

THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM



*I will cause your descendants
to become as numerous as the
stars of the sky*

Genesis 26:4

BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

(10 BIBLE STUDIES)

EXAMINAPPLICATION

BIBLE STUDIES

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THE SMALL PRINT

THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Co

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2014

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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THESE STUDIES

Your Commitment

I would encourage you to make a commitment to attending your group regularly. I realise that sometimes there are things that get in the way, but do prioritise studying the Bible with other. This will involve sacrifice, and effective use of your time, but I really believe that in doing so you will get the most out of studying the Bible and praying together in your small group.

Your Contribution

What you put into the group is going to determine what you get out of the group. I encourage you to contribute honestly to the discussion and workings of the group. I understand people come from different backgrounds with unique personalities & life experiences. But, we all have a big part to play, so I encourage you to be fully present and take ownership of your group.

Your Preparation

These materials are primarily for use in preparing and/or leading group discussions, but they will also be useful in keeping your thoughts together in one place. The materials provide you with the passage so that you can identify and highlight recurring themes and note down your own thoughts and questions. Also, the materials include questions designed to provoke thought, and help you reflect on what the passage meant, both at the time it was written, and also what it means for us now.

I would encourage you to make good use of these materials, as doing so will help you contribute and get the most out of the group discussions. The materials are, however, only “tools” – they are there to help you, and not to restrict you, or force you to think in a certain manner. I want to see God speaking to you through these passages, and if the questions or notes don’t help you, simply don’t use them!

I have also included within these materials an introduction to these character studies. Make of this what you will, but I hope that it is helpful in getting you started!

Your Leadership

Here are some useful pointers in how to lead your Bible study group. Be aware that included in this study guide are more questions than you can possibly ask and/or answer in one session. They are not designed to be used rigidly, and there will rarely be a need to ask every question! Make sure that you spend some time praying at the start and ensure you read & re-read the passages as much as possible. In relation to the passages, then consider the suggested questions with an open mind. There is rarely “a single right answer” and I would encourage you to share your thoughts with your group.

I have also included a number of quotations from relevant Christian literature, most of which are readily available online if you want to do further thinking or study. My prayer is that as you study together you would grow to love Jesus and experience Him more deeply.

I would appreciate your feedback and suggestions on how to make these materials even better!

*Steve McClure
Spring 2019*

ABRAHAM AND SARAH - 20TH CENTURY (BC) MISSIONARIES

CALLED TO WAIT – GENESIS 12-23 AND HEBREWS 11: 8-16

Their story begins 2 Millennia before Jesus and our story 2 Millennia after His First Coming (2 Peter 3:3-4). People still mocking saying where is this promised Coming but we can be 20 times more sure of His second coming since there are 20 times more Refs to the Final Day of the Lord compared with those for His first Coming. We also are called to wait as were Abraham and Sarah. Some lessons from the lives of Abraham and Sarah: Waiting, Hope, Perseverance, Faith. We can reflect on their lives from Gen 12-23 through the lens of three tests which come to all of us: Suffering, Silence, Success.

A. SUFFERING

1. *Pilgrimage*: He built an altar (12:7); pitched his tent (12:8) and dug wells (21:21, 31). The life of the Patriarchs can be summarised from Gen 26:18, 25 as - altar, tent, well. Altar= Life of Worship and Sacrifice; Tent= Life of pilgrimage and Hope ; Well = Life of dependence and desire (thirst)
2. *Famine* (12:12-20): Flees the Promised land for Egypt; fear of Pharaoh and deception over Sarah. Repeats the same failure with King Abimelech years later (Gen 20)
3. *Discouragement & Division over Lot*: (Gen 13, 14 and 19 (Final Loss & break up)
4. *Shame*: No descendant (Gen 15) God says 'I am your Shield and exceeding Great Reward'. c.f. Fred Horrox and myself held up at gun point by bandits in Kenya in 1998
5. *More family stress* (Gen 16): Conflict over Sarah and Hagar. Sarah felt despised and angry; Abraham gets the blame.
6. *What about me?* (Gen 20:17): Ironically, he prays for healing of barren wombs in Abimelech's household, but Sarah remains barren. c.f. Paul's thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:8-10)
7. *Loss of Ishmael* (Gen 21:9-11) Ishmael mocks Isaac and is sent away leaving Abraham very distressed
8. *Sacrifice of Isaac* (Gen 22): What might he have been thinking & feeling during the three-day walk to Mount Moriah?
9. *Loss of Sarah* (Gen 23:12) 80 years of marriage - a huge hole in his life.

Why does God allow suffering in our lives?

- Makes us more dependent on the Lord and more like Jesus (James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:5-7; Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 1: 8,9)
- Develops compassion in us to comfort others suffering in a fallen world (2 Corinthians 1:3,4)
- Mystery of God's purposes (Book of Job) and Lord you alone know (Ezekiel 37:3)
- c.f. Murder of young leader Idris in Nigeria in 1982; led to his brother Blessed becoming a missionary in Zambia (John 12:24, 25)

B. SILENCE (CALLED TO WAIT)

After 24 years in the Promised Land they had lost hope of the promised child through Sarah. Why such a long wait?

1. After Lot's separation 'A servant will become my heir!' (Gen 15:1-6) The question leads to promise of descendants like stars and sand

2. Ten years in the land (Gen 16) - 86 years old when Ishmael is born. 4 millennia later we are still living with the consequences of that decision in the Middle East! Impatience leads to many failures e.g., King Saul and loss of his Kingdom (1 Samuel 13:5-14). c.f. my experience in Cote d'Ivoire disciplining an apparently eager young Ivorian who later ended up in prison and proved to be a charlatan.
3. 24 years in the Land (Gen 17:17-19) - 99 years old (Sarah was 89). Next year you will have your baby! Abraham laughs, so son to be called Isaac (Hebrews -he laughs). God says 'No' to Ishmael as heir to the promise e.g., David and Nathan – 'No' to building the temple but 'Yes' to his son Solomon - the next generation (2 Sam 7). Sarah also laughs and lies (Gen 18:12-15) – but later through her partnership with Abraham is co-heir to the promises (Heb11:11-12)
4. 25 years in the land (Gen 21:1-7) - 100 years old (Sarah 90). Joy and Sorrow mixed - Birth of Isaac but Ishmael forced to leave (21:9-11). Life is a mixture of joys and sorrows - often running concurrently.
5. On-going years of waiting for the out-working of the promises e.g., Isaac and Rebecca waiting 20 years for the birth of Esau and Jacob; Israel waiting 400 years in Egypt for Exodus; 400 years of silence from Malachi to the arrival of Jesus.

Why does God make us wait?

- We learn more about God's character and purposes and ourselves! (2 Peter 3:18 grow in grace and knowledge of Jesus). Names of God reveal His character e.g. Jehovah - Covenant God (12:1, 7, 8 etc.); Most High God and Creator of Heaven and earth (Gen 14:22); Shield and Great Reward (15:1); Living God who sees me (16:13,14 - via their slave girl Hagar!); El Shaddai-Almighty, All Sufficient (17:1); Judge of all the earth (18:25); Eternal God (18:14; 21:33); Jehovah Jireh - God will provide (22:8,14)
- The Lord could have given Isaac in the first year and fulfilled His promise, but they would never have learned so much about God and themselves.
- We grow in perseverance, wisdom and transformation of character (James 1:2-5; 3:17)
- We learn that God is sovereign, full of mercy and compassion and fulfils His promises (James 5:10, 14).
- We learn the importance of solitude and being still and silent before the Lord (Psalm 46:10; Zechariah 2:13) e.g., Moses - 2 x 40 days on the mountain and 40 years in the desert before that; Israel's 40 years wilderness wanderings; Jesus 30 years of preparation then 40 days in the wilderness; Paul's 3 years in Arabia and many years in prison; half hour silence in heaven (Rev 8:1). C.f. More prep time for prayer, prep for teaching Chemistry and learning Hausa following a military coup in Nigeria in 1975; two-year difficult wait and redirection to Francophone Africa following Muslim riots in Nigeria in 1983.
- We learn to persevere in prayer and put our hope in God's promises (Luke 18:1-8). C.f. Missionary Patricia St John's story of her front house wall suddenly falling down in Tunisia after 20 years of underground vibrations from next door bakery machine and not giving up in prayer

C. SUCCESS

Perhaps the most difficult of tests we face? E.g., Moses' impatience with the Israelites and couldn't enter the Promised land – 'shall I bring forth water from the rock' (Numbers 20); David sin with Bathsheba and indirect murder of Uriah - abuse of power (2 Sam 11&12); Uzziah's pride in insisting on offering the sacrifices and subsequent leprosy (2 Chronicles 26); Diotrefes loved to be first (3 John

9). Abraham had failures of faith but most often gives glory to God for the successes God gives him. For example;

- Abraham delivers Lot from captivity but refuses king of Sodom's offer of gifts but offers tithes to Melchizedek representing the Most High God (Gen 14:18-24). He also had trained his 318 young men for battle - not just a wealthy Bedouin (14:14)
- Believes God for the promise of descendants like stars and sand grains (Gen 15)
- Obeys God in the sacrifice of Isaac-says 'Here I am' twice (22:1,11). He is responsive and available to God. This is the high point of his journey of faith (Gen 22). He was afterwards called the 'Friend of God' (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isa 41:3; James 2:21-23). E.g., Lorne Sanny was asked why such an unlikely successor as himself was chosen to be President of the Navigators after Daws died - he replied: 'I was always available'.
- Purchased a cave after 60 years sojourning in hope of the promise of his descendants inheriting the whole land, even though he still only had one Isaac (Gen 23).
- The life of faith and hope is transmitted to his descendants through the rest of Genesis to Joseph wanting his bones to be carried from Egypt back to the Promised Land -a wait of 400 years!

What is success? Finishing well and keeping the faith (2 Tim 4:8); continuing to believe God's promises to the end of our days and passing this hope onto our co-workers and descendants - both physical and spiritual (Hebrews 11:9,13); being faithful to our Calling and whatever task or role the Lord assigns us, whether small or great, whether we see much fruit or little (Luke 16:10-12; John 4:37,38; 1 Cor 15 : 58).....how would you define success?

- 2000 years after the times of Abraham and Sarah the Promised 'seed' is born (Matt 1:1; Gal 3:16) and through the Gospel and faith in Jesus:
- We become heirs of the promises even as Isaac was (Gal 3:29; 4:28; 2 Corinthians 1:20)
- We ourselves are called the friends of God if we trust and obey Him (John 15:9-16)
- Even more amazingly the Father loves us as much as He loves Jesus - we are His Beloved! (John 13:1; 17:23; 1 John 3:1-3)

CONCLUSION:

- Let us look to the rock from which we have been cut...to Abraham...to Sarah... and just as they did 'to live for the future and for others' (Isaiah 51:1-2).
- Let us look to Jesus, the promised 'seed' to bless the nations and run our race with the same perseverance and hope as Abraham and Sarah did - as we also wait by faith for His promised return.

Bernie Dodd, Navigators UK (European Missions Forum Feb 2012)

INTRODUCTION: In Genesis 3-11 we see the growing impact of mankind's sin on the rise. After the flood however, God renews His promise and again mandates mankind to multiply and fill the earth. Mankind's response however is to build the tower of Babel. At this point Abram and Sarai enter the story and we see the beginning of God's answer to the evil of human hearts.

SETTING THE SCENE: What is your experience of leaving behind something that is very familiar? How would you rank the most difficult aspects of this change? To what extent can you relate to Frodo Baggins in expressing the gravity of such an upheaval (see quote on page 9)?

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CALLED FROM (11:27-12:2): Based on what we know about Abram (11:27-32), what do you think would have been hardest for him in leaving 'his country, his people and his Father's household' (12:1, Acts 7:2-4)? What do you think God wanted Abram to 'go from' (see also Joshua 24:2)?

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CALLED TO (v1): What *positively* did God want Abraham to 'come to' (e.g., what do we know about the land God would show him)? What implications would obedience to God's command have for how Abram related to God (see also 1 Thessalonians 1:9, 2 Corinthians 6:18)?

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GOD'S PROMISES TO ABRAM (v2-3): What do you notice about the promises God makes to Abram? What do you notice about the tenses used here? Are these promises to be filled spiritually and/or materially? How and when do you imagine that the promises might be fulfilled?

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BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING (v2-3): What does God mean and/or not mean here through the use of the word 'blessing' (consider the ideas of fruitfulness, multiplication, filling and abundance)? How does blessing work both horizontally, and vertically, in our relationships with others? To what extent do you agree with Paul, that this was the 'gospel announced in advance to Abraham' (Gal 3:7-9)?

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TO OBEY OR NOT TO OBEY (v4-5): Why is so little attention given to the details of the journey (a month's hike of 500 miles)? With Abram 75 years old and Sarai barren, it must have been very hard for them to trust God; what then do you think it was that caused them to choose to obey?

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A PROMISED INHERITANCE (v6-9, Acts 7:6): Having obeyed God, how do you think Abram would have felt being told that his descendants would inherit the land which was currently occupied by the Canaanites? How do you typically respond when God's promises clash with present realities?

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DEALING WITH CHANGE (v10-20): How do life's challenges threaten to derail both Abram's faith in God and the promises God made to him? What would have been the appeals of staying in Egypt rather than the land God had promised to Abram? Why do you think God punishes Pharaoh (who acted ignorantly) instead of Abram (who acted in disobedience and unbelief)?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: How does this chapter help us in working out the practical realities of living by faith? How have you experienced the fulfilment of God's promises to Abram in your own life? What practically can you do, in living out your faith, to be more of a blessing to those around you?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Discuss together ways that God has asked you to give up your comfort and security in order to embrace His promises for the future. Pray for one another that you would know more of God's blessing and as a result be more of a blessing to those around you.

MEMORY VERSES: GENESIS 12:2-3

Frodo Baggins is told he must leave his cosy home in the Shire and travel far away. After the initial shock he says: "Of course, I have sometimes thought of going away, but I imagined that as a kind of holiday, a series of adventures like Bilbo's or better, ending in peace. But this would mean exile, a flight from danger into danger ... As for where I am going, it would be difficult to give that away, for I have no clear idea myself, yet ... where am I to go? And by what shall I steer? What is to be my quest? ... I feel very small, and very uprooted, and well-desperate."

J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings (Great Britain: harper Collins © 1994, p61, 64-65

STUDY 2 – GENESIS 13:1-18, 14:8-24 – ABRAM RESCUES LOT

INTRODUCTION: Here we see Abram and his nephew Lot falling out over the land. They decide to go their separate ways, but later Lot is captured, and Abram goes to save him and his possessions. Abram defeats them in battle, but refuses to accept the spoils of war offered instead of the people.

SETTING THE SCENE: To what extent can you identify with Abram and Lot's disagreement? How can we settle falling outs with friends/family without resulting to quarrelling?

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ON THE ROAD AGAIN (13:1-4): What do you imagine it was like for Abram to pack up everything he had, including large numbers of livestock, silver and gold? Why do you think Abram returns to the place where he started? How much of a priority do you think Abram places on communing with God?

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TOO MUCH STUFF (13:5-7): Can you imagine such vast numbers of livestock that the land was not able to support them? Why do you think Lot was travelling with Abram? What is the significance of the other tribes mentioned living there at the time?

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WE CAN WORK IT OUT (13:8-13): Why do you think Abram allows Lot to take the easy option? How can we show the same grace to others when we fall out nowadays? To what extent do you think Abram's selflessness here was because he trusted in God? Looking at v13, what does this show about the respective wisdom of Lot's and Abram's decisions?

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HOME SWEET HOME (13:14-18): Why do you think God waits until after Lot is gone to show Abram the borders of his new home? What do you make of God's promise about Abram's offspring outnumbering the dust of the earth? Why does Abram build another altar?

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KIDNAPPED (14:8-12): What is the importance of this battle between these nine kings? Is this just a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time for Lot? Why or why not? To what extent is this battle a possible warning from God to the people of Sodom in light of what is going to take place?

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ABRAM TO THE RESCUE (14:13-16): What, if any, is the significance of Abram allying with people outside God's promise? How much is Abram motivated by love to rescue Lot? Would you act as immediately as Abram appears to do so to rescue someone you love? Does Abram rescuing Lot despite his bad choices remind you of anything?

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MELCHIZEDEK (14:18-21): What are your impressions of the curious case of Abram's encounter with Melchizedek, King of Salem? What do you think motivates Abram to give him a tenth? The only other Biblical reference to him is in Hebrews 7:1-10: what light does this passage shed on this?

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SERVICE VS. REWARD (14:17,22-24): Do you think Abram intended to save the King of Sodom, or was it just a by-product of rescuing Lot? Why do you think he turns down the spoils of war and swore it on oath to the LORD? What can we learn from Abram here about service being its own reward?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: What lessons can we learn from the main characters in these chapters and where do you see God's hand at work here? What are the key things that you are taking away?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Discuss times when you have intervened to help someone at great material cost to yourself, because of the love and affection that you have for them. Can you think of any regrettable situations you may have been in, that God has rescued you from?

MEMORY VERSES: GENESIS 13:8-9

STUDY 3 – GENESIS 15:1-21 – THE LORD’S COVENANT

INTRODUCTION: In this study we shall look at the beginnings of God’s Covenant to Abraham. God comes to Abram in a vision and again reiterates His promises: a child who would have a multitude of descendants, and a nation for them to live in peace.

SETTING THE SCENE (v1a): In what ways does (or has) God spoken to you? How does this contrast with the descriptions used in the life of Abraham (e.g., 12:1-3, 7, 13:10-13 & 15:1)? What specifically do you think is meant here by the phrase *the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision*?

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THE PRESENCE OF GOD (v1b): Why might Abram be afraid? Why is it so significant about the LORD’s claim to be Abram’s *shield* and his *very great reward*? In what ways should the presence of God have been enough both for Abram and also for us?

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ABRAM’S DOUBT (v2-3): Despite God’s incredible words, we can see the pain in Abram’s response: why does he find it so hard to take encouragement from v1? What can we learn from Abram’s honesty here? Do you think Abram’s doubt over the lack of a son affected his faith in God?

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THE PROMISED SON (v4-5): How do you respond to the idea that we, like Abram, need to be reminded of the promises that God makes us? Why does God speak in certainties, such as “your own flesh and blood”, when He knows that Abram will still have to wait many years to see the outcome?

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ABRAM’S FAITH (v6): Why now, does Abram believe God’s promise? What do you make of the simplicity of the spiritual transaction here: Abram believes, and God credits him with Righteousness (quoted in Romans 4, Galatians 3:6 & James 2:23)? Does the imagery of stars representing his descendants affect Abram’s understanding of God?

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THE PROMISED LAND (v7-8): Why does Abram's doubt resurface in relation to the land God has promised him? Do you think Abram is concerned of trying to take possession of the land with only a promise from God to back his decision?

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ABRAM'S SACRIFICE (v9-11): What is the significance of Abram fetching these animals to sacrifice them (See also Jeremiah 34:18-19)? What does cutting them in half symbolise? Why does Abram choose to enter into this Covenant agreement with God?

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FUTURE SUFFERING (v12-16): Why does God go into such detail about Abram's descendants suffering in a foreign land for 400 years? What does God mean when He says: "the sin of the Amorites has not reached its full measure", and why is this significant for Abram's descendants?

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FULFILLING THE PROMISE (v17-21): What is your explanation of the blazing torch that moves among the pieces of Abram's offerings? What specifically is the Covenant that God makes with Abram? Is it important that God promises the possession of lands specifically owned by other nations?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: In what ways has the events of this chapter served to grow Abram's faith in the promises of God? How might it likewise help to grow our own faith in God? How should these words prompt a response of praise towards our God who continues to work out these promises today? Where do you see Jesus and His gospel portrayed through this chapter?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Reflect and praise God for His great promises to us. Sometimes our tendency is to begin to doubt that they are from Him when they haven't fully materialised. Pray that God would use these times to grow your faith in Him and His promises. Specifically ask Him to help you choose to trust in His promises, even in spite of present sufferings or difficulties we might be facing?

MEMORY VERSES: GENESIS 15:4-5

STUDY 4 – GENESIS 16:1-16 – FAITH VERSUS DISSAPPOINTMENT

INTRODUCTION: In this study we see what happens when Abram is impatient waiting for his promised son, so decides to take matters into his own hand by sleeping with a slave, Hagar. The resulting child, Ishmael, caused a few headaches for Abram later on, as we shall see in Galatians.

SETTING THE SCENE: What kind of things are you waiting for at this time? When there is uncertainty, what makes waiting such a struggle? In what kind of ways do we sometimes try to short cut God's plan for us in our waiting? How might Sarai's 11 years of waiting have begun to define her (see 11:30)?

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TRYING TO FIX IT (v1-4a): Sarai is clear that God had kept her from having children (v2): why might she think this? How could Abram sleeping with her Hagar provide her with a family? To what extent do you think it strange that Abram so easily agrees, completely forgetting God's promises to him?

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BLAME & BITTERNESS (v4b-6): Why do you think Hagar is so annoyed, that she begins to despise her mistress? Why does Sarai complain to Abram, given that it was her idea? What do you make of Abram effectively permitting Sarai to mistreat the mother of his unborn child?

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THE CYCLE OF DISSAPPOINTMENT (v1-6): In what ways can you relate to this cycle of disappointment that took Sarai from faith to a place where she became defined by her situation before trying to fix it, blaming others and becoming bitter?

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MISERY & JOY (v7-11): Why is it a surprise that God now appears to Hagar? How do you think Hagar would have responded to being told she must submit to Sarai? Why do you think the LORD promises to give her numerous descendants? What do you make of the LORD hearing her misery?

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ISHMAEL (v12-16): How might Hagar have responded to hearing her son will effectively be a lone wolf, hostile to everyone? Why does Hagar name God, *the One who sees me*? What do you make of her faith, as she returns to submit to Sarai, and gives birth to a son, who Abram names Ishmael?

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THE LAW VS. PROMISE (GAL 4:21-31): Who are these people who Paul addresses who *want to be under the law*? What is Paul getting at when he asks them if they are aware of what the law says?

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a) SLAVE VS. FREE (v22-23): Why does Paul distinguish the two sons of Abraham as one born into slavery (by the flesh), and the other born into freedom (by the promise)?

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b) TWO COVENANTS (v24-27): In what ways do the two women represent two covenants: one from Mount Sinai and one from the Jerusalem that is *above*?

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c) FLESH VS. SPIRIT (v28-31): How do you understand that are we now *children of promise* (v28)? How do we live as children not of the *slave woman* but of the *free woman*?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: What have you learned about how God grows our faith through our waiting? How can we live in the Spirit, by God's promise rather than bound under the law, by our flesh?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Share stories of when you have tried to fix situations yourself rather than waiting for God. Ask God to help you replace this cycle of disappointment with a cycle of faith. Pray for one another in this and ask Him to speak in our waiting and use these times to grow us in faith.

MEMORY VERSES: GALATIANS 4:22-23

STUDY 5 – GENESIS 17:1-27 – PROMISE OF BLESSING

INTRODUCTION: God says that Abram (exalted Father) will now be called Abraham (Father of many nations). God reaffirms His covenant with him, and it is to be confirmed through the sign of circumcision. In return, God promises that He will be His God, and the God of his descendants.

SETTING THE SCENE: Abram and Sarai have now been waiting 25 years for God to fulfil his promise to Him of a son? How do you imagine Abram & Sarai might have felt at this stage? To what extent can you relate to such a long and uncertain period of waiting?

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WALKING FAITHFULLY (v1-2): It's been 13 years since God's last recorded word to Abram (now 99) and now the LORD appears to him again. What is significant about the way that God introduced Himself here (*El Shaddai* means *God who is sufficient*)? What would you say that it looks like to walk before God faithfully and blamelessly (literally whole)? Is God's covenant with Abram conditional (v2)?

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NAMES & PROMISES (v3-8): When might falling facedown be appropriate before God? Why does God give Abram a new name (v5)? God repeats His promises, but is still yet to fulfil them: what do you imagine this would have felt like for Abram (think esp. about the significance of the name change)?

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Do you notice any progression in God's promises? Who exactly is included this Covenant? Why is God saying that He will be their God such a big deal? Paul calls us the "children of Abraham" (See Galatians 3:7); in what ways does this covenant extend to us today?

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SIGN OF THE COVENANT (v9-14): In what ways is the sign of circumcision so important? Why do you think that God wants *those who are not your offspring* to be circumcised? Why is this described as an *everlasting covenant* when we don't have to be circumcised now (Romans 2:25-29, Col 2:11-12)?

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THE MOTHER OF NATIONS (v15-18): God also changes the name of Sarai (*princess*) to Sarah (*princess of a multitude*): why is God so eager to affirm that Abraham would have a child through her (v16)? To what extent is Abraham's response understandable given their ages (see also Rom 4:17-21)? How does v18 demonstrate Abraham's ongoing struggle to believe?

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ISAAC & ISHMAEL (v19-22): Why does God want to establish a Covenant with Isaac over Ishmael? How do you interpret God's acceptance of Abraham's desire for Ishmael to be blessed? Why does God promise to also make Ishmael into a great nation? Do you think it is significant that Abraham is given a timescale of when Isaac will be born, and if so, do you think this would help his faith?

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FULFILLING THE COVENANT (v23-27): What do you make of Abraham's immediate response to obey God in this? How easy to you find it to do what God asks of you? Abraham is meticulous in following every detail of God's commands; is that how we respond to God in what He asks us to do?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: How might the events of this chapter have strengthened Abraham and Sarah's resolve to continue trusting God to deliver on His promises? In ways do you think we can learn from these interactions? Where do you see Jesus Christ referenced or pointed to in these words?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Share stories of how you have trusted in God's promises even when it has felt like the wait was never-ending. Ask God to circumcise our hearts and help us to put Him first in all that we do. Pray that we would be faithful and blameless in the light of God's new Covenant.

MEMORY VERSE: HEBREWS 11:11

INTRODUCTION – In this session the LORD appears again to Abraham and proceeds to announce both the birth of Isaac and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. We read about Sarah's response to the promise of a son with a year and Abraham's pleading with God on behalf of Sodom.

SETTING THE SCENE: In what ways have you heard or experienced the presence of God? In a world where we are bombarded with voices from all directions, how can we discern God's voice and God's presence and make space to hear Him?

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ENCOUNTERING GOD (v1-8): Soon after the events of chapter 17 God appears again to Abraham: what can we learn about Abraham and the LORD from this encounter at *Mamre* (see also 13:18)? What do you think causes Abraham to respond with such urgency, reverence and eagerness to serve? Why do you think that God appears to Abraham in this manner?

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GOD OF THE IMPOSSIBLE (v9-15): To what extent can you identify with Sarah when 'she laughed to herself' at God's promise to give her a son within the coming year? Why do you think that God points out her unbelief (v14) and her sin (15)? How does this contrast with her laugh in 21:1-7?

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What situations are you experiencing (or have experienced) where some element seems (or seemed) impossible? How can we encourage one another in deepening our convictions that nothing really is too hard for the LORD – the God of the impossible?

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PLEADING FOR SODOM (v16-21): What do you make of the discussion about whether to hide from Abraham what God was about to do to Sodom & Gomorrah (where Lot's family were living)? To what extent do you think that the outcome was ever in doubt? Abraham is described as the "friend of God" (2 Chronicles 20:7, Isaiah 41:8); what do we see of the closeness of their relationship in these verses?

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INTERCESSORY PRAYER (v22-33): What is striking about the way that Abraham pleads with the LORD once the men had gone to investigate the outcry in Sodom (v22)? Do you think Abraham oversteps the mark as he intercedes on behalf of the righteous in this city; why or why not?

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GOD'S APPOINTED MEANS: If God is Sovereign why then does God want us to intercede with Him on behalf of others (e.g., Ezekiel 22:30-31)? To what extent do you believe, and have you experienced that our prayers make a difference (see also Numbers 23:19 & Don Carson quote below)?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: Why do you think God entered into this kind of dialogue with Abraham; how might it have helped him? Think of a time when you have interceded on behalf of somebody or some situation to God; what was the outcome both for you and for the person you interceded for?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Share together something that currently seems impossible to you OR your thoughts about the power of prayer and how it interacts with God's purposes. Intercede with God regarding areas of particular struggle or where you are looking to God to act just now.

MEMORY VERSE: HEBREWS 4:16

"The really wonderful truth is that human beings like you and me can participate in bringing about God's purposes through God's own appointed means. In that limited sense, prayer does certainly change things; it cannot be thought to change things in some absolute way that catches God out...If I pray aright, God is graciously working out his purposes in me and through me, and the praying, though mine, is simultaneously the fruit of God's powerful work in me through his Spirit. By this God-appointed means of prayer we become God's instruments to bring about a God-appointed end. If I do not pray, it is not as if the God-appointed end fails, leaving God somewhat frustrated. Instead, the entire situation has now changed, and my prayerlessness, for which I am entirely responsible, cannot itself escape the reaches of God's sovereignty, forcing me to conclude that there are other God-appointed ends in view, possibly including judgement on me and on those for whom I should have been interceding."

D. A. Carson, A Call to Spiritual Reformation © 1992, IVP, p164-165

STUDY 7 – GENESIS 19:1-29 – SODOM & GOMORRAH DESTROYED

INTRODUCTION: In this study we look at the salvation of Lot and his family by the angels from the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. We see God's wrath poured out on them, and Abraham sees from a distance what has occurred.

A DIFFICULT PASSAGE: What are your first impressions from this passage? Is this a different God to the one we see in the New Testament? How do you reconcile God's divine Justice with His overwhelming love, mercy and grace? Do you ever question God's decision-making when it comes to your own life (like Abraham did in the last study)?

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LOT GREETES THE VISITORS (v1-3): How would you react to meeting two angels? Are you at all surprised by Lot's response to them? Why do you think he insists on them coming with him? What is the significance of him giving them something to eat, and to rest?

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CITY IN UPROAR (v4-8): How do you think Lot felt at his house being surrounded? What do you the demands of the mob tell us about them? What does Lot's offer of his daughters to the mob tell us about him? Why do you think Lot protects the visitors; is it because he recognises who they are?

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A RESCUE PLAN (v9-14): What do you make of the angels telling Lot to gather his family and get out of the city? What do you think of the fact that the outcry of the people was so great that God had to send them to destroy it? Why do you think Lot cannot convince his sons-in-law to leave the city?

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FLEE OR DIE (v15-17): How do you react to the angels' urgency to get Lot to leave the city ASAP? Do you think it strange that Lot hesitated, when he clearly knew who these visitors were? Why do you think they give them a helping hand to escape? Why do the angels only take Lot and his family part-way to safety? Is it interesting that God only just rescues Lot? (See 1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

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A FURTHER PLEA (v18-22): Why do you think Lot says that he can't flee to the mountains? Is he a little apprehensive about trusting God to save him and his family? Why does God decide to spare the town of Zoar? Why now does Lot's presence seem to delay God's action, when it didn't beforehand?

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WRATH & PUNISHMENT (v23-26): How do you react to the LORD raining down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah? Why do you think God destroys everything living, including the vegetation, in the land? Why does Lot's wife look back? What do you make of her being turned into a pillar of salt?

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ABRAHAM REMEMBERED (v27-29): How do you think Abraham reacted when he saw what the LORD had done? Why did God choose to remember Abraham, and therefore decide to rescue Lot?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Pray for those you may know in difficult situations where it's not easy to be a Christian. Think on God's mercy and grace as he sent His son to die on the cross to save us from sin. Is there anyone we know is facing judgement now who we can intercede for in our prayers?

STUDY 8 – GENESIS 21:1-7 & 22:1-19 – ABRAHAM TESTED

INTRODUCTION: In this study Abraham and Sarah finally receive the child of the promise. Once the child is weaned, Sarah asks Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away (Gen 21:8-21) and God tells Abraham to listen to his wife. Sometime later God chose to test Abraham's faith and asked him to sacrifice the very child that God had promised and for whom Abraham had waited so long for.

SETTING THE SCENE: What experiences have been particularly testing in your life; what was it that was tested? What was the outcome? What specifically has tested (or is testing) your faith in God?

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GOD'S PROMISES FULFILLED (21:1-7): After 25 years of waiting, in what ways do you think trusting God's promise was difficult for Abraham and Sarai (remember Gen 16:1-4, 17:17-18, 18:12-15)?

The promise (Gen 12) – Abraham aged 75
 Ishmael born (Gen 16) – Abraham aged 86
 Promise repeated (Gen 17) – aged 99
 Isaac born (Gen 21) – Abraham aged 100

How is the LORD's faithfulness demonstrated in these verses (v1-2)? How do these verses reveal their delight at God's faithfulness? How do you think they felt now that their waiting had come to an end? How does their testimony help you to trust God's faithfulness and believe His promises?

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CALLED TO SACRIFICE (22:1-2): What is your immediate response to God's instruction to Abraham to 'take his son, his only son, whom he loves' and sacrifice him as a burnt offering? What do you notice from what Abraham does and doesn't say and do? I can think of a long list of things that I might say to God if he asked this of me; how do you think *you* would respond?

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A TESTING HIKE (22:3-8): What are the implications of God's command for Abraham (see also quote over the page)? How would you think Abraham would have felt as he and Isaac made the 3 day hike to Mount Moriah? How did Abraham's faith enable him to obey (see v5 and Hebrews 11:17-19)?

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FAITH PROVED GENUINE (22:9-14): What did God learn about Abraham's faith from taking him through this test (esp. v12)? Why does Abraham call the place 'God will provide' (see v8 & v13)?

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How and why do you think that God tests us (see James 1:2-4, 12, Job 23:10, Isaiah 48:10, 1 Peter 1:6-7)? How do you think that Abraham experienced God in a deeper way because of what God took him through? What have you learned from the ways that God has tested your faith in the past?

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PROMISES OF BLESSING (22:15-18): How do these promises parallel with God's promises in Genesis 12:1-3, 13:14-17 and 15:1-21? Why do you think that these promises are so often repeated throughout Abraham's story and what are we to learn from them?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: What parallels do you see between this account and what Jesus did for us on the cross? How did God "provide" for all of us in the latter (substitution, justice, punishment)?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Discuss your own personal response to the way that God tests Abraham's faith and to the example of faith and obedience demonstrated in Abraham in spite of the fact that his hope, his joy and his future were all on the line. Pray for one another that you would also experience God in a deeper way and that when tested your faith would also be proved genuine.

MEMORY VERSES: HEBREWS 11:17-18 OR JAMES 2:21

"This boy is his son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loves. And he ties up his legs, binds his arms, so there will be no struggle at the end. Then he picks up his son—bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. He holds the same body that he held on the first day it came from Sarah's womb, the little body that he held to feed and bathe and rock and tell stories...the little body he would check on at night to make sure it was still breathing, and hold sometimes just to laugh at the sheer impossibility of it all. He holds that body one last time, then he places it on the altar, on the wood. Finally, he reaches towards heaven

with the knife in his hand, to destroy with a single move the life he had created; and with it all his hope and joy and future " John Ortheg The life You've always wanted Grand Rapids Zondervan © 2002

STUDY 9 – GENESIS 23, 25: 1-11 & HEBREWS 11:8-19 – ABRAHAM'S LEGACY

INTRODUCTION: In this study we will consider the deaths of Abraham and Sarah and the physical and spiritual legacies that they left behind. We will be reflecting back over their lives, trying to identify the ways that their examples have touched our lives (Romans 15:4) and seeking to learn from them.

SETTING THE SCENE: What would you like people to remember about you long after you have passed away? How would you want to complete the sentence "By faith you..."? What are the long-term goals that will help you live in such a way now to build such a legacy?

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How do you respond to Philip Eveson's Quote: "If you want to die in faith, make sure that you are living in faith" (Origins, pg. 365)? What might it look like for you to live in faith?

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SARAH'S DEATH (GENESIS 23): Why do you think that so few details are recorded about Sarah's death compared to Abraham's provision of a burial place? Why was Abraham so eager to ensure that he bought the land? What do you think was the significance of the place where Sarah was buried (see v4, v19)? In what was Abraham placing his hope (Hebrews 11:13-16)?

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SARAH'S LEGACY (HEBREWS 11:11, 1 PET 3:6): Most biblical references to Sarah are in Genesis but what do we learn about her legacy from these two NT statements about her faith and obedience? How have we observed Sarah to have 'considered him faithful who had made the promise'? To what extent are you considering *him faithful* who has made promises to you?

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ABRAHAM'S DEATH (GEN 25:1-11): In contrast to Sarah what do we learn about Abraham and the legacy he left behind to his various children? What do you think is the significance of the phrase "good old age" (See Gen 15:15)?

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GATHERED TO HIS PEOPLE: In what sense was Abraham 'gathered to his people' (see Matthew 22:31-32); as a 'foreigner and stranger' was not the opposite true (only Sarah had thus far been buried in Canaan)? Who then really are Abraham's people and Abraham's children (see also John 8:31-42) and how is this the fulfilment of all the promises God had made to Abraham?

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ABRAHAM'S LEGACY (HEBREWS 11:8-10,12-13): What do we learn about Abraham's legacy from the verses written in the New Testaments great 'hall of faith'? Is there anything here about Abraham's faith that surprises you (either by inclusion or omission)?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: What is the one thing from the life of Abraham & Sarah that really challenges you in your daily lives? What would be the one thing that stands out to you from this study?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Think back over the lives of Abraham and Sarah (all that God has done in them and through them) and try to identify the things that have really touched your hearts. Pray for one another that you would take them to heart and allow them to influence and transform your lives.

MEMORY VERSES: GALATIANS 3:28-29

"Faith involves certain beliefs. Faith involves an attitude of hope and confidence. But at its core, faith is trusting a person." John Ortberg, Faith & Doubt, pg. 51

STUDY 10 – ROMANS 4 & GALATIANS 3 – CALLED TO LIVE BY FAITH

INTRODUCTION: The New Testament helps us consider how God's promises to Abraham were understood. In Romans 1-3, Paul described the universal need of salvation and God's remedy. Then in chapter 4, Paul explained the Old Testament basis of being justified by faith, apart from works. Abraham's life remains an example to us all of living by faith and believing God's promises.

SETTING THE SCENE (GAL 3:8): Before we get into Romans 4, what is your understanding of how people in the Old Testament were saved? To what extent have things changed; i.e. would you say that 'justification by faith' (See Romans 3:21-31) was an afterthought or God's plan from the beginning?

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ABRAHAM NOT JUSTIFIED BY WORKS (4:1-8): How do you understand the phrase "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (v3, Gen 15:5)? Was this 'credit' to his account something earned or a gift and why does this matter?

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ABRAHAM NOT JUSTIFIED BY CIRCUMCISION (4:9-12): What does Paul draw from the fact that Abraham was justified long before (~14 yrs) he was circumcised (nb: circumcision was keenly debated in the early church)? In what sense was circumcision a 'sign' and a 'seal' to authenticate God's people as the 'justified' people of God? How then is Abraham the father of both Jew and Gentile?

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ABRAHAM NOT JUSTIFIED BY THE LAW (4:13-17a): How do you understand Paul's statement that Abraham would 'be heir of the world'? Why does Paul state so strongly that the promise is received and inherited by faith, not law (See also Gal 3:17-18, 21-22)?

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ABRAHAM JUSTIFIED BY FAITH (4:17b-22): How did Abraham's conviction about the power of God enable him to believe "against all hope" and "in hope" (18a)? How does Paul show that Abraham, (without running away from reality) faced up to the facts and in faith still chose to believe God without wavering in unbelief? How can we 'let God be God' and trust Him to do as He has promised?

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"Faith always looks at the problems in the light of the promises." John Stott, BST: Message of Romans

ABRAHAM'S FAITH AND OURS (4:23-25): How in these verse does Paul help us apply the lessons from Abraham's faith? How 'persuaded' are you of God's power and ability to do what He has promised for us? What are some ways that we can grow in our faith?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER (GAL 3:6-9, 14-16): How does this passage help us to see how the 'blessing given to Abraham' has come to us through Christ Jesus? To what extent do you now see how God's plan has always been 'justification by faith' because of the death and sacrifice of Christ? How do these promises apply to us today and what difference do they (or should they) make in our lives?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Give thanks to God for His plan of Salvation which He. Thank Him for the promises He made to Abraham and then renewed, expanded and fulfilled throughout the rest of scripture. Pray for one another that you would each have a real and deep faith in the God who has proved Himself faithful to countless generations of disciples throughout the generations.

MEMORY VERSE: GALATIANS 3:14

"God made a promise to Abraham. And an understanding of that promise is indispensable to an understanding of the Bible and of the Christian mission. These are perhaps the most unifying verses in the Bible; the whole of God's purpose is encapsulated here." John Stott, The Living God is a Missionary God, Reprinted in "You Can Tell the World", Downers Grove, IL: © IVP, 1979

MEMORY VERSES

STUDY 1: ABRAM CALLED

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." **Genesis 12:2-3**

STUDY 2: ABRAM RESCUES LOT

"So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarrelling between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are close relatives. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." **Genesis 13:8-9**

STUDY 3: THE LORD'S COVENANT

"Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

Genesis 15:4-5

STUDY 4: FAITH VERSES DISAPPOINTMENT

"For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise." **Galatians 4:22-23**

STUDY 5: PROMISE OF BLESSING

"And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise." **Hebrews 11:1**

STUDY 6: EXPERIENCING GOD

"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." **Hebrews 4:16**

STUDY 7: SODOM AND GOMORRAH DESTROYED

"Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." **Lamentations 3:22-23**

STUDY 8: ABRAHAM TESTED

"By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." **Hebrews 11:17-18**

STUDY 9: ABRAHAM'S LEGACY

"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." **Galatians 3:28-29**

STUDY 10: CALLED TO LIVE BY FAITH

"He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit." **Galatians 3:14**