



Pilgrim People

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Clifford M. Yeary

with Little Rock Scripture Study staff



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Wrap-Up Lectures and Discussion Tips for Facilitators are available for each lesson at no charge. Find them online at [\[redacted\]](#)

Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.

Pilgrim People

The resource you hold in your hands is divided into four lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book *and* the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.

If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet four times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and to allow all to participate as they wish.


Some groups choose to have an initial gathering before their regular sessions begin. This allows an opportunity to meet one another, pass out books, and, if desired, view the optional intro lecture for this study available on the "Resources" page of the Little Rock Scripture Study website (www.littlerockscripture.org).

Every Bible study group is a little bit different. Some of our groups like to break each lesson up into two weeks of study so they are reading less each week and have more time to discuss the questions together at their weekly gatherings.

If your group wishes to do this, simply agree how much of each lesson will be read each week, and only answer the questions that correspond to the material you read. Wrap-up lectures can then be viewed at the end of every other meeting rather than at the end of every meeting. Of course, this will mean that your study will last longer, and your group will meet more times.

WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?

The materials in this book include:

- Commentary by Clifford M. Yeary, which has also been published separately as *Pilgrim People: A Scriptural Commentary* (Liturgical Press).
- Occasional inserts  highlighting elements of the New and Old Testaments. Some of these appear also in the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible* while others are supplied by staff writers.
- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the audio or video lectures online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is:

 Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

Prepare in advance

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 11.

- Read the assigned material in the printed book for Lesson One (pages 12–25) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session. You may do this assignment by reading a portion over a period of several days (effective and manageable) or by preparing all at once (more challenging).
- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 26–28.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 29 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.

Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer found on page 11 (also used by individuals in their preparation) or use a prayer of your choosing.
- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- Listen to or view the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (15–20 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. This lecture provides a common focus for the group and reinforces insights from each lesson. You may view the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

Above all, be aware that the Holy Spirit is moving within and among you.

Pilgrim People

LESSON ONE

The Call of Abraham and Sarah

Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

Prayer

God, you are the source and goal of all life. Strengthen, support, and guide us on our earthly pilgrimage so that, nourished by your word and inspired by your Son's example, we may persevere in faith until we find ourselves home at last in your heavenly kingdom.

Read the Introduction and pages 12–25, Lesson One.

Respond to the questions on pages 26–28, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 29 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean today to be part of a people whose very identity is rooted in the belief that they belong to God and that their lives are a pilgrimage of faith?

It is a statement of faith among the Jewish people, embedded in the covenant God made with them through Moses: “My father was a wandering Aramean” (Deut 26:5).

This wandering father of the Jews is most probably Jacob, the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. Considering Abraham and Sarah’s own journey of faith, Jacob was by no means the first person in the story of their covenant to be a wanderer. Jacob, however, has the distinction of being renamed “Israel” after wrestling with a divine messenger on the banks of the river Jabbok; as Israel he becomes the model of a people who both wander and wrestle with God.

As understood for millennia within the Judeo-Christian heritage, Abraham, with Sarah, his wife, set forth on a journey of faith that would come to exemplify the very nature of faith. They abandoned a home in response to a spiritual call and journeyed toward a land God promised to give their descendants. Their faith

in the promise was not entirely for their own benefit. First, this childless couple had to trust in God as they grew older and older that they would even have offspring. Then, they had to trust that the promise of the land would be fulfilled by this same God long after they died.

Paul assured the Christians of ancient Rome that they were the spiritual offspring of Abraham (Rom 4:1-17), and so Christians have always regarded themselves as children of Abraham. Like Abraham, we are also sojourners in a land that is not truly our home, for “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil 3:20), and like Abraham, we are “looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and maker is God” (Heb 11:10). We can look forward to it in faith and hope because so much of its joy has already filled our hearts (see Rom 5:1-5).

Through the broad, colorful strokes of the Bible, from Genesis through the New Testament, this commentary will explore important dimensions of what it means to be a people who belong to God and whose lives are a pilgrimage of faith. For every believer, however, it also means something intensely personal. It is a personal journey of faith that each one of us is set upon, but Scripture can shed a much needed spiritual light on our personal journeys.



THE CALL OF ABRAHAM AND SARAH

Who Was Called First?

Genesis 11:31–12:3

^{11:31}Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and brought them out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to go to the land of Canaan. But when they reached Haran, they settled there. ³²The lifetime of Terah was two hundred and five years; then Terah died in Haran.

^{12:1}The LORD said to Abram: “Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you.

²“I will make of you a great nation,
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
so that you will be a blessing.

³I will bless those who bless you
and curse those who curse you.

All the communities of the earth
shall find blessing in you.”

The most significant thing about Terah is not that he lived to be two hundred and five. Life spans in Genesis are frequently reported in numbers that are frankly inexplicable, but

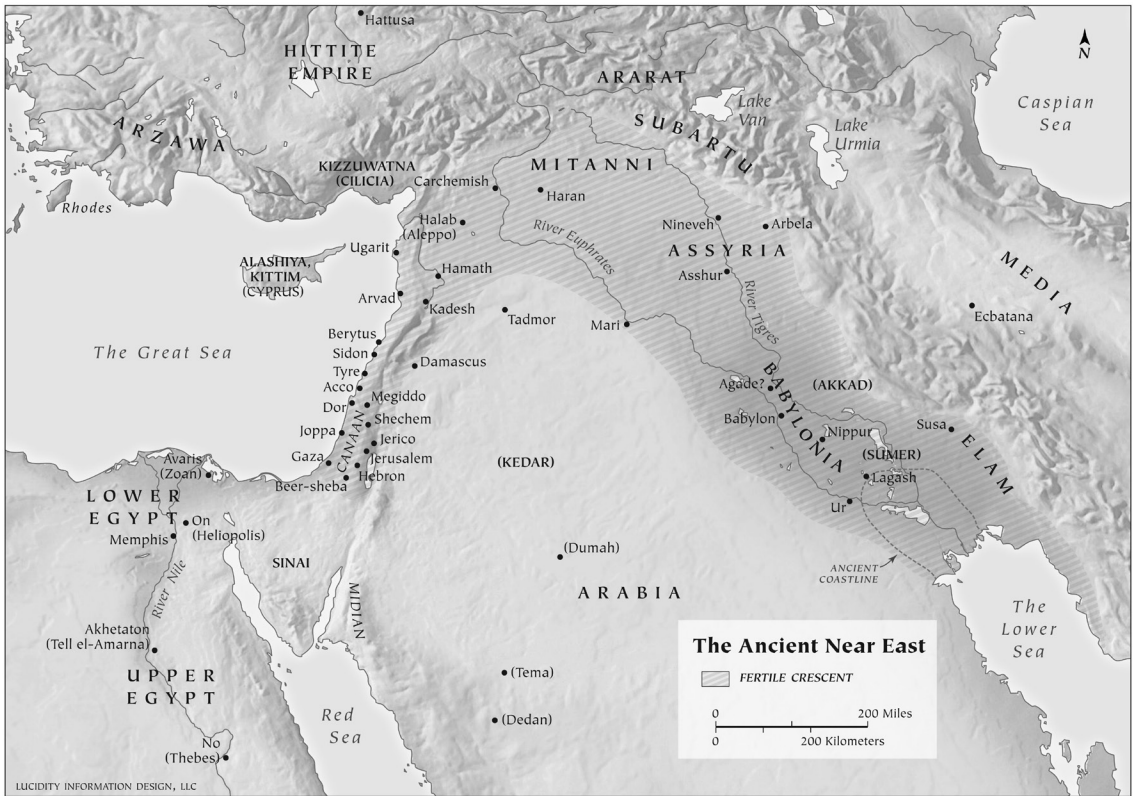
our incredulity should not get in the way of hearing the inspired message. There is a Samaritan version of this text that says Terah only lived to be one hundred and forty-five (only!). Regardless, we are meant to understand that although Terah lived a good long while, he had at one time set out from Ur for Canaan with Abram and Sarai and Lot. This is before Genesis tells us that Abram and Sarai received their own call to resume the journey to Canaan.

Ur appears to have been in what is now modern Iraq, along the Euphrates, perhaps near the ancient shore of the Persian Gulf. Today this is where the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers flow together into a delta that has pushed out the shore for many miles.

Had God called Terah to make this journey first? The text leaves that for us to ponder without an answer. But consider this: Terah had set out for Canaan with the same people in tow that God would later call to complete that journey. Whether or not Terah heard a call from God, it was God’s intention that the journey should be completed. When Terah stopped short and settled in Haran they had completed a good part of the journey. Haran was probably located in the southeast of what is now modern Turkey, north of Syria. A turn to the south would have eventually taken Terah to Canaan.

If God did call Terah to leave Ur and to travel to Canaan, close would not have been good enough—not if he still had strength to venture toward the goal. The text is clear on this: Terah *settled* in Haran. He had made Haran his home. His journey to Canaan had not just been delayed, he had found a place to call home. Now the journey he had begun would have to be taken up by others.

That is when God calls Abram and Sarai to resume the journey that began in Ur but was not to end in Haran. It would not, however, even end in Canaan, for as much as God intended for them to see the land of the promise, the promise was bigger than the land. The promise is about far more than a place, it is about more than a single nation of people of whom they will be the direct ancestors. It is, ultimately, about a promise that will embrace all the peoples of the earth.



These pilgrims are from a past so ancient that their story blends indistinguishably with legend. The legendary overtones, however, do not obscure the fact that all who will eventually call upon the one God as God can trace their own call to become pilgrims in faith to Abram’s call.

The Journey Begins

Genesis 12:4-5

^{12:4} Abram went as the LORD directed him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. ⁵ Abram took his wife Sarai, his brother’s son Lot, all the possessions that they had accumulated, and the persons they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan.

“Abram went as the LORD directed him” (Gen 12:4). This is the faithful obedience for which people of faith—even differing faiths—

have remembered Abram/Abraham in every subsequent generation. Abram, Sarai, and Lot leave the place in which Terah had settled. Terah had put down stakes, perhaps even roots, in Haran. His son, his daughter-in-law, and his grandson from another son resume the journey he had once begun: “Canaan or bust.”

Abram may be leaving a home behind and stepping out in faith to Canaan, but he takes all that he has with him. He has a lot of possessions, and they all go with him. Some of his possessions are said to be people.

His wealth and the nature of his possessions might bother us. We are rightly concerned about the ethics of accumulating “persons.” But this concern was not shared by those who made certain that his story was handed on to us. This was a vastly different age than ours, and what they meant to tell us about his possessions was an important aspect of his faith, not his ethics.

If we are curious as to just how wealthy Abram is, our suspicions are laid to rest in 13:2. “Now Abram was very rich in livestock, silver and gold.” Abram needs a lot of people just to keep his stuff together on the journey!

We might more easily picture him in our own cultural context as a wealthy, retired business baron who has invested everything in a fleet of sleek, luxurious motor homes so that he, his wife, and a slew of faithful household employees (he might have butlers, maids, and cooks, as well as accountants and mechanics, just to name a few) can hit the road without missing any of the comforts of home, even though they now have no place to call home.

Eventually, biblical authors will present us with a different message about wealth and the call of God. Paul reminds the Corinthians that while they are rich in faith in Christ, their humble circumstances are linked to the profound loftiness of their calling. “God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God” (1 Cor 1:28-29).

But something else is being said about Abram. We are to understand that he is a person of importance—a person of significance—and his wealth is a sign of God’s favor. It is to Abram’s credit that as significant a person as he is, even with all his wealth, he is answering a call that unsettles him. Abram has been called for a purpose larger than himself, toward a future generations beyond what he will ever see.

Even as we take stock of Abram’s wealth, stature, and dignity, he will shock us by exposing a very deep flaw in his character. He is unwilling to trust God with something—someone—very important to his calling. In an act of cowardice, Abram betrays Sarai.



The re-naming of **Abram (to Abraham) and Sarai (to Sarah)** takes place in Genesis 17 following the institution of the covenant of circumcision (17:5, 15). Although the meaning of their new names does not change significantly (*Sarai* and *Sarah* both mean “princess,” while *Abram* and *Abraham* are two forms of “exalted father”), the name-change indicates a change in their relationship with God and a new share in the blessings God will bestow.

Abram’s Lie

Genesis 12:10-20

^{12:10}There was famine in the land; so Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, since the famine in the land was severe. ¹¹When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai: “I know well how beautiful a woman you are. ¹²When the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘She is his wife’; then they will kill me, but let you live. ¹³Please say, therefore, that you are my sister, so that it may go well with me on your account and my life may be spared for your sake.” ¹⁴When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw how beautiful the woman was; and when Pharaoh’s courtiers saw her, ¹⁵they praised her to Pharaoh. So she was taken into Pharaoh’s palace. ¹⁶On her account it went very well with Abram, and he received flocks and herds, male and female slaves, male and female asses, and camels.

¹⁷But the LORD struck Pharaoh and his household with severe plagues because of Abram’s wife Sarai. ¹⁸Then Pharaoh summoned Abram and said to him: “How could you do this to me! Why didn’t you tell me she was your wife? ¹⁹Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her for my wife? Here, then, is your wife. Take her and be gone!”

²⁰Then Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and all that belonged to him.

This is a deep flaw in Abram/Abraham’s character, for it is a sin he will repeat when he lets Abimelech, king of Gerar, take Sarah as an object of his desire on the premise that she is Abraham’s sister (Gen 20). We naturally have questions about these two accounts. However old Sarai might be when Pharaoh takes her, Sarah herself claims to be withered with age before Abimelech is deceived into believing she is just Abraham’s sister. What is his attraction to a ninety-year-old woman? And is she Abraham’s sister? He claims she actually is in Genesis 20:12: “She is in truth my sister, but

only my father's daughter, not my mother's; and so she became my wife." Sister-brother marriages, while later forbidden in Mosaic law (Lev 18:11), did exist in adjacent cultures of the time. But the genealogy of Terah and Abram we read in Genesis 11:27-30 makes no mention of Sarai being Terah's daughter.

These are matters scholars struggle with, but many good scholars are careful to give the account as we read it back to us as a story we have to deal with on its own terms. The story is making a point about Abram/Abraham that we are meant to notice because we are told it twice. Our hero is not always so heroic. His loyalty to Sarah is more than just suspect, it is faulty at the core, and so it should come as no surprise that his faithfulness to God will itself have to be tested.

Look about You . . .

Genesis 13:7-12, 14-17

^{13:7}There were quarrels between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and those of Lot's. (At this time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were occupying the land.)

⁸So Abram said to Lot: "Let there be no strife between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are kinsmen. ⁹Is not the whole land at your disposal? Please separate from me. If you prefer the left, I will go to the right; if you prefer the right, I will go to the left." ¹⁰Lot looked about and saw how well watered the whole Jordan Plain was as far as Zoar, like the LORD's own garden, or like Egypt. (This was before the LORD had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) ¹¹Lot, therefore, chose for himself the whole Jordan Plain and set out eastward. Thus they separated from each other; ¹²Abram stayed in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the Plain, pitching his tents near Sodom.

¹⁴After Lot had left, the LORD said to Abram: "Look about you, and from where you are, gaze

to the north and south, east and west; ¹⁵all the land that you see I will give to you and your descendants forever. ¹⁶I will make your descendants like the dust of the earth; if anyone could count the dust of the earth, your descendants too might be counted. ¹⁷Set forth and walk about in the land, through its length and breadth, for to you I will give it."

Abram and Lot, uncle and nephew, go their separate ways in order to honor their close relationship. Those who tend their large herds have begun arguing. If disputes went any further it might lead to contention within their family. Abram is generous toward his nephew. He tells him that the choice of land is Lot's; Abram will not choose, he will merely take what is left him.

Lot makes his choice wisely, at least it would seem so at the time. He sees a stretch of land watered and flourishing like the original Garden of Eden and says, "I'll take that." Lot leaves with his herds and Abram accepts his fate. He had put his future out of his own hands and left his destiny for Lot to decide, but that actually only put it into the hands of the Almighty.

"Look about you," God tells him. And as he looks he hears God's promise resounding in his ears. The land in every direction, as far as the eye can see, will be his and his descendants'. And his descendants will be uncountable. This is Abram's destiny.

Actually, it is his descendants' destiny.

Which would have been harder to believe, that all this was his, or that it would belong to his innumerable offspring? As we will see later, Abram will come to possess very little of the land himself. He will live his life as an alien in the land that he knows is a gift by faith, a gift waiting a time long past his own. He is, however, to walk about its length and breadth, believing all the while in the promise. But for now, he must mostly wait for a descendant with whom he can confide the promise.

Abram's Faith

Genesis 15:1-6

^{15:1}Some time after these events, this word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:

“Fear not, Abram!
I am your shield;
I will make your reward very great.”

²But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what good will your gifts be, if I keep on being childless and have as my heir the steward of my house, Eliezer?”

³Abram continued, “See, you have given me no offspring, and so one of my servants will be my heir.” ⁴Then the word of the LORD came to him: “No, that one shall not be your heir; your own issue shall be your heir.” ⁵He took him outside and said: “Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so,” he added, “shall your descendants be.” ⁶Abram put his faith in the LORD, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness.

Once again, God comes to Abram and assures him of a magnificent future. And Abram responds, in not so many words, with “Enough already with your promises!”

Abram has answered God's call. He and Sarai have left Haran far behind and have entered Canaan just as God had directed them. *But what good are these promises?* Abram asks. *I have no child.* In English we miss the sarcastic way Abram addresses God in Hebrew. Abram complains that he has no son to inherit the promises except for a house steward from Damascus. What is translated as “the steward of my house” is, in Hebrew, the coupling of the word for son with the last three consonants found in Damascus. Had he said it in English it would sound something like, “I have no son but my son-mascus from Damascus!”

Such punning from Abram would sound quite daring, if not downright flippant, tossed as freely as it is into the Almighty's ear. Abram

is not just tired of waiting for the promise; he is reminding God that time is running out.

God does not bend to Abram's impatience. What God has said will come to pass will surely do so. God challenges Abram to count the stars. If he can do that, then maybe he will be able to count his descendants, they will be so many. The promise remains a promise, but it is God who has spoken and so it will be. Abram, for all his impatience—even knowing that time itself is ruling out the possibility of an heir—hears the word God speaks and believes. All the evidence in the world suggests Abram should despair, but his faith is in God, not in any evidence.

Abram's faith is credited to him by God as an act of righteousness.

If you ask St. Paul, this is the most important act of faith in biblical history prior to the act of faith that prompts the cry, “He is risen!” Abram, who is waiting for God to bring about the promise of an heir to the land that is also, as yet, only a promise, believes God will bring it about and is declared righteous for his faith.

Paul carefully examines the circumstances under which Abram makes his act of faith, and notes that Abram was declared righteous while as yet uncircumcised (Rom 4:1-13). Because of that simple fact, Paul proclaims, we can be certain that God accepts uncircumcised Gentiles when they too profess faith. Circumcision is not the way for a Gentile to be declared righteous; that happens when we believe God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

Jesus is a direct descendant of Abraham. There are two different genealogies in the Bible tracing Jesus' ancestry directly to him (Matt 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38). There are three major monotheistic faiths on the planet. Most Jews as well as Arabic Muslims claim a blood connection in their relation to Abraham. Most Christians cannot make the same claim. Instead, we have Paul's assertion that our profession of faith in Jesus as the risen Lord assures us that we, like Abraham, will receive God's declaration of righteousness. We honor Abraham as our

ancestor in faith; we don't rely on a personal genealogy to see our connection to him.

Abram's journey of faith has so far only given him a glimpse of what is promised him. He has to believe in the promise or he literally has nothing to show for his faith. This is where Paul's interpretation of Abraham's faith being the precursor of Christian faith is so apt, for, as Paul says to the Corinthians:

For if the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all. (1 Cor 15:16-19)

The pilgrimage of Christian faith is one that extends even beyond this life, embracing in faith the hope of the resurrection. Having this faith teaches us to see everything in this life differently. Because of this faith we have become lifelong pilgrims. Without it, we could only see what is in front of our eyes and our journey would more likely be toward some *thing* rather than toward some *one*.

Abraham's faith, which Paul sets as the model for ours, is also an *act* of faith. It is not simply belief, it is *faith*, and faith expresses itself through *faithfulness*. Abraham's faith will be tested. Does he really have faith? This will only be answered by whether or not he proves to be faithful. But that test will await the fulfillment of God's first promise to Abram; he will have an heir!



Prayer Starter: It will happen in your life also: those barren moments with no birth in sight. Let Abraham be your mentor in these times. Follow him out under the stars. Gaze at the heavens and offer to God a faith you cannot see or feel.

Hagar and Ishmael

Genesis 16:1-16

^{16:1}Abram's wife Sarai had borne him no children. She had, however, an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar. ²Sarai said to Abram: "The LORD has kept me from bearing children. Have intercourse, then, with my maid; perhaps I shall have sons through her." Abram heeded Sarai's request. ³Thus, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, his wife Sarai took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his concubine. ⁴He had intercourse with her, and she became pregnant. When she became aware of her pregnancy, she looked on her mistress with disdain. ⁵So Sarai said to Abram: "You are responsible for this outrage against me. I myself gave my maid to your embrace; but ever since she became aware of her pregnancy, she has been looking on me with disdain. May the LORD decide between you and me!" ⁶Abram told Sarai: "Your maid is in your power. Do to her whatever you please." Sarai then abused her so much that Hagar ran away from her.

⁷The LORD's messenger found her by a spring in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur, ⁸and he asked, "Hagar, maid of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She answered, "I am running away from my mistress, Sarai." ⁹But the LORD's messenger told her: "Go back to your mistress and submit to her abusive treatment. ¹⁰I will make your descendants so numerous," added the LORD's messenger, "that they will be too many to count. ¹¹Besides," the LORD's messenger said to her:

"You are now pregnant and shall bear a son;
you shall name him Ishmael,
For the LORD has heard you,
God has answered you.

¹²He shall be a wild ass of a man,
his hand against everyone,
and everyone's hand against him;
In opposition to all his kin
shall he encamp."

continue

¹³To the LORD who spoke to her she gave a name, saying, "You are the God of Vision"; she meant, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after my vision?" ¹⁴That is why the well is called Beer-lahai-roi. It is between Kadesh and Bered.

¹⁵Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram named the son whom Hagar bore him Ishmael. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

The adage, "Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it," is quite appropriate here. Sarai knows well the promise God has made Abram and devises her own plan to make it come about. She gives her maid (her slave) to her husband and tells him to have relations with her. It would seem that she is hopeful that Hagar will become pregnant and bear a son. Indeed, she seems to hope that Abram will have more than one son through Hagar, who is now referred to as Abram's concubine.

Times were different then, to be sure. Even in the biblical world, a wealthy man would often have as many women as he could support without any trace of overt criticism. Today, a wife who would provide a mistress for her husband is the stuff made for more than one racy television series. Many Bible readers would not be amused, however. But there is something beneath the surface in this biblical account that warns us against making Sarai's choice a model for married behavior. It all backfires on Sarai and things get even worse for her maid, Hagar.

Sarai does get exactly what she wishes; Hagar bears a son. The concubine is fruitful and lets the barren wife know it with insufferable pride and disdain. Furious, Sarai, as first wife, demands justice from Abram who delivers the mother of his son into the jealous grip of Sarai. "Do to her whatever you please" (16:6). Tormented beyond endurance, Hagar runs away with her son.

From our vantage, it seems strange that God would send the unfortunate Hagar back to her jealous, punishing mistress. But there is more to this story than is told in the Bible. Here

in Genesis, God promises a special providential care for Hagar's son, his future is assured of greatness, and with this promise, Hagar will bear her own future under the harsh hand of her mistress with hope, no matter what the future brings to her personally.

Hagar has entered her own pilgrimage. No matter how long or how far she journeys with these other pilgrims, she is on her own journey of faith now, trusting God for her son and his own unique future.

Far beyond what is allotted him in the words of Genesis, Hagar's son Ishmael will be regarded in Islam as the true child of promise. If we are to believe in God's providential care for Hagar and her offspring as reported to us in our Scripture, then we too must marvel at the greatness of Ishmael's heritage.



It was a **widely accepted custom** in the ancient world for a wife who was barren to provide a slave woman as a concubine for her husband so that the continuance of his line would be ensured. Evidence for this practice can be found in Old Assyrian marriage contracts as well as in the Nuzi texts (stone tablets dating from the fourteenth century BC, discovered in northern Iraq). While the laws of neighboring cultures *required* wives who were infertile to provide the means for their husbands to insure their posterity, it is important to note that Sarai herself freely suggests this course of action to Abram.

A Change of Identity

Genesis 17:1-8, 15

^{17:1}When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said: "I am God the Almighty. Walk in my presence and be blameless.

continue

EXPLORING LESSON ONE

1. When he is called to leave Haran and journey to a land that God “will show [him]” (Gen 12:1), Abram takes along “all the possessions” he has acquired (Gen 12:5). Why might this detail concerning what Abram takes with him into Canaan be noteworthy?

2. a) Why does Abram/ Abraham lie about his relationship to his wife, first to Pharaoh (Gen 12:10-20) and then to Abimelech, King of Gerar (Gen 20)? What do these lies tell you about Abraham?

b) Without defending Abraham’s actions, can you imagine circumstances where people might do desperate things if they feel threatened and isolated in new surroundings? How does this perspective affect your understanding of the text?

3. In what ways does the story of Abraham invite us to consider the relationship between *faith* (our belief in the promises of God) and *faithfulness* (the expression of our faith through action)?

4. According to Paul, how can Christians claim Abraham as an ancestor (Rom 9:7-8; Gal 3:7, 29)? In what way does this claim differ from the Abrahamic ancestry of Jews and Arabic Muslims?

5. a) Sarai seeks to anticipate God's promise of an heir by giving her maid Hagar to her husband so that she might "have sons through her" (Gen 16:2). Do her actions fulfill God's plan?

b) Can you think of times in your life when you grew impatient for God's plan to unfold and tried to take matters into your own hands? What lessons did you learn through those experiences?

6. Compare and contrast the promises God makes to Hagar (Gen 16:7-16) with those he had made earlier to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-6). What similarities and differences do you notice?

7. a) Naming—the authority to grant or change a name—is a notable theme throughout Scripture (e.g., Gen 2:19-20; 35:10; Matt 16:17-18; Luke 1:13, 31). What is the significance of the changes in Abram's and Sarai's names proclaimed by God in Genesis 17:1-8, 15?

b) Has a change in name marked you as a pilgrim? Examples might include name changes at confirmation, marriage or religious vows, or even new nicknames or titles.

Lesson One

8. What does the visit that God pays to Abraham in Genesis 18 reveal about the nature of God and his relationship with those who are his “friends”?

9. What lessons for your own life can you draw from the story of God’s testing of Abraham in Genesis 22:1-12?

10. What is the importance of Abraham’s purchase of property in Canaan for the burial of Sarah (Gen 23:1-20)?

CLOSING PRAYER

Prayer

Again the LORD's messenger called to Abraham from heaven and said: "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants shall take possession of the gates of their enemies, and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing—all this because you obeyed my command." (Gen 22:15-18)

Heavenly Father, you rewarded the faithfulness of Abraham by confirming the promises made to him at the very start of his pilgrimage. May we also be faithful, and at the end of our earthly pilgrimage, may we realize the promise of salvation through your son, Jesus Christ. Strengthen our faith and grant assurance of your love and friendship to all believers, especially those we pray for today . . .