

## Seventh Revelation - Stewardship - Genesis 22:1-19<sup>1</sup>

**Before the Lesson:** Have the poster (found at the end of this lesson plan) or the words from that poster written on a board for the Information session.

**Fellowship Question:** (Use *one* of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

What are some chores you are responsible for in your household?

On your last journey, what percentage would you guess went exactly as planned? What did not?

### Information

The next story, the final in our series, is often taken out of context. It is the seventh visit from God to Abraham. Many Bible teachers, professional and non-professional, do not understand this. They read only this story and are stunned by the image of God that seems to be portrayed here. For example,

“We can only imagine that Abraham’s response to God’s monstrous command to sacrifice his beloved son would be one of shock and puzzlement. . .the command from God must seem both capricious and sadistic. Nevertheless, the reader knows, from the start of the story, that God is testing (tempting?) Abraham to determine to what extreme he is willing to go in order to be obedient. But this is a test where no one truly wins – neither Abraham, nor Isaac, nor God – certainly not the ram.”<sup>2</sup>

What we must keep in mind, however, is that this is the seventh of seven revelations of God to this man, Abraham. The stories build on one another. They are passed from generation to generation for thousands of years so we will learn what faith is and how faith grows. Let’s review the crescendo to this point:

1. In his first revelation, God speaks - “Go!”- and Abram goes toward a land he does not know.
2. In the second revelation, God shows Abram the land that he will occupy.
3. In the third revelation, God has Abram walk the land, claiming it for himself and his descendants.

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<sup>1</sup> This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2023. More lessons may be found at [greatbibleteachers.com](http://greatbibleteachers.com).

<sup>2</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis*, Belief Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 215.

4. In the fourth revelation, God reminds Abram that he will be the Father of a great nation – and Abram argues with God! Then God strengthens the promise by “cutting a covenant” (as Abram cuts a heifer, a goat, and a ram in half). Abram’s journey of faith has involved listening, seeing, walking, and sacrificing.
5. In the fifth revelation, God tells Abram to walk with him – to walk in the way of mercy, justice, and humility. God changes their names to Abraham and Sarah. The newly named Abraham shows a new sense of partnership by laughing at God’s plans and pointing out their impossibility.
6. In the sixth revelation, we see Abraham grow in Righteousness, which is demonstrated in two areas. First, his righteousness (the right way to live) is expressed in the way he treats three strangers who come to his tent. He offers effusive hospitality. Then, God reveals God’s plan to destroy Sodom. Abraham stands up for the (very minority) righteous people of the city and argues with God that God must be just. This insistence on righteous justice is the final hallmark of Abraham’s faith before we come to today’s mysterious story.
  - Have a class member read Genesis 22:1-2.

There are some differences in the way God reveals Godself to Abraham in this story.

“God does not allow Himself to be seen at the beginning as He did at the beginning of the previous two revelations, and here for the first time He is not called YHVH but Elohim: it is the *hidden* God who will reveal Himself only *then*.”<sup>3</sup>

Verse 1 says that God “tested” Abraham. How do you feel about this idea? Does God put tests in front of us? What is the purpose of a test? Do we know a test when we see one?

In our first story from Genesis 12, God told Abraham to “Go forth to a land I will show you.” Here, the same word is used, “Go, take your son...” From the birth to the maturity of our faith, it is active, growing, moving. Although this is the last revelation that God will offer Abraham, he anticipates that Abraham will continue to mature in his faith as he reflects on what he has learned and how he has changed from these seven revelations.

For example, in the fourth revelation, Abraham argues with God. As far as Abraham is concerned, there is no way God can keep the promise of a future generation born through Abraham and Sarah.

- Have a class member read Genesis 15:1-8.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Buber, *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 41.

Doubt has been dubbed a bad thing in the life of faith. We tisk-tisk “doubting Thomas” for not believing the other disciples’ report of Jesus’ resurrection, for example. In Abraham’s faith story, doubt is part of the maturation.

“Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”<sup>4</sup>

Isn’t it true that as we mature in our relationships, we must grow through doubt?

How has doubt served to mature your understanding and trust in another person?

(For example, there comes a time when we doubt that our parents are the smartest, strongest, most superior people in the world. Then, we gain a more realistic vision of our parents that offers a more realistic set of expectations.)

God reveals Godself to Abraham, then tests Abraham. Abraham often doubts - wouldn’t you if you were over 90 years old and a voice told you that you were about to be a parent? But these struggles with doubt make his faith stronger. He believes that God will keep this promise, as impossible as it seems.

“The *active* surrender of Abraham, which begins to be evident after the fourth revelation, as if to atone for that moment of doubt in the midst of trustfulness (‘by what shall I recognize?’), here reaches its apex.”<sup>5</sup>

“In the story’s climactic scene, ‘Go forth’ is heard once again, and again the destination is uncertain – ‘to a mountain I will say unto you.’ The Hebrew word for *go-forth* occurs nowhere else in the Bible. Its paralleled use indicates something of the writer’s care in connecting visits one and seven, the plot’s beginning and end.”<sup>6</sup>

“Both in the first and the last of the revelations, God - the as yet unknown God in the first and the familiar one in the last - sends Abraham out with the same command: ‘Get thee...’ The phrase appears only on these two occasions in the entire Bible. In the one instance, the demand, at the beginning of his trials, is that he separate himself from the past, from the world of the Fathers; in the second instance, at the end of his trials, that he separate himself, in spite of the promise given him by that same God, from the future, from the world of the sons. Both times, God does not tell the man where He is sending him.”<sup>7</sup>

Abraham’s trust in God is celebrated in the New Testament.

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<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (NY: Harper and Row, 1973), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Buber, 41.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 103.

<sup>7</sup> Buber, 41.

- Have class members read Hebrews 11:8-12; 17-19; James 2:20-24; Romans 4:16-25.

“In visit seven, [Abraham] is challenged to give up that which is dearer than his own life, to relinquish that which represents his only hope for a name. He must let go of his son, his future.”<sup>8</sup>

*Your only son:* Abraham had other sons. Two “sons” were attempts by Abraham to help God out by providing sons that were not biological children, but had legal rights as sons. Lot, Abraham’s nephew, was adopted, basically, as a son. Eliezer of Damascus was the heir to Abraham’s estate if he should not have a son - but he served the same role of son. Then, there was the child fathered by Abraham through Hagar, Ismael. And after Sarah’s death, there would be six sons by another wife, Keturah.

“Some scholars, bothered by the technical inaccuracy of the term [“only one”], have followed an ancient reading of *yadid*, ‘favored one,’ instead of the Masoretic *yahid*. This seriously misses the point that in regard to Abraham’s feelings, Isaac, this sole son by his legitimate wife, is his only one.”<sup>9</sup>

The test for Abraham was, will he let go of all that has driven him to this point - his desire to make a name for himself, his fixation on having a “normal” family with a first son to inherit his name and wealth, his attempts to save his own skin as he offered Sarah to Pharaoh and to Abimelech?

God’s call for Abraham was to be a blessing to all peoples. Abraham was the steward of that call and that promise. A steward is a keeper - not the owner, but the trustee of the owner. Many times, when it meant a sacrifice or potential pain (or death), Abraham put his stewardship role aside. Will Abraham now trust the owner of the promise? Will Abraham now live into his call of steward? This is the test. This is the journey of faith.

“We can’t understand the import of God’s request for the son in the last visit without seeing it as an overlay of the first request [to leave his hometown], as a paralleled instance to let go of all that is normal, of what we hang onto as belonging to us. ... Let us remember that the letting go is for the sake of blessing, and that relinquishment represents a reversal of normal and destructive attitudes and actions. Blessing progressively replaces the curse humans have brought on themselves. ... Five times in these opening verses of this story we hear *bless* or *blessing*; five times in the Genesis prologue (1-11) we have had explicit reference to *curse*.”<sup>10</sup>

- Have a class member read Genesis 22:3-13.

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<sup>8</sup> Borgman, 103.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 103.

<sup>10</sup> Borgman, 109 “The five mentions of curse... are these: 3:14 (serpent); 4:11 (Cain); 9:25 (Canaan); 3:17 and 5:29 (ground).”

*The fire and the wood* – “As Gerhard von Rad aptly notes, ‘[Abraham] himself carries the dangerous objects with which the boy could hurt himself, the torch and the knife.’ But now, as Isaac questions his father, he passes in silence over the one object that would have seemed scariest to him, however unwitting he may have been of his father’s intention – the sharp-edged butcher knife.”<sup>11</sup>

We can only imagine how this experience shaped Isaac’s faith. Did he comprehend that this was a test? Did he trust his father more or less after this experience? How did Sarah feel about this experience when she heard about it? We have many unanswered questions!

In spite of all of our unanswered questions, when we keep this story in its context as the seventh revelation of God to Abraham, it begins to make more sense.

“Genesis does not discuss how Abraham knew it was God rather than his deluded mind speaking, but it does provide a context for working with the possibility. Abraham knows who God is. He knows that God wants to bless Abraham and to bless the world. He knows God is committed to him and that he is committed to God. He has experienced God’s grace and protection and provision. He does not hear this bidding from God out of the context of God’s relationship with him, and with Isaac. The way the story unfolds indicates that he knows that simply slaughtering Isaac cannot be the end of the story.”<sup>12</sup>

Look again at verse 5. What does this verse say about who will return to the servants after the worship?

Look again at verses 6, 8, and 19. What is the significance of the word “together?”

Abraham’s faith has progressed since we began his faith journey in chapter 12.

“The seven revelations to Abram are precisely and significantly related both to one another and to the stories with which they are interspersed. Each one of the revelations and each one of the other stories has its particular place in the pattern, and could not stand in any other. The revelations appear as stations in a progress from trial to trial and from blessing to blessing; not one of them can be transposed without disrupting the whole.”<sup>13</sup>

Abraham passed this test.

- Have a class member read Genesis 22:14-19.

What does this experience teach us about being a blessing to all peoples?

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<sup>11</sup> Alter, 105.

<sup>12</sup> John Goldingay, *Old Testament Ethics: A Guided Tour* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 230.

<sup>13</sup> Buber, 36.

What were the barriers to Abraham’s faith and love? What are our barriers?

One of the primary emotional barriers that Abraham had to overcome was fear.

“If the tests of each visit are viewed chiastically – paralleled but in reverse order – the central visit, number four, would be the ‘heart’ of the chiasm. There we find the challenge not to fear....

<i>A Frame:</i> Genealogy	(11:27-32)
<i>B Test 1</i> Go...from your country, kindred, father’s house	(Visit 1; 12:1-6)
<i>C Test 2</i> Implied: Abram initiates response to promise	(Visit 2, 12:7-9)
<i>D Test 3</i> Walk (the land)	(Visit 3, 13:14-18)
<i>E Test 4</i> Do not fear; cut animals	(Visit 4, 15)
<i>D’ Test 5</i> Walk (before me , blameless)	(Visit 5, 17)
<i>C’ Test 6</i> Implied: Abraham initiates response to Presence	(Visit 6, 18:1-15)
<i>B’ Test 7</i> Go...Take your son...only son...whom you love	(Visit 7, 22:1-19)
<i>A’ Frame:</i> Genealogy	(22:20-24) <sup>14</sup>

“What this chiasm emphasizes goes beyond the escalating difficulty and greater reciprocity of relationship. It provides a focus, as well, on the middle test. This challenge ‘not to fear’ appears as central to all the visits and all the tests.”<sup>15</sup>

The story ends with Abraham free from fear, matured through doubt, the father of faith who had “confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” (Hebrews 11:1)

### **Transformational Exercise**

Our journey with Abraham and Sarah ends here. But, Abraham and Sarah lived on, as did Isaac. Interestingly, God does not give Abraham or Sarah another vision. There are no more strangers at the tent flap. There are no more “impossible things to believe before breakfast.”<sup>16</sup>

God is a silent partner for the rest of Abraham’s story.

What does this say about a mature faith?

Some people fret about “the will of God” and others about “the presence of God.” At times, we sense God’s Voice urging us to go somewhere or to do some good work. But most of the time,

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<sup>14</sup> Borgman, 111,112.

<sup>15</sup> Borgman, 113.

<sup>16</sup> From Lewis Carrol’s *Alice in Wonderland*. “Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said. 'One can't believe impossible things.' 'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'”

we live our daily lives with no Voice commanding us to do a specific act. God is a silent partner in our lives. Yet, we *are* partners. We are stewards.

Our responsibility is to be good stewards of what God has given us to be and do. As the prophet Micah (6:8) said,

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”

When we are unsure of God’s will for us regarding specifics (Should I take that job? Should I go on that trip? Should I join that group? etc.), we are guided by divine directions. I will state them as three questions:

First, will this choice help or hinder my ability to love God with all that is within me? Second, will this choice help or hinder my ability to love my neighbor as I love myself? Third, will this choice help or hinder my ability to be a blessing to other people (especially “strangers”)?

Those are our guidelines. God trusts us to take it from here.

[Close in a prayer something like this:] *God of Abraham and Sarah, you kept the impossible promise to take two elderly, barren people from the middle of nowhere and give them names that will never be forgotten, children who eventually gave us our Savior, and a commission to bless that is still ours today. Help us to be blessings to people who are like us and especially to people not like us. Help us to be faithful to you as partners in the redemption of the world. Amen.*

# Abraham's Faith Journey

Belief

Trust

Obedience

Partnership

Intimacy

Righteousness

(A. Hospitality)

(B. Justice)

Stewardship