

Genesis 21-22

The Place where the Lord Will Provide

Introduction

After chapter 17 with the promise of Isaac to Abraham, Genesis abruptly left us hanging as it moved on to complete the story of Lot with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and describe Abraham's first interaction with Abimelech. With chapter 21, it now returns to the promise given in chapter 17.

The Birth of Isaac – Gen. 21:1-7

Verses 1-7 now finally pick up the where Genesis 17 left off with verbal references back to that passage: the word “bore” (or “born”) is repeated five times; there are three references to Abraham's age (old or 100 years), and “laughter”, “laugh” or “Isaac” (meaning “he laughs”) is repeated five times. In verse 1, the LORD *visited* (ESV) Sarah. This word is used by God when He takes a special interest in someone. This is used of the LORD in His concern for Israelites in Egypt (Ex. 3:16), when He gives food to His people after a famine in Ruth (Ruth 1:6), and similarly to this text, he “visits” Hannah enabling her to have additional children after Samuel (1 Sam. 2:21). Also note that verse 1 is written as a parallel statement emphasizing the fulfillment of His promise as *the LORD visited her as He had said, and the LORD did for her as He had promised*. Verse 2 is almost a third phrase in the pattern for the result of God's visiting Sarah is that she finally conceives and bears a son even in Abraham's old age (hers is not mentioned) *at the very time God had spoken to him* again emphasizing God's faithfulness to his promise. And as commanded in chapter 17, Abraham calls his new son Isaac and circumcises him on the eighth day.

Vs. 5 again emphasizes Abraham's age of 100 years when his son Isaac is born, essentially answering Abraham's incredulous question of vs. 17:17 - “*Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?*” The incredibly amazing nature of this birth is the topic of Sarah's response in vs. 6-7 as she uses the theme of laughter to exclaim, “*God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.*” The second phrase literally refers to her son's name as in “*Everyone will Isaac over me.*” She concludes with the rhetorical question, “*Who would have proclaimed to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children.*” The expected answer is “no one.” But God had in actuality proclaimed that to Abraham **twice** and now has fulfilled that promise (with “borne” and “old age” again repeated in this last verse).

Hagar and Ishmael – Gen. 21:8-21

As Wenham mentions¹, it is characteristic of Genesis to finish off sidelines before continuing the main thread as has just happened with the recounting of Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah between chapters 17 and 21. So here, the author now focuses on the fate of Ishmael. Isaac grows and is weaned (likely around 3 years of age). This is a significant event as infant mortality was higher in that time, and thus it was now more certain that he would survive as an heir. Abraham now throws a feast to celebrate. However, this event is also now cause for friction in the household. Sarah sees “the son of Hagar” (Ishmael is never called by name in this chapter) laughing. This is based on the same word as used for Isaac's name, but its form here is often used in a more negative light to refer to mocking or jesting or “making sport of” something. Whatever he is doing incenses Sarah, and she demands that Abraham now drive out the slave woman and her son (note no names are used). She also further explains that her

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50, Word Biblical Commentary*, 1987, p.81

objection is not just to the behavior of the boy, but now that Isaac is likely to survive, she does not want the inheritance to be split between them.

Abraham is *very displeased*. The word for “displeased” is not nearly as strong in English as it is in Hebrew. When God is displeased, death usually follows! It has the sense of seeing something as evil. And Abraham is *very displeased*. This shows the depth of feeling he has for his son, Ishmael. But God tells Abraham to listen to his wife for she was right about one thing. It would be through Isaac “*that your descendants will be named*.” The precise meaning of this phrase is not clear, but it is referring to the line of promise. God reassures Abraham that although Ishmael would not directly inherit at this time, he would make a nation of Ishmael’s descendants. It is amazing how God cares about our messy and distressing human relationships and can handle them! Abraham complies, but also cares about Hagar and her son. He provides them with bread and water and *sends them* away. This is a softer, gentler action than the demand from Sarah to “drive them out.” Hagar departs and wanders in the wilderness of Beersheba. She appears lost and not sure of where to go.

Eventually, Hagar runs out of water (vs. 15). She is at the end of her rope once again. She cannot bear to watch her child die, and so leaves him under a bush (a shaded place) and goes a bowshot distance away. Throughout this passage, Ishmael is referred to as a “lad”. Such a term can mean an age anywhere from a young boy to a young man not yet married. Ishmael could be anywhere from 14 to 20 years old. Thus, the picture here is not of her placing a baby or infant under a bush, but rather directing him to stay in that spot as she goes away. She can likely still see him from that distance, but more importantly, she would not be able to hear him cry. And she weeps aloud.

However, she is not the only one crying, for God hears the voice of the boy. Was he crying or was he perhaps praying as taught by his father? Before he was the God who sees, but now He is the God who hears. The angel of God calls to her from heaven and again asks her a question, “*What troubles you, Hagar?*” calling her by name. He does not even allow her to answer as He knows what the trouble is and begins to reassure her. He tells her not to fear, for he has heard the voice of the boy. While previously he had assured her that her son would have many descendants, God now adds that He will make of him a great nation and commands her to get up and take the boy by the hand. It is at this point that he enables her to see a well of water. She fills the water skin and not even thinking of herself, gives her son a drink.

Vs. 20-21 now conclude his story (except for a genealogy provided in chapter 26). It began mentioning Isaac growing, and now concludes with Ishmael growing up, and God *was with him* to bless him. He continues to live in the wilderness in the Sinai Peninsula east of the Red Sea as an expert archer. Hagar assumes the role of a single parent and in that role finds a wife for her son from her people, the Egyptians.

A Treaty with Abimelech – Gen. 21:22-34

Vs. 22-34 recount another event in Abraham’s life before the final test in chapter 22. There is much speculation as to why this event is recorded and why placed here. However, there is a moment of worship and acknowledgement of a characteristic of God at the end that is significant for Abraham and perhaps is needed for the test that will follow.

It opens with the return of Abimelech with his army commander to speak with Abraham. That he is bringing his army commander indicates that there is a healthy respect for Abraham’s retinue, that he is a force to be reckoned with. That may also be the motivation for asking for a non-aggression treaty. Abimelech starts out recognizing that Abraham has been blessed by God. And he asks Abraham not to deal falsely with him (as he knows Abraham is capable of that). He seems to be aware that Abraham will become more than he is now, for the treaty is to apply to descendants as well! Abimelech is planning for the long term, suspecting Abraham’s descendants may be powerful even though he now only has the one son! He also asks for kindness, even as he has shown kindness to Abraham, and

expects it to be reciprocated. After this long entreaty, Abraham's response is short and to the point. "I will swear" is all he says!

In vs. 25, we learn why his response was so abrupt. He has a grievance. A well that he considered his had been seized by force by Abimelech's servants. As in the previous encounter, Abimelech claims ignorance of the wrong. He again scolds Abraham as before that Abraham had not told him. Abraham is mollified and as a sign of returning kindness (or perhaps as the lesser party) gives Abimelech sheep and oxen and the covenant is established. But then he does something odd, setting apart 7 ewe lambs. It is even confusing to Abimelech who asks what that is about. Abraham explains that he wants a concession as part of the covenant. These ewes, if accepted, will be a witness by Abimelech that the well belongs to Abraham. Abimelech agrees, the covenant is ratified, and he returns with his commander to *the land of the Philistines*. The Philistines referred to later in the Old Testament did not actually appear in that area until about 1200 BC. This may be an anachronistic referral to where Gerar was located. Or this may have been an earlier Aegean people that preceded the Philistines (also Aegean). The place is called Beersheba which can mean both Well of Oath or Well of Seven. Perhaps it meant both.

In response to this event, Abraham plants a tamarisk tree which can grow to 20 feet in sandy soil. He also gives another name to the LORD, "El-Olam," meaning "Everlasting God". Something in the transaction reveals to Abraham that God is also in this for the long term. He and his descendants now permanently own something in this land and he can put down roots. The section concludes that Abraham sojourns there many days.

Testing Abraham – Gen. 22:1-19²

Genesis 22:1 begins with "after these things." It is not clear how much time has passed, but Isaac is no longer a young child as we later read that he is able to carry wood. He might even be a teenager by this time. The verse continues that God is going to test Abraham. This note is for the reader to give insight into what happens, but Abraham does not know this is a test. As we have seen, Abraham is not perfect by any means, but we have seen how his faith, his understanding of God, and his relationship with God has grown, and now it is to be proven, God has been preparing him for this test. Then, at the conclusion of the test, are the last recorded and most climatic words of God to Abraham.

As vs. 1 continues, God calls out to Abraham by name and waits for a response which is a change to previous interactions. This happens three times in the chapter. Twice God calls out to Abraham, and once Isaac does with "my father". Abraham responds with, "Here I am" all three times. It is also interesting to note that in vs. 1-10, while the test is being played out, "Elohim" is used to refer to God and it is only when God calls to stay Abraham's hand in vs. 11 that "YAHWEH", the more personal name of God is used.

In vs. 2, the test is laid out. It is not in the English translations, but this is one of the rare places in the Old Testament where God uses "Please" with his request. He is asking this as a favor to Him. And no reward is offered. The request is to take his son to the land of Moriah and offer him as a burnt sacrifice. God clearly knows what this will cost Abraham as he gives a threefold description of Isaac as "*your son, your precious son, whom you love.*" There is debate as to where the land of Moriah is located. However, the only other use of the name is in Jerusalem for the site of Solomon's temple (2 Chron. 3:1), and while it seems odd that there is no mention of these events in that passage, it makes the most sense for the significance its place in the history of Israel and redemptive history.

The account does not tell us what Abraham thought of God's request. We might think that, culturally, child sacrifice would not be a surprising request. However, child sacrifice was not likely practiced yet in that region, and even if it was, Isaac was far too old to be considered. So, Abraham is left with this

² You can also listen to Gordon Hugenberger's sermon on this passage on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8V5LbFZmrY>, or search for "Hugenberger Genesis 22"

horrific request without understanding why. Abraham had been told Eliezer was not to be his heir. Lot was sent away. Ishmael has been sent away, and now, the child through whom God had said his descendants would be named was to be sacrificed? How does he react? He immediately complies! Early the next morning he saddles a donkey, takes two additional young men, and his son. Then he cuts the wood for the burnt offering and sets out to the place God had told him. The language of “place God hold him” is similar to God’s commands to the Israelites in Deuteronomy that He would choose a specific place for them to worship as in Deut. 12:11, “Then it shall come about that the place in which the LORD your God will choose for His name to dwell, there you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution of your hand, and all your choice votive offerings which you will vow to the LORD.”

In vs. 4, on the third day, Abraham looks up to see the place in the distance. He has had 3 days to change his mind. It is difficult to imagine what he might have been thinking on the way, but his words to his servants and his son give some clue. He now leaves the donkey and his servants with it telling them, “*we will return.*” Is he disguising his intent? Or is he trusting in God’s provision and power that both of them would return? Vs. 6-8 are especially poignant. Abraham places the wood on Isaac to carry (a possible symbol of carrying a cross) and he, himself, takes the more dangerous fire and knife. Then the text describes them going on together. This is repeated again at the end of verse 8 as a small inclusio. In the middle is the difficult conversation with his son. His son calls out, “my Father!” It seems to imply that they had been walking in silence and Isaac needs to get his father’s attention. Abraham answers affectionately, “Here I am, my son”. Isaac then asks the obvious question he had probably been wondering for awhile. “Where is the sacrifice?” Abraham answers, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Again, is he trying to hide the truth from his son? Perhaps he is using the name of the place, “Moriah” (“the Lord will provide” or “will see to it”) as a sign of hope. He has seen God do amazing things – even bring a dead womb to life, and God has promised the line to go through Isaac. So while he does not understand, he trusts. They continue on together.

They arrive at the spot, Abraham builds the altar, lays the wood on it, and then binds his son and lays him on the altar. It is interesting to note that Isaac must have let his father do this. Abraham is over 100 years old. Isaac is a youth and could likely have successfully resisted. And yet, there does not appear to be a struggle. Even as Abraham trusts God, Isaac in parallel trusts his father. Then Abraham “reaches out his hand” to slaughter his son. It is at this point that the angel of the LORD calls out, “Abraham! Abraham!” He calls twice in urgency to be sure to get Abraham’s attention! And for the last time, Abraham says, “Here I am.” God responds again with a double command, “*Do not lay your hand or do anything!*” He also says, “*for now I know ...*” Shouldn’t God have known before? Isn’t He all knowing? Yes, he knew, but it needed to be experienced as well. The knowledge is now confirmed. Why does God ask us to pray when he already knows what is in our hearts? It is so we can experience and know his care through it. Testing not only reveals our hearts to God, but to ourselves as well.

Abraham passes the test and shown that he was willing to give everything to God, even his own precious son that God had given him. It is interesting how God set Abraham up for this test – putting all the pieces in place so that Isaac would be so very precious – the last possible heir, in his old age, born to Sarah, the child of promise. At this point, God now provides a ram caught in a tree for Abraham to use as a sacrifice in place of Isaac. Abraham names the place officially – “The LORD will provide.” Through the test he has not only proven his own character, but is now even more knowledgeable of the character of his God.

But God is not quite finished yet. The angel continues with the final words to Abraham. God swears by Himself, the only time in Genesis. Because he has done this, God repeats the blessings but now with superlatives – “I will **greatly** bless you, and I will **greatly** multiply your seed as the stars in the heavens and the sands of the seashore” They shall possess the gates of their enemies – meaning they will conquer cities. Something of significance to the Israelites facing the fortified cities of Canaan. And not “in you,”

as before but “in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed.” Abraham then returns to Beersheba.

As hinted at above, this event in Abraham’s life is a foreshadowing of God’s sacrifice of His son. The description of the love of Abraham for Isaac is like the words of God for Jesus at his baptism and in the Transfiguration – “this my beloved son.” And the description of “only son” or “precious son” is echoed in John 3:16 – *God gave his only begotten son*. And even as God provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac, Jesus became the “lamb of God”, the substitute sacrifice for us.

Meanwhile, in other News – Gen. 22:20-24

The chapter ends rather anti-climatically. It simply recounts that Abraham learns about the fate of his brother, Nahor. As Abraham has had children by a wife and concubine, so has Nahor, only more so. The children are listed here. The key person and only woman mentioned, however, is Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel. This then will link us to the next chapter in Isaac’s life.