

“Father Abraham”

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Genesis 12:1–3 (ESV)

¹Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”¹

If I were to guess, I imagine there is something in your life that seems impossible right now. Perhaps it’s a relationship problem; you may think it’s impossible that your husband or wife will ever change, or that your marriage will ever get better. Perhaps it’s a physical issue; you may think it’s impossible that you will get healthier, that a disease will be cured, or a condition improved. It may be a financial issue; you may think it’s impossible to pay your bills, or that you will have more income. Whatever is going on in your life right now, there are some things that seem impossible.

Yet in the story of the Bible, God does things that don’t seem to be possible. He works miracles, for example. And he often works through very unlikely people. He often doesn’t pick the rich, the strong, the powerful, or even the good. He chooses to work through a bunch of nobodies.

Today, we’re going to look at the life of Abraham. He is one of the key figures in the Bible, but he is also a very unlikely person for God to use. God does the impossible through him. We also see Abraham as a model for faith, one who obeys God because he trusts in him. Yet we also see that Abraham is not perfectly obedient—he’s a lot like you and me. This part of the story shows how God will bring blessings to the world. He’ll do it through the most unlikely manner. This story gives us hope, and it should help us trust God.

I’ll tell the story of Abraham in four scenes. I’ll move quickly through each scene and show what each one contributes to the story.

But first, here’s a bit of background.

Over the last two weeks, we saw that God first made Adam to be the one who would bring blessings to the earth. But Adam disobeyed God. Later, it seemed that God was going to

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

use Noah to bring blessings to the earth. But Noah and his family disobeyed, too. After the story of Noah, we see that humans make a tower—the tower of Babel—to make a name for themselves (Gen. 11:1-9). Though God made people to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28), the people said, “Come, let us build a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:4). The people at that time spoke only one language. But God stopped their plans by giving them many languages. We see once again that people tend to rebel against God, and their sin brings division.

Then in Genesis 11, we find out that one of Noah’s sons, Shem, has a descendant named Abram—that’s his name at the beginning of the story (Gen. 11:10-26). He lives in Ur of the Chaldeans. This place has been located in lands known by various names: Mesopotamia, Babylon, and now Iraq. Abram is married to a woman named Sarai and we are told: “Now Sarai was barren; she had no child” (11:30).

And now, the first scene:

¹ Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:1-3).

God takes the initiative with Abram. God speaks to him, not the other way around. In fact, we have no reason to believe that Abram was looking for God. Later in the Bible, in Joshua 24:2, we read this: “And Joshua said to all the people, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, “Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.’”” So Abram was probably a typical person of his day; he was a polytheist. He worshiped many false gods. So he wasn’t on a quest to find the one true God. It’s also worth noting that he was 75 years old (Gen. 12:4) at this time. He lived a good chunk of his life before God called him.

Yet God tells Abram, “Go and be a blessing!” God tells Abram that he will cause him to become a great nation. But a nation requires people and a land. God tells him to go to the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:1, 7). That solves the land issue. Still, Abram is an old man, with an old wife, and she can’t have children. Where will the people come from? This seems impossible. We’ll have to wait to see how God will fulfill this promise.

The reason why God will bless Abram is so that he will become a blessing. He will bless the whole earth through Abram. The whole earth! It seems that Abram is now taking on the role that Adam and Noah once had. God will reverse the curse that he put on the world when Adam and Eve sinned. As one theologian puts it, “God intends to use Abram and his family as the instrument of rescuing and restoring his broken creation.”² Blessings, not curses, will come through Abram. God will work through Abram to bring his people back to the garden of Eden, back into his presence.

We see here that God promises certain things will happen. God will make sure that Abram blesses the earth. But God also gives Abram commands. Both God’s unconditional promises and Abram’s obedience are important parts of this story.

Abram obeyed. He responded to God’s call. He went to the land God showed him. In the next few verses, Abram goes to the land of Canaan and God says, “To your offspring I will give this land” (v. 7). And Abram builds an altar to God. Abram acts like a priest.³ He worships God (v. 8). This is good. But our author wants us to see that Abram isn’t perfect. In the next passage, we are told there is a famine in the land. Instead of staying in the land and trusting God, Abram heads to Egypt. Not only that, but he tells the Egyptians that Sarai is his sister. This is a half-truth. Sarai is his half-sister (Gen. 20:12), but it appears that Abram was afraid. Sari is beautiful and he is afraid that someone in Egypt would kill him and take his wife. Because of Abram’s lie, Sarai is taken to the Pharaoh to be one of his wives. We’re not told if she actually knew the king of Egypt or not, but this situation is sketchy. We should also notice that God’s promise to make Abram into a great nation implies having children. Abram’s actions here threaten God’s promise. If he lost his wife to the Pharaoh, God’s promise wouldn’t be fulfilled—at least not through Sarai. But we read, in verse 17, that “the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife.” Abram was able to leave with his wife. God made sure his promise would not be negated.

This first scene shows that God called a nobody, an old idol-worshiper, to be the human instrument through whom he would bless the whole world. And it shows that while Abram

² Peter J. Gentry in Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *God’s Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 234.

³ “Now we see Abram fulfilling *and Adamic role*: he offers sacrifice as a priest and worships God in this mountain sanctuary.” *Ibid.*, 235, original emphasis.

responded in faith, he was clearly not perfect. He wasn't perfectly faithful. This shows that God does not choose people because they are good or faithful. As Paul says in Romans 3:10-12:

- 11 “None is righteous, no, not one;
 no one understands;
 no one seeks for God.
12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
 no one does good,
 not even one.”

If you are a Christian here today, God called you to himself. He didn't choose you because you were good. According to God's standards, you're not good. But he chose you because he loves you. He decided to adopt you to be part of his family. We see this unmerited blessing, this grace, throughout the story of Abraham.

Let's now move to the second scene in Abraham's life. Let's look at Genesis 15. Here we see Abram, a few years later, still without a nation. God makes Abram another big promise, and Abram believes it. Let's read Genesis 15:1-6:

¹ After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” ² But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” ⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” ⁵ And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” ⁶ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

When God tells Abram that his reward, or his inheritance, will be great, Abram can't see how that will happen. Abram still doesn't have a child. But “the word of the LORD” comes to him: “your very own son shall be your heir.” Here's a man who is now over 75 years old, with a wife who is barren, and God is telling him the impossible: he will have his own son. Then God does something interesting: He leads Abram outside to look at the stars. He promises Abram that the number of his offspring will be as great as the number of stars he can see. I think what God is implying is that if he can make all those stars, he can make one son for Abram. The God who, by his word, made the universe out of nothing can make an offspring, by his word, for Abram.

And Abram trusted God. Though Abram couldn't see how God would come through on this promise, he trusted. This faith is counted to Abram as righteousness. He was not righteous

because he was obedient, or because he was good. He was counted “in the right” with God because he trusted God. More specifically, he trusted God’s promises. Abram is a great example of being reconciled to God through faith. That’s why verse 6 is quoted a few times in the New Testament (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; James 2:23).

That’s what faith really is. Faith is trusting that God will do what only God can do. Christians believe that though we may die in this life, our bodies will be resurrected at some time in the future, when Jesus returns. And we will live forever with God in a perfect world. We can’t see such a promise. Almost everything tells us that such a thing is impossible. Yet God has promised us that this will happen. Will we trust God like Abram, even though we can’t see the future? Such trust in Jesus is what makes us Christians. We are reconciled to God because we have a right relationship with Jesus. We believe what we can’t see: That his death on the cross almost two thousand years ago is enough to pay for our sins. We trust that he rose from the grave in his own resurrected body, and that his resurrection is the guarantee of our future resurrection. God’s Word has given us this promise. Will we trust God the way Abram did?

God also promises Abram land, and he does something that may appear strange to us. Let’s read verses 7-11:

⁷ And he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” ⁸ But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” ⁹ He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” ¹⁰ And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. ¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

God promises to give Abram land, and Abram wants to know how he can trust God’s promise. If the stars in the sky were a sign that Abram could trust God’s promise of an offspring, what God does next will be a sign that he will make good on this promise, too. So God tells Abram to bring him some animals, and Abram brought them and cut them in half. What is going on here?

By the end of the chapter, we see what this means. God is making a covenant with Abram. A covenant is a binding agreement made between two parties. The two parties have a relationship with each other, but there are also commands, or obligations, involved. One way of ratifying a covenant was to take an animal, kill it, and cut into pieces and then walk between the pieces (see Jer. 34:18-20). It’s a way of saying, “If I break this covenant, let me be like these animals.” In other words, it’s like saying, “If I break this covenant, I die.”

God asks Abram to bring him every type of sacrificial animal that will later be involved in Israel's worship.⁴ It has been suggested that these animals represent Israel, while the birds of prey represent the attacks of foreign nations.⁵ In the next few verses, God puts Abram into a deep sleep, and then God tells Abram, apparently in a dream, that his descendants will inherit the land, but only after living in exile for four hundred years. This refers to the Israelites' future stay in Egypt. And then something else happens. Let's read Genesis 15:17-20:

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,

The smoking fire pot and the flaming torch represent God. God passes between the pieces of these animals. Here, God is the one going between the animal pieces. Abram doesn't go with him. It's God's way of saying, "If I break this covenant, I will die." Now, God cannot die. But God cannot break his word, either. So it's a very dramatic way of telling Abram, "Trust me, I will make good on my promises."

The supernatural God's supernatural promises will only come about by supernatural means. But Abram doesn't quite understand that yet. All he knows is that God promised him a son. In the next chapter of Genesis (chapter 16), Sarai, Abram's wife, came up with her own plan for fulfilling God's promise. We see this in Genesis 16:2: "And Sarai said to Abram, 'Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai." Sarai convinces Abram to have sex with her servant, Hagar, in order to produce children. And Abram does what his wife says. This is an echo of the Adam and Eve story (Gen. 3:6, 17). Hagar, the servant, does have a child named Ishmael, but he isn't the offspring that God had promised.

That leads us to the third scene, in Genesis 17. Years later, when Abram is 99 years old, God tells him about that promised son. Here, God provides more detail about the covenant he made with Abraham in Genesis 15. For a variety of reasons, we can see that God made one

⁴ "Every type of sacrificial animal is represented to underline the significance of the scene. All Israel is involved." Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 333.

⁵ "The rite pictures Abram's descendants, in the form of sacrificial animals, protected by the Abrahamic promises from attacks by foreigners, the birds of prey." *Ibid.*, 335.

covenant with Abraham in two parts.⁶ Chapter 15 stressed God's unconditional promise, but here, in chapter 17, Abram's obedience is emphasized. Let's read verses 1-8:

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." ³ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ⁴ "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."

God wants Abram to walk before him. That means that Abram will represent God.⁷ But Abram must be blameless in order to do so. He must be obedient. And God promises to multiply Abram and make him fruitful. This is similar to the "be fruitful and multiply" language of Genesis 1:28. God repeats this promise to Abram and his descendants.⁸ Abram won't have just one child. He'll be the father of nations. That's why God changes his name to Abraham. "Abram" mean "exalted father." "Abraham" means "father of a multitude." If you're a Christian, you're a child of Abraham. He is your father (Gal. 3:7, 29). You are part of the people that God has blessed through him. And you, like Abraham, have received this great promise: God will be your God, and you will be his people. That's the heart of the covenant. It's a relationship between God and his people.

In the next few verses, God tells Abraham that the sign of the covenant is circumcision. God tells him: "Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you" (vv. 10-11). If a male Israelite doesn't get circumcised, he "shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (v. 14).

⁶ For evidence, see Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 263-269. "Abram has not demonstrated full integrity, and so, in chapter 17, God comes to confirm/uphold his covenant and emphasise [sic], among other things, the need for an obedient son in Abram's Adamic role." *Ibid.*, 263.

⁷ "Thus, Abram is to be God's agent or diplomatic messenger and representative in the world. When the world looks at Abram they will see what it is like to have a right relationship to God and to be what God intended for humanity." *Ibid.*, 260.

⁸ See also Gen. 22:16-18; 26:3-4, 24; 35:11; 47:27; 48:3-4.

What is circumcision? Well, it physically marked the male Israelites. Perhaps this was a hint that the promised offspring, the one who would crush the serpent (Gen. 3:15), would be a physical descendant of Abraham. Circumcision can also represent a “putting off of the flesh.” In that way, it anticipates the spiritual circumcision, the circumcision of the heart, that the Bible later talks about. God will perform heart surgery on his people, to cause them to love and obey him. But circumcision had another meaning in the ancient Near East. In Egypt, circumcision was reserved for priests. Yet in Egypt, only priests were circumcised. In the case of Abraham, he and all his male descendants were circumcised. That means that all of them were to be priests, in a sense. That’s why later Israel is called a “kingdom of priests” (Exod. 19:6). Also, though other nations practiced circumcision, the Israelites were the only ones to remove completely the foreskin. This was a reminder that if an Israelite broke the covenant, he would be completely cut off from the covenant community.⁹

At any rate, what is important to see is that God’s covenant with Abraham was both conditional and unconditional. God promised Abraham he would have a son, and he would have land, and all the nations would be blessed through him. But Abraham needed to be obedient to God. Obedience is a necessary part of any covenant with God.

And we shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that at this time Abraham was 99 years old. His wife was only ten years younger. God promised Abraham a son through Sarai, a woman who couldn’t have children. God promises to do the impossible. We see that in verses 15-19:

¹⁵ And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” ¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” ¹⁹ God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.”

God changes Sarai’s name to Sarah. It’s unclear what this name change means, because both names mean “princess.” But like any name change in the Bible, this is a change in status. Sarah

⁹ For information on circumcision in Egypt and other ancient Near East countries, see Genry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 273-74.

will be blessed with a child, and like Abraham, she will become nations. Kings will come from the “princess.”

What is Abraham’s response? He laughs. He knows how impossible this sounds. And if you were reading this for the first time, you might laugh, too. It’s impossible that a 90-year-old woman should give birth. But God says that is exactly what is going to happen. And, to let us know he’s in on the joke, God tells Abraham that the child will be called Isaac, which means “he laughs.” Yet God isn’t really joking. Abraham and Sarah really do have a son named Isaac, just as he said. We see this in Genesis 21:1-7.

From this scene in Abraham’s life, we see that God demands obedience from his covenant partner. He demanded obedience from Adam, but Adam failed. He demanded obedience from Adam, but Adam failed. Now, he demands obedience from Abraham, but Abraham has shown that he hasn’t been fully obedient. In fact, before Isaac is conceived, he pulls the “take Sarah, she’s my sister” routine one more time (Genesis 20). And, once again, God protected his own promise. (This time, Sarah was taken by Abimelech, the king of Gerar. God stopped Abimelech in a dream.) And we know that we are, like Abraham, not fully obedient. This shows God’s grace and mercy. He’s patient with us. It also shows that the perfect covenant partner will have to come later. There is one who was and is fully obedient, and he is a descendant of Abraham, circumcised on the eighth day. But before we jump ahead of ourselves, let’s look at the fourth and final scene of Abraham’s life that we’ll consider today.

Let’s look at Genesis 22. Let’s start with the first two verses:

¹ After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ² He said, “Take 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.”

Wait! What did God say? Isaac is the long-awaited promised son. And now God asks Abraham to kill him?

Before we see how this story resolves, we should consider something: Isaac deserves to die. So does Abraham. They, like all of us, were sinners, and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). They had rebelled against a holy God. God had every right to cut them off forever. That’s why animals were sacrificed in the Old Testament. Sin demands death, and people offered up substitutes that died in their place.

Yet God doesn't demand the deaths of all sinners. Let's keep reading to see what happens. We'll read verses 3 through 8:

³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." ⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. ⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" ⁸ Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

Despite what God asks of him, Abraham responds in faith. He thinks he and Isaac will come back together after worshipping God. Isaac realized something was missing, namely an animal to sacrifice. But Abraham knew that "God will provide." He believed that God would provide a substitute, one who could be sacrificed in Isaac's place.

⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

God stopped Abraham. It was never God's plan to have Abraham sacrifice his son. God wanted to draw this act of obedience out of Abraham. God knew how Abraham would respond to this test. But Abraham didn't know. God wanted Abraham to see what kind of faith he had. God wanted Abraham to know that he should value God more than his own son. Isaac couldn't be Abraham's idol. God wants us to respond in faith, too. He wants us to value him more than we value anyone or anything else. Abraham trusted God would provide a way out. Abraham's

faith produced obedience to God, even when he didn't understand what was happening. Hebrews 11:17-19 says,

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." ¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Abraham's faith led to obedience. To be perfectly clear: Abraham was not acceptable to God because he was obedient. He was declared righteous because he trusted God, not because he was obedient. The story of Abraham shows that Abraham was not perfectly obedient. But his faith in God did lead to obedience, as it did at this time. That's why it says this about Abraham in James 2:21-24:

²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Real faith in Jesus leads to our being accepted by God. And this leads to real obedience.

As I said earlier, this story shows that obedience is necessary. That's why the story concludes this way, in Genesis 22:15-18:

¹⁵ And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

Abraham's obedience ensured that God would give his promises. Because Abraham obeyed, God would bless Abraham, he would multiply his offspring, and he would bless the whole world.

I don't think this story makes much sense without Jesus. Almost two thousand years later, Jesus, the true beloved Son, would come. He was the only human being who perfectly obeyed God. He didn't run away like Abraham. He wasn't tempted to do anything contrary to God's will. He was and is the perfect covenant partner of God. Because Jesus was obedient, even unto death on a cross, God can bless us and multiply Christians so that they are greater in number than

stars in the sky or sand on the beach. God's blessings can come to the earth because Jesus is the true righteous one.

But there's more: Jesus is the substitute, the one that God provided to be sacrificed in our place. This story of Isaac has Jesus written all over it: Isaac is a unique, beloved son who carries the wood up Mount Moriah to die. Jesus is the true, one of a kind Son of God who carried his cross outside the city of Jerusalem. It's no accident that the temple in Jerusalem was built on Mount Moriah (2 Chron. 3:1). The near-sacrifice of Isaac took place on roughly the same spot where Jesus, the true lamb of God, would die almost two thousand years later. Because Jesus was obedient, and because he was obedient unto death, we can live.

The story of Abraham shows that God calls unlikely people to himself. It shows that God does things that are impossible. He does things that only he can do. Sometimes, his promises seem crazy, and they cause us to laugh. But God always comes through on his promises.

God's plan that began with Abraham took nearly two thousand years until it was fulfilled by Jesus. That shows that God's timing is not ours. His plans may involve things we won't see in this lifetime. We may be tempted to shortcut God's plans by coming up with our own plan, the way Sarah came up with a plan for Abraham to produce a child with Hagar. But we must resist that temptation.

Consider this: Abraham didn't get to see Jesus' day. He didn't see how God's plan would unfold.¹⁰ And he still trusted God. We are so privileged. We do know how the story was completed. We have the whole story in the Bible. How much more should we trust God!

This story also shows God's great grace. God chose an idolatrous man, an imperfect man, to be the one through whom his blessings would flow. If you're a Christian, you were chosen by God even though you weren't looking for him. And if you were looking for him, it was because God was already at work in you. You, like Abraham, were worshiping something else. And you, like Abraham, are not perfect. But God is gracious. He doesn't give us what we deserve, which is condemnation. If God gave us what we deserved, we would all be sacrificed, like Isaac was nearly sacrificed. But God gives us what we could never earn: he forgives us our sins because Jesus paid for them; he considers us morally perfect because Jesus is morally perfect; he

¹⁰ John 8:56 and Heb. 11:13 indicate that Abraham "saw" Jesus and God's promises unfold. This must mean that he saw it through the eyes of faith. In other words, Abraham trusted God and his promises so much that he could "see" that God would do as he promised, even if he couldn't see exactly how things played out.

promises us an inheritance; he promises us a future in a perfect world, the true Promised Land; and he promises to be our God, while we will be his people.

This grace is unique to Christianity. For example, Abraham is a significant figure in Islam. Yet in Islam, “Allah does not seek out the lost and redeem them; . . . he does not take the initiative to deal constructively with their sins.”¹¹ In the Qur’an, the Abraham story is changed so that “Abraham is the perfect Muslim and a model for others to follow.”¹² According to Iain Provan, “The Qur’an never states that God loves someone who has not loved him first—never implies that God loves someone who has not already turned toward righteousness.”¹³ Islam, like many other religions, does not picture God pursuing unrighteous people. Yet that is exactly what God does.

As we go through this life, we may not get all that we want. God never promised we would have perfect marriages, or perfect health, or great-paying jobs. But he promises that all who come to his Son in faith will live with him forever. That seems impossible, but the God of the Bible is the God of the impossible. Let’s trust him and follow him and obey him, even if we do that imperfectly. Just like father Abraham.

¹¹ Iain Provan, *Seriously Dangerous Religion: What the Old Testament Really Says and Why It Matters* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 189.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.