

GENESIS—WEEK 16

ABRAHAM GOES TO SCHOOL



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is God and the Angels visit Abraham by Arent de Gelder (1645 – 1727)
On display at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam*

The Abraham-Abimelech fiasco wraps up, and Sarah bears Isaac. You might think she'd be happy about this (and she is) but almost anything involving Ishmael triggers Sarah, and so she gets triggered. Fortunately, God brings Hagar out of the resulting crisis.

After one more conflict with Abimelech, in which Abraham displays some growth, God starts up the ultimate test—the sacrifice of Isaac.

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Thank you.

Genesis 20:14–22:3 — Abraham Goes to School
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1 Genesis 20:14–18 (ESV)

Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelech said, “Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you.” To Sarah he said, “Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone you are vindicated.” Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

Abimelech would have been justified in putting Abraham to death for his cheap trick duplicity. Instead, just to put an exclamation point on how Abraham has misjudged him, Abimelech magnanimously blesses Abraham with many gifts.

So, Abraham is completely outclassed and schooled. That’s the point. God is mocking Abraham to remind him of his sin.

Then Abraham prays for Abimelech. This isn’t just for show either; God responds with dramatic blessings for Abimelech and his whole house.

Abraham has learned his lesson.

This moment is perfectly orchestrated for maximum embarrassment. Abraham’s face has to be burning.

Imagine what was going through his mind as he prayed. He’s desperate for the curse on Abimelech to be lifted. Imagine how awful it would be if it isn’t.

But the kicker is that Abraham can’t be certain how this will turn out. God has been tight with Abraham, but He always has His own plans, and we don’t always know what they are.

So Abraham should be sweating. Good. This is meant to be a teaching moment.

Except that it isn’t just a moment.

Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

The reference to bearing children means it took months for this to play out. The whole time Abraham is sweating.

And thinking. And praying.

God regularly uses some of the strongest teaching methods imaginable to hammer His lessons home.

2 Genesis 21:1–10 (ESV)

The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.” 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.”

And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.”

This time, we get a good look at Sarah’s sinfulness. At first, all seems well. After laughing at the angels’ prediction that she would bear a child—and then denying it—she now celebrates. “Isaac” means, “He laughs.” This miracle is laughably wonderful, and Sarah seems happy to be proved wrong. She’s growing.

Then something goes horribly wrong. Sarah sees *the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing* and this picks at an old scab. The Hebrew word that’s translated as “laughing” can mean mocking—and that’s probably what it does mean here—but so what? Teenage boys mock their little brothers all the time.

But Sarah goes ballistic over this and insists that Ishmael (and his mother) be kicked out of the household. Obviously, there’s emotional baggage at work here. Why is Sarah so volatile?

It’s because this is her own fault. Ishmael’s very existence was her idea. With no one to blame, her anger just simmers inside her. It’s sometimes easier to forgive someone else than to forgive yourself.

Even before Isaac came into the picture, the stupidity of her plan for Abraham to sire an heir had gotten under her skin. Her reaction then was the same as it is now—to explode in response to a trigger.

She hasn’t come to grips with her own mistake, and any reminder sets her off.

This time the lesson is not that we’re just as bad as Sarah. Just kidding; of course we are. We may not make mistakes as grand as the one Sarah made, but we still react just as sinfully. We often convert a valuable lesson into little more than emotional baggage.

One of the most important words in the English language is “oops.” When we admit we’re wrong—fully, completely, without denial—we avoid a lot of pain. Being wrong is an important and useful part of life. Our mistakes shouldn’t be ignored, or even suppressed; they should be studied.

But don’t forget to ask God to help you see the lesson the mistake is meant to teach.

3 Genesis 21:11–21 (ESV)

And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, “Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring.” So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, “Let me not look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Hagar forgot the promises made the last time she was out in the wilderness.

The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude. ... He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.” — Genesis 16:10, 12 (ESV)

How could Hagar forget something that profound? We know that she understood what the angel said because she obeyed and returned and submitted to Sarah. Besides, how could anyone forget anything the angel of the LORD said?

Never underestimate the power of depression. Hagar's encounter with the angel of the LORD should have given her bullet-proof faith. Yet, here she seems totally faithless.

This is another facet of our inconsistency. When we're dysfunctional, our faith fails too.

Depression is a curious beast. It distorts everything. Do you know people who are sinking into despair? Ask God to clear their broken attitude and let them see joy.

And give them a call. Depressed people need friends. Without anyone to talk to, they just sit and stew. A friend showing up can have almost as much impact as an angel. This is part of the point of James 1:27.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. — James 1:27 (ESV)

Never forget that it's all about glorifying God. Visiting people who need a visit does that in spades.

4 Genesis 21:22–34 (ESV)

At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, “God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity, but as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned.” And Abraham said, “I will swear.”

When Abraham reproved Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servants had seized, Abimelech said, “I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today.” So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart. And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?” He said, “These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well.” Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath. So they made a covenant at Beersheba. Then Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army rose up and returned to the land of the Philistines. Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines.

To the modern eye, all this pomp and circumstance looks like so much showing off, but it actually has a purpose. At this point in history, there is no contract law and no government to enforce it anyway. Any commitment can only be enforced through military conflict. The only way to win a military conflict is by having many people who are willing to join you in battle.

The key to getting people to do that is trust. A leader must be respected or no one will follow him. The purpose of all this pomp is to put Abraham’s and Abimelech’s honor on the line. By swearing oaths and giving livestock as a sign, they are bringing in lots of witnesses. Break these promises and everyone will know.

So, their treaties are enforced by the publicity. They have no interest in conflict anyway, so they depart friends and that’s the end of it.

When we thank God for the great country we live in, we usually don’t even think of the basic functions of government. Laws make life work. We trust that everything that we depend on will be there tomorrow. The electricity will be on. The gas stations will have gas. Our money won’t suddenly be worthless. We won’t be persecuted.

This has not always been true, and isn’t true now for many people around the world. We’re where we are, and not where they are, simply because of where we were born.

Pray for the persecuted church. We don’t deserve to be spared their pain. We could be in their shoes. We should recognize our incredible blessings and pray for those less blessed.

This isn’t a one-day prayer request. This should be a permanent attitude.

5 Genesis 22:1–3 (NKJV)

Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!”

And he said, “Here I am.”

Then He said, “Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

This passage is special to anyone who has ever split firewood. They understand something about Abraham’s state of mind—the wood-splitting helped him get through the test.

And what a test it was. Just imagine what was going through Abraham’s mind. Every kind of doubt must have cropped up. Yes, that really was God speaking. Yes, He really wants you to sacrifice Isaac. Yes, *that* kind of sacrifice. No, you’re not losing it.

So Abraham rose early in the morning. Could you sleep?

And he split the wood for the burnt offering.

Splitting wood is amazing anger therapy. It’s totally violent and destructive, yet you don’t get in trouble for doing it. You get to smash something to pieces, and the angrier you get, the better you are at it.

And you always win. If a log has an especially tough knot, it just takes longer to break it. As you do battle, your adrenaline rises higher and higher. Eventually you bust the knot and you get to do a victory dance. It’s awesome.

Abraham had great faith, but it’s silly to think that he just robotically followed God’s instructions without emotion. The log-splitting is scripture’s brief depiction to what really happened.

I doubt I’ll ever have a test like this, but if I do, logs will suffer.

Abraham didn’t split the wood for the anger therapy; he split the wood because a burnt offering needs a very hot fire. God built the therapy into the test.

This is a perfect example of how God’s love works when we’re enduring a trial. He doesn’t remove the trial; he helps us get through it. Thus, the trial accomplishes its purpose.

But we often pray for the wrong thing. Unlike Jesus’s prayer for Peter in Luke 22, we ask for trials to be removed, instead of for perseverance. Fortunately, God gives us what we need instead of what we ask for.

And the Lord said, “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail;” — Luke 22:31–32a (NKJV)

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever had a long-term lesson from God?
2. Are there things that trigger your anger?
3. Have you witnessed depression interfering with clear thinking?
4. Have you ever suffered for Christ?
5. Do you know a good anger management therapy?