind us of God's faithfulness in bringing us this far. We need to commemorate God's faithfulness so that we can grow in ourselves the habit of gratitude. It is also important because, in all likelihood, somebody near you needs to be reminded of the goodness of God.

That is what it means to “give God glory.” “Giving God glory” means showing others what happens when you trust God with your life. It isn't about showing how God has blessed you instead of others. It's about showing others that the same God who has been faithful to you promised to be faithful to them. The goal is not to provoke jealousy but to inspire hope, faith, and perseverance.

### **CONCLUSION**

When something big happens in your life, how do you respond? Do you move on to the next thing? Do you spend a day being lazy or overindulgent? Or do you celebrate like Abraham and Sarah? They show us the key to true Biblical celebration. If we will follow their lead, perhaps we would be better able to look back on the past as full of testimonies to God's faithfulness and forward to the future in faith and hope for all God still promises to do.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Are you good at celebrating? What are some bad reasons we give for not celebrating? What are some bad ways that we celebrate?
2. How can celebration involve remembering God's promises? How does forgetting God's promises keep us from celebrating? How are study and worship involved?
3. What is the connection between obedience and God's goodness? Which comes first? Which do we sometimes wrongly put first?
4. What does it mean to acknowledge God's equipping? What two things does God do for Sarah?
5. What is the connection between celebration and commemoration? What major milestones are worth celebrating? What is the purpose of giving God glory? Who needs it?

## LESSON 15 | ISHMAEL IS ABANDONED: TRUSTING A GOD WHO HEARS

### GENESIS 22:8-21

Literature is full of books that have unique or memorable openings. Many people can recall the lines even if they aren't sure what book they come from. I bet you have heard "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," even if you don't recall it's from *Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. Other famous first lines include, "In a hole, in the ground, there lived a hobbit," which begins JRR Tolkien's story about that creature. If you love 18th-century British literature, you probably know the opening line of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." Sometimes, an opening line can convince you to want to read the entire book, as was the case for me and Stephen Lawhead's book *Byzantium*, which begins, "I saw Byzantium in a dream, and I knew that I would die there."

But of all the famous first lines, perhaps the most famous, or at least in the top ten, is the opening sentence in Herman Melville's novel about whaling entitled *Moby Dick*. The first three words are, "Call me Ishmael." This is also probably one of the most misunderstood opening lines as well. He isn't giving us his name. It doesn't say, "My name is Ishmael." He is beginning to tell the readers why he decided to go to sea aboard a whaling ship. He is leaving because he is an Ishmael. He is the other son, not the son of the promise, not the chosen one, and it is time for him to go.

As a society, we love hearing stories about the wonder kids and child prodigies. We highlight the special ones. But for every child prodigy, there are hundreds if not thousands of regular kids who feel the enormous weight of not being "good enough."

In the Bible, Ishmael is a symbol of that. He is the product of a plan hatched by his parents to achieve the will of God through their means. It's not his fault. He didn't concoct the plan. He is the byproduct of other people's faithlessness, doubt, and sin. But what do you do when you aren't the main character, when you feel like an afterthought, or that you are in the way, and it's not your fault?

Today we are going to look at the story of Ishmael being cast out. As we do, hopefully, we will gain perspective and hope when we feel like we don't belong, like we don't matter, like there is no room for us in God's plan.

### **ISHMAEL IS REPLACED (v8-10)**

The story starts at the feast Abraham organized to celebrate the weaning of Isaac. This would typically happen around the age of three. So, based on some calculations, this makes Ishmael around 17 years old. At the party, he does something that puts Sarah on edge. Verse 9 says, "Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking."

The word translated here as "mocking" comes from the same root as the word laughter, which gives us Isaac's name. The word can have a wide range of meanings, from the most benign meaning of "playing" to the more severe "persecuting" and "tormenting." Given Sarah's reactions, it seems that she saw something more than just an older brother playing with his sibling. Perhaps he was mocking the great fuss being made over Isaac. Perhaps he was irritated and resentful of the attention. Perhaps it was fear because up until now, he had been the son of Abraham; now, there was another child. This was the child he had been born to stand in the place of in case that child didn't come. Now he was here, and Ishmael was realizing that he had been replaced.

Sarah, with her usual volatility, confronts Abraham and delivers an ultimatum. In verse 10, she says to Abraham, "Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac." This whole situation is Sarah's creation. Back in Genesis 16, she had proposed the idea of Abraham having children with Hagar so that, as Genesis 16:2 says, "perhaps I will obtain children through her." Now that she has her own child, she doesn't want the spare child hanging around. She wants to make sure that only Isaac will be Abraham's heir.

### **ISHMAEL IS EXPELLED (v11-14)**

The situation is problematic to Abraham. He knows God's promises. He knows God's plan. He is excited about them. He also loves Ishmael. Verse 11 says, "The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son."

God appears to Abraham and tells him what to do. In verse 12, God tells Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named." God reassures Abraham that everything is going to be ok. God isn't necessarily endorsing Sarah's behavior or desire. He simply states that her fears won't wreck God's plan or ruin Ishmael's life. Isaac will still be the one through whom God builds Abraham into a mighty nation. God also promises

to bless and protect Ishmael as well. Verse 13 says, “And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also because he is your descendant.”

It was evidently in a dream because verse 14 says, “Abraham rose early in the morning” and did as God commanded. He gave Hagar provision and sent her and Ishmael on their way. The end of verse 14 tells us, “She departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba.” Hagar is Egyptian. She is probably headed in the direction of her homeland.

Lest we think too harshly of everyone involved, it is essential to remember that Ishmael was a young man. If Isaac weren’t involved, this story would read like a coming-of-age story. A young man on the edge of manhood is sent off into the world to discover who he really is and become a real man in the process. Such things happen in cultures around the world to this day. Young men are expelled from their father’s house to learn to fend for themselves.

Ishmael’s expulsion also probably came with the added perk of freedom for Hagar. Hagar is called a maid throughout the passage. The Hebrew word means bondservant or slave. So, Ishmael’s harsh treatment might have brought about a change in status for his mother.

### **ISHMAEL IS ABANDONED (v15-16)**

The story, however, goes from bad to worse. Ishmael wanders in the wilderness with his mother when their provision runs out. They are weary and exhausted. Verse 15 says, “When the water in the skin was used up, she left the boy under one of the bushes.” Stricken with thirst and perhaps heat stroke, she left him where he collapsed, under a tree.

It is at this point that even his mother abandons him. Verse 16 says, “Then she went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away, for she said, “Do not let me see the boy die.” And she sat opposite him and lifted up her voice and wept.” I am not saying I would be able to do something different. But it is a little bit selfish of Hagar to abandon her son as he lay dying. Yes, it’s hard. But think of Ishmael, abandoned by everyone, all alone, left to die under a tree. Hagar’s focus isn’t on Ishmael; it’s on herself. She is torn; she can’t stay but knows it’s wrong to leave.

### **ISHMAEL IS SAVED (v23)**

At the lowest point, God intervenes. Sarah, Abraham, and now Hagar have all abandoned Ishmael, but God doesn’t. Verse 17 says something extraordinary, “God heard the lad crying.” Verse 16 ended with Hagar crying, but that is not the weeping God

responds to. He hears the cry of Ishmael, alone, weak, and on the verge of death, and He comes not to Ishmael but to Hagar to get her to come to her senses and keep going. I love what God tells Hagar first, "What is the matter with you, Hagar?" I don't think He is just asking her how she is doing. I think He is confronting her about her decision to abandon her suffering child to die alone. He is asking what on earth she thinks she is doing. He then promises to make a great nation out of him too. In verse 18, God says, "Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Verse 19 says, "Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went and filled the skin with water and gave the lad a drink." In the desert, there are few springs. One way to find it is by looking for plant growth. Where there are plants, there must be water. The water is often hidden by a thicket of dense brush. There are reports of travelers in the desert doing exactly what Ishmael did, lying down in the shade to die of thirst a few feet away from a well or spring. God opened Hagar's eyes to see that the tree Ishmael was lying under was itself being nourished by a spring. She saw past the hardship and saw God's provision.

The rest of Ishmael's story is summarized in the last few verses. He lived in the wilderness. He became an archer. His mother found him an Egyptian wife. But the most critical part of the story is found at the start of verse 20: "God was with the lad." God may have chosen Isaac to be the one through whom God would bless the whole world by eventually sending Jesus. But that doesn't mean Ishmael is forgotten.

## **APPLICATION**

**Trust God's Presence:** The most important thing to discern in this story is that God is with Ishmael, even when no one else is. Maybe he isn't the favorite son anymore. Maybe he threatened Isaac. Maybe he was kicked out by his dad because his mom was jealous. Maybe his mom did leave him to die under a tree. But through it all, God was with him.

Interestingly, Ishmael's name isn't mentioned in the entire story. He is referred to as the lad or the boy, or the son. But never Ishmael. But there is an apparent wordplay with his name in Hebrew. In verse 17, when it says, "God heard" and "God has heard," the Hebrew for that is very similar to the name Ishmael. Ishmael's name means "God hears." In Genesis 16:13, Hagar called God, El-Roi, "The God who sees me." Here, we are to see Ishmael's name as another name of God, Ishma-El, "The God who hears me." When we are at our loneliest and feel most isolated, abandoned and desperate, we can trust that God sees, hears, and is with us.

**Trust God's Plan:** It is important to remember that God's choice of Abraham and then Isaac aren't because they are special. They were chosen because God knew one of their distant descendants would be special. That descendent is Jesus. God plans to bless everyone on earth through Abraham's descendants. So, God's choice of Isaac over Ishmael doesn't mean God likes him more. God is in the business of wanting to bless everyone. This story shows us that you don't have to be an Isaac to experience the blessing of God. This is an important lesson, especially since Jesus came. Because of Jesus, we are all Ishmael. Jesus is the main character. We all play a supporting, secondary role in the story God is telling through Him. Trusting God's plan means learning to play our role no matter what it is.

**Trust God's Placement:** The hard part about being Ishmael is wishing you were Isaac. All of us at times think that we could have been rich, famous, or successful if only something had gone a different way. Sometimes we think we have been deprived of crucial support at a critical time. Perhaps we blame our parents, coworkers, or bosses for holding us back or not giving us what we need to succeed. Perhaps, like Ishmael, we are tempted to fall into bitterness and jealousy, wishing we were the "golden child." But the truth is that God has a plan for each of our lives that is for His glory and for our good. He places us where He wants us so that we can be the people He created us to be. That is what happens to Ishmael. He wasn't an accident or an afterthought. Through the machinations of others, God's plan was fulfilled, and Ishmael found himself placed precisely where he needed to be to become the man God had created him to be. The same is true of us. Our lives are in God's hands. We can trust Him to place us where we are supposed to be.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Why does Sarah want Ishmael kicked out? What does Ishmael do to Isaac?
2. Have you ever felt like you were expendable and had been replaced like Ishmael? How did you respond?
3. Why do you think Hagar abandoned Ishmael under the tree? Did she do the right thing?
4. How does God demonstrate his goodness to Ishmael?
5. What does Ishmael's name mean? How is this manifested in the story?

## LESSON 16 | ABRAHAM AND ABIMELECH PART 2: LEARNING TO TRUST

### GENESIS 21:22-34

I remember the first joke I ever learned. I was around 6 or 7 at First Baptist Church in Del Rio, TX. I learned it from the jokes page in the Royal Ambassadors magazine. Here it is: Why did the monkey fall out of the tree? Answer: it was dead.

I don't know why I thought it was funny. But I did, and I still kind of do now. These days, jokes like that are called "Dad Jokes," jokes so corny and terrible that only dads find them funny. I am moderately offended by the term, though, because I have been telling jokes like this my whole life. So, when I was a kid, they weren't dad jokes. They were just jokes. When does a joke become a dad joke? When it becomes apparent.

Maybe instead of Dad jokes, a better term would be classic jokes. If the cars your parents drive are classic cars, and the music your parents listen to can be called classic rock, why can't the jokes we tell be called classic jokes?

Some good classic jokes include:

- What did the buffalo say when he dropped his boy off at school? Bison
- Why do cows wear bells? Their horns don't work.
- Why did the bicycle fall over? It was two (too) tired.
- What is red and bad for your teeth? A brick

One of my all-time favorites goes like this:

Did you hear the joke about the three holes in the ground? Well, well, well.

Believe it or not, that whole opening was because today, we are looking at a story involving Abraham and a well. At first blush, it seems like an odd and interesting story about how a well and a city were named. But it is more than that. It is the story of God giving Abraham a taste of His goodness by giving him his first piece of the promised land. The story isn't about a well. The well represents the goodness of the God Abraham is learning to trust. Hopefully, as we read this story, we will learn to trust God more and be more trustworthy ourselves.

### **ABRAHAM IS CONFRONTED BY ABIMELECH (v22-24)**

Have you ever met somebody who ended up passing the lousy day they were having on to you? That seems to be what is happening in this story. We aren't told why Abimelech decides to show up unannounced in the tents of Abraham, but he does, and he brings somebody with him. Verse 22 says, "Now it came about at that time that Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham."

Imagine you have had a previous run-in with a king. You patch things up. Then one day, you walk outside, and the king has come to your house. Not just that, he has brought the commander of his army. It doesn't say who else they brought, but I am guessing that when a king and a general travel somewhere, they bring quite an entourage, perhaps a small army.

After Abimelech acknowledges that God protects Abraham, he makes a request, which reads more like a complaint. Verse 23 says, "Now therefore, swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but according to the kindness that I have shown to you, you shall show to me and to the land in which you have sojourned."

We aren't told what Abraham did to necessitate the visit, so it was likely nothing. Maybe Abimelech was trying to extend the size of his territory. Because he permitted Abraham to live in his land, this oath of kindness may have been used to show that Abimelech's rule extended all the way to Beersheba. Maybe, Abimelech was having a bad day. Perhaps he was worried about an attack and decided to visit the borders of his territories to make everything secure. He remembers the issue he previously had with Abraham and decides to visit him and make an official agreement between them.

To Abraham's credit, he doesn't respond indignantly. Abimelech is bringing up previous wrongs and throwing them in Abraham's face. He simply says in verse 24, "I swear it." Abraham has learned his lesson. He isn't going to deal in deception.

### **ABRAHAM COMPLAINS TO ABIMELECH (v25-26)**

Before they officially make the covenant, Abraham has a grievance he wants to bring up. Verse 25 says, "But Abraham complained to Abimelech because of the well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized."

Abimelech responds by denying he knew anything about it. Verse 26 says, "And Abimelech said, 'I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, nor did I hear of it until today.'" Though it might sound like an honest denial, it reads more like a

politician who has created for himself plausible deniability. He sounds more like he is a dodgy witness on the stand, saying things like, “I have no recollection of that.”

It might sound like an insignificant thing, but in the desert, water is a precious commodity. We will discover later in verse 30 that the well had been dug by Abraham himself. Abraham is doing more than just asserting his rights. He is defending his family. Shepherds without access to water would be in desperate circumstances. Abraham doesn't allow himself to be cowed into silence. A king shows up on his doorstep with the commander of his army next to him and asks if he can trust you. Abraham responds, yes, you can trust me, but can I trust you?

### **ABRAHAM COVENANTS WITH ABIMELECH (v27-32)**

To demonstrate his trustworthiness, Abraham supplies the sacrifices for the covenant. Verse 27 says, “Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two made a covenant.” Remember that in Hebrew, you “cut a covenant.” So, though it doesn't say the two men sacrificed the animals, it is implied.

After the covenant ceremony, Abraham presents Abimelech with an odd gift. Verse 28 says, “Then Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves.” After Abimelech asks in verse 29 what the meaning of this gift is, Abraham responds in verse 30, “You shall take these seven ewe lambs from my hand so that it may be a witness to me, that I dug this well.”

This is one of the ways contracts were made in the ancient world. To publicly accept a gift from a person was a way to acknowledge that you accepted their version of the story. Abraham presents these lambs to Abimelech as a way of guaranteeing access to the well and public admission that Abraham dug the well and, therefore, it belongs to him.

This event gave the name to this place, “Therefore he called that place Beersheba, because there the two of them took an oath.” “Beer” means “well.” “Sheba” is a word that can mean both “oath” and “seven.” So, Beersheba means either Well of Oaths or Well of Seven. You can see how this story gave rise to both explanations.

### **ABRAHAM CLAIMS A PIECE OF THE PROMISE (v33-34)**

Though the city is still there, and there is a well outside the city walls that may be the well Abraham himself dug, this is more than a story about how a city and a well got their names. Abraham has been living as a sojourner and a stranger in the land God promised to give his descendants. But here, for the first time, Abraham can claim

ownership of a piece of the Promised Land. To celebrate this fact, verse 33 says, “Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.”

Abraham had planted trees before, but they were oaks. Here he plants a tamarisk tree, a rugged tree common to the desert. They are planted in this area for shepherds to use as shade for themselves and their flocks, which can also eat their branches. Tamarisks are known for being rugged and for lasting when other things perish. Perhaps this was why he chose to plant this tree. Maybe he feels like the tamarisk tree planted by God in this place. Maybe he feels like the tamarisk tree represents God’s faithfulness and protection in a harsh world. In the same way that the tamarisk tree watches over the well, God will watch over Abraham and his family in this land.

Abraham responds to God in worship. God has given him a piece of the land as a foretaste of what will come in the future. So, he calls upon God and worships Him using the name “The Everlasting God.” The Hebrew is El-Olam. This is the only time in the Bible that this name is used. It reveals his recognition that it has been God who has led him up to this point. It also looks forward to God continuing to guard the covenant and promise He made for the future.

## **APPLICATION**

There are several ways to approach this story. One important dimension, though, is from the perspective of trust. In his previous encounter with Abimelech, Abraham doesn’t trust him and therefore doesn’t act trustworthy. This time, the question that hangs in the air is whether these two parties can trust each other. A couple of points of application stand out.

**Can Others Trust You? :** Abraham is willing to do what it takes to affirm that he is trustworthy. He is willing to enter into an agreement with Abimelech to demonstrate his willingness to be taken at his word. This reminds us that we need to be trustworthy people as well. Do people trust our word? When we say we will do something or be somewhere, can people count on it? Or do they expect you to back out or fall through at the last minute? Can others trust you?

**Can Your Family Trust You? :** A second application is found in Abraham’s willingness to bring his complaint about the well to Abimelech. He was doing what he could to help his family. He could have lived in fear by allowing Abimelech’s men to keep the well. He could have attacked Abimelech’s men to gain it back. Instead, he seeks a middle path. He stands for his family and their rights to the well in a way that preserves peace.

HE shows that his family can trust him too. Many people today are so committed to success in the business world that they have become unreliable or untrustworthy to their families. They hide under the guise of “providing,” but the truth is their family doesn’t trust them to be there, to show up, to be present, to love, support, protect, and lead. Abraham shows that we need to be people that our families trust.

**Do You Trust God? :** The final application question is probably the core. Do you trust God to do what He promises? If not, you will act accordingly. Abraham didn’t fully trust God before, and it caused him to lie to Abimelech. This time, he has learned a little more about what it means to trust God and is rewarded with his first piece of the promised land. He plants a tree and gives God a new name to remind himself that it is God’s responsibility to do what God says He will. What do your actions reveal about your trust in God? Do you distort the truth like a younger Abraham in order to protect yourself? Or do you have the courage and faith to trust God and do what He has called you to do?

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What does Abimelech want from Abraham? Whom does Abimelech bring with him? What do you think lies behind Abimelech’s request?
2. What does Abraham ask of Abimelech? What does Abimelech claim? How does Abraham get Abimelech to agree?
3. What does Beersheba mean? How does the story explain that meaning? What is the significance of the well to Abraham?
4. What does Abraham do in gratitude to God for gaining possession of the well? What does a tamarisk tree represent? What does the name Abraham use to worship God mean?
5. How does this story illustrate the importance of trust?

## LESSON 17 | THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC: TRUSTING GOD TO PROVIDE

### GENESIS 22:1-14

If God created everything, then did God create evil? Maybe you have been asked this question. Maybe you have wondered about it. It's a great question. And there is a great answer. God didn't create evil because evil isn't a thing. Evil is a distortion. Satan takes the good things that God makes and twists them. Every virtue can be twisted and distorted into some vice. And every vice is the distortion of some positive virtue. Every evil is a distortion of some good thing that God made. God's plan for His creation is to untwist things and restore them to what they were created to be.

One area where distortion happens is in the realm of ideas. People take true ideas and either intentionally or unintentionally distort them so they are no longer accurate. These distorted ideas are still capable of deceiving people because they still have a hint of the truth in them.

One attractive but distorted idea goes by the name of the "Prosperity Gospel." It claims to give people the secret of opening up the floodgates of God's blessing so that they can live in abundance and prosperity.

There is a truth at the center of this error, making it attractive to people. The truth is that God really does care about your physical needs. He does promise to provide. He is eager to bless. The distortion sneaks in when you think that you think you know better than God what you need or that you can control or determine what God provides or when. Most prosperity gospel proponents don't want to serve God; they want to use God to accumulate wealth. They have misunderstood the nature of God's provision.

God isn't a spiritual Santa Claus to whom we can give our wish list and expect Him to get busy fulfilling it. God's provision has always been a matter of surrender. It is learning to believe that God knows what we need and is faithful to give it. Abraham learns this lesson powerfully in the passage we will look at today. He learns it so well that he calls on God by a new name because of it. We are going to look today at the story of God telling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Hopefully, we will learn more deeply what His promise of provision really means and learn to trust Him the same way Abraham did.

### **ABRAHAM IS TESTED (v1-3)**

Imagine being Abraham. After living a full life, God tells you to uproot your family and move across a continent. He then tells you in your childless old age that you will be the father of many nations. Next, imagine God fulfills His promise and blesses you and your wife with a child way outside the time when it was biologically possible. Now, imagine how you would feel when the child is about twelve or thirteen, and God tells you to kill him.

That is precisely what happens. Genesis 22:1-2 says, “1 Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 2 Then He said, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.”

I know my mind would be swimming with confusion, fear, doubt, frustration, and anger. I would want to cry out to God, “Why did you give him to me if you were just going to take him away?” But what is amazing is verse 3: “So Abraham got up early in the morning and saddled his donkey...” Abraham didn’t drag his feet. He got up first thing in the morning and started obeying.

### **ABRAHAM IS QUESTIONED (v4-8)**

After a three-day journey, Abraham sees the mountain where he is supposed to go. He leaves his servants and takes Isaac to go alone. Verse 5 says, “Stay here with the donkey, and I and the boy will go over there; and we will worship and return to you.” One wonders if his words were meant to disguise his mission or reveal his confidence in God. I think the latter. Hebrews 11:19 tells us about Abraham’s heart at this moment, “He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.” Abraham knew what God was able to do. Abraham trusted God to be faithful. He just didn’t know what God would do in this instance. When Isaac realizes they have everything for the sacrifice except the lamb, he asks his father about it, and Abraham responds in verse 8, “God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” Though Abraham uses the word Elohim for God instead of Yahweh, the verb for “will provide” is from “jireh.”

### **ABRAHAM IS STOPPED (v9-14)**

Verse 9 and 10 detail the process Abraham went through to prepare for the sacrifice. He builds an altar. He stacks the wood. He knew God was going to do something. But He didn’t know what. I can imagine him there waiting and wondering when God would intervene and how. He binds his son. Did Isaac resist? Were there tears in Abraham’s eyes as he laid Isaac on the altar? Did his heart race as he lifted the knife?

At the last possible moment, Abraham is told to stop. And God does indeed provide a sacrifice, a ram caught by his horns in a nearby thicket. After offering the ram as a sacrifice, he names the place after the lesson he learned about God there. Verse 14 says, “And Abraham named that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day,

“On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”

This time, Abraham uses the covenant name of God. He gives that place the name Yahweh-Jireh to remember the intervention of God in the sacrifice of Isaac by providing a sacrificial substitute.

### **APPLICATION**

**God Sees:** The first thing this name of God reveals to us is that God hasn't forgotten us. “Jehovah sees” is one possible translation of this verb. Provide is a secondary meaning of the verb Jireh. Its primary meaning is ‘to see.’ We shouldn't be shocked by this. And if you know a little Latin, you know that “video” means “to see,” so the word “provide” in English comes from the Latin verb which means “to see beforehand.” We even use the phrase “see to it” to mean something like provide. This definition is clearly a part of the meaning of the name because of how the name is interpreted at the end of verse 14. Most translations say something like, “as it is said to this day, “In the mount of the LORD it will be provided.” In this instance, the King James Version comes closest to getting it right, “And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah Jireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.”

This attribute of God is revealed in a different name given to Him by Abraham's “other” wife, Hagar. When Hagar flees because of the harsh treatment of Sarah, she meets an angel of the Lord who promises her protection and blessing. In response, Hagar says this about God in Genesis 16:13, “Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, “You are a God who sees me.” El Roi is the Hebrew.

We serve a God who sees us and our circumstances. He hasn't forgotten or forsaken us. God sees, and God will be seen. God will show up.

**God Knows:** The next aspect of God that this scene and this name reveal is that God knows. God is more than an external observer of our situation. He is intimately acquainted with our situation. Sometimes we think God's commands are burdensome and don't factor in everything. We somehow think that God doesn't fully appreciate the gravity of the situation like He is a commanding general sending us on a suicide mission because He either doesn't know how dangerous it is or doesn't really care about us.

It's important to realize that God does know, and He does care. If I were Abraham, I would cry to God, "But God, you told me that you would bless me through this son? But God, this son was miraculously conceived? But God, he is my only son? But God, I love him."

Before Abraham can open his mouth, God answers Abraham's potential objections. Consider how God describes Isaac to Abraham in verse 2, "your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac." Even before God tells Abraham what to do, God reveals that He understands what He is asking Abraham to do and knows it will be hard. I know he is the son of the promise. I know he is your only son. I know you love him. Trust me, and do it anyway.

**God Gives:** Last, this passage reveals that God does give. But His provision and generosity invite us to trust rather than coerce. Abraham didn't obey because he knew WHAT God would provide. He simply knew THAT would provide. His knowledge of God's nature enabled him to trust God and obey.

Sometimes we think we are in a position to make demands of God and be mad when he doesn't "grant" them. Jesus does tell us that we are free to ask of God whatever we want, but there is a big difference between asking and telling. Asking God means trusting and submitting to His wisdom. Jesus gives us insight into this in Matthew 7:7-11. Instead of teaching us a trick to ensure that we always get God to give us exactly what we want every single time, He shows us who God is and invites us to trust Him with what we ask of Him. In this passage, Jesus gives us concrete details about HOW God provides.

- **God Gives Generously (v8):** Verse 8 says, "Everyone who asks receives." Everyone. It doesn't say people who ask well, or people who ask nicely, or people who have been good. Everyone who asks receives. The reason is to be found not in the asker but in the giver. God gives because it is in His nature to be generous. James 1:5 describes God as the one "who gives to all generously and without reproach." He doesn't judge your worthiness or begrudge your need.

- **God Gives Like a Father (v9-11):** God isn't a bank, or a government agency, or a concierge. You don't look for ways of bribing, coercing, or ordering Him to do what you want. God gives like a father. That means he is not mechanical or magical but rather personal and motivated by love. It also means He is in control, not us. We come to Him humbly as His children, not arrogantly as His customers or angrily as His employer. We ask but don't demand. We ask and trust that our Father knows us, loves us, and will bless us with what is good.

• **God Gives What is Good:** (v9-11) We are sometimes mistaken about what will fulfill our needs. We ask God for something because we think it is what we want. God knows when we are mistaken. That seems to be what is going on with the analogy in verses 9-10, where Jesus says, “What man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he?” What is the connection between stones and bread or between fish and snakes? The style loaves cooked in Judea of Jesus’s day looked like stones. There is also a kind of catfish that lives in the Sea of Galilee that looks a lot like an eel. Imagine a child pointing at a stone or an eel and saying to their father, “Daddy, can I have that.” The father will not give the child what they asked for because they are mistaken. The father will give them the thing that they actually need. The way that translates to us is that we don’t always ask for the right thing. God doesn’t promise to give us whatever we want. He promises to give us what is good. He isn’t withholding good from us. He just sometimes knows better than us what will truly satisfy us. There is a line in the old hymn, “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty,” that says, “Hast thou not seen, how all thy longings have been, granted in what He ordaineth.” God hears our requests, knows our needs, and gives us what He knows will be for our good. In the midst of rejection or refusal, we need to be willing to analyze our own motives and trust the wisdom and love of God.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What does Yahweh-Jireh mean? In what context was this name revealed? What was God trying to teach in that situation?
2. What does it mean that one aspect of God’s provision is that God sees? What does He see? Why do we doubt that and need to be reminded?
3. What does it mean that one aspect of God’s provision is that God knows? What does He know? Why do we doubt that and need to be reminded?
4. How do we misunderstand the nature of God’s giving? How does Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount clarify how God gives? How is this borne out in the actions of Abraham?
5. Have you ever been in a circumstance like Abraham’s where God asked you to do a difficult thing? What were your initial feelings and responses? How can we learn to trust and obey like Abraham did?

**NOTES:**



— ABOUT THE AUTHOR —

Dr. Steve Jones has been the Teaching & Training Pastor at Kingsland Baptist Church since June 2016. He teaches regularly through the church in a variety of formats and works with the Discipleship Pastor to equip and develop leaders at Kingsland who are empowered to use their gifting to teach the Bible in life-changing ways.



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