

THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

Chapter 2: God Builds a Nation

Key Question: What can we learn about faith from Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob?

The Call

Pages 13–16

Noah's descendents spread out over the earth. As time passed, people again rejected God's way for their own way. God chose a man for a special purpose: building a nation to represent him.

The prophet Abram was seventy-five years old when God told him to leave his home and go to Canaan. His wife Sarai was sixty-five, still beautiful, but barren.

1. (a) What did God tell Abram he would do for him (Genesis 12:2–3)? (b) What would happen through Abram to all peoples on earth (12:3)? (c) What part of this promise was particularly surprising considering Abram was childless? (d) How did Abram show his faith in God (12:4)? (e) How does our obedience to God's commands show our faith in him?

After Abram arrived in Canaan, God showed him the land he would give Abram's offspring, who would be more numerous than the dust of the earth.¹⁸

The Lord blessed Abram by keeping him safe in this dangerous land, just as he promised. In fact, God enabled him to rescue his nephew Lot from the armies of four strong kings with only 318 men.¹⁹ Yet one thing puzzled Abram.

2. (a) What had God still not given Abram (Genesis 15:2–3)? (b) What did God promise Abram (15:4–5)? (c) What was Abram's response (15:6)? (d) What was the Lord's response (15:6)?

¹⁸ Genesis 13:14–17.

¹⁹ Genesis 14.

That night, God gave Abram a miraculous sign. When people made covenants in those days, they sacrificed animals, cut the carcasses in two, and laid the pieces across from each other. The parties spoke the terms of the covenant and walked between the pieces. God told Abraham to sacrifice and lay out animals. He told Abram to know for certain that his descendants would possess this land in four hundred years. Then a smoking firepot and blazing torch appeared and passed between the animal pieces: all would come to pass.²⁰

The Proof

Pages 16–18

A decade passed and Sarai, thinking she had no chance of bearing a child for Abram, offered her servant Hagar to mother a child for her.²¹ When Hagar became pregnant, though, she acted haughtily towards Sarai. They argued and Hagar fled. The angel of the Lord came to Hagar.

3. (a) What did the angel of the Lord tell Hagar to do (Genesis 16:9)? (b) Why does it take humility to mend a relationship by doing what was right, even though the other person did wrong too? (c) Why did the angel of the Lord say to name her child Ishmael, which means “God hears” (16:11)? (d) What name did she give to the Lord (16:13)? (e) What do you learn from these two names for God that you can apply to a current situation?

A long thirteen years later, the Lord again appeared to Abram.

4. (a) How did the Lord identify himself to Abraham (Genesis 17:1)? (b) What do you learn from this name that you can apply to a current situation? (c) What did God tell Abram to do (17:1)? (d) What was God about to do (17:2)?

²⁰ Genesis 15:7–21.

²¹ This was a common practice. Hagar became a wife of lower status than Sarai.

God told Abram to call himself Abraham.²² He made a covenant with Abraham in which God would make Abraham the father of many nations and kings. Abraham's part of the covenant was to circumcise himself and all the males of his household. Every baby boy descended from him was to be circumcised at eight days old.

God also told Abraham to call his wife Sarah instead of Sarai,²³ and said he would bless the approximately eighty-nine-year-old Sarah so that she could bear a son within a year. They were to name him Isaac, and he would be the child through whom God would establish his covenant.²⁴

Though such a pregnancy was humanly impossible, Abraham trusted God and circumcised all the males in his household.

And so, twenty-five years after God told Abraham to go to Canaan, when Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah ninety, God miraculously blessed Sarah and she bore the child of promise: Isaac.

The Test

Pages 18–21

Abraham watched Isaac grow up. He'd seen God's miraculous hand in his life many times. He was a prophet who had talked with God and with angels. He'd received astonishing blessings. God had promised Abraham that Isaac would be his heir and the child of the covenant. But then God tested Abraham's faith in this promise by asking him to do something that appeared to make the promise's fulfillment impossible.²⁵

5. (a) What did God ask Abraham to do with his beloved son, the only son of God's promise (Genesis 22:2)? (b) "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead,"²⁶ and so his faith stood firm. How did Abraham demonstrate his faith that obeying God wouldn't stop Isaac from being the child of promise (22:5)?

²² *Abram* means *exalted father* and *Abraham* means *father of many*.

²³ Both names mean *princess*.

²⁴ Genesis 17:15–19.

²⁵ For a fuller examination of this test, see *Abraham, Isaac & Child Sacrifice* at www.jeanejones.net/2011/10/abraham-isaac-child-sacrifice.

²⁶ Hebrews 11:19.

The angel of the Lord stopped Abraham before Isaac was harmed.

6. (a) What did Abraham's willingness to obey God prove (Genesis 22:11–12)? (b) When God provided a ram to substitute as a sacrifice, what did Abraham call the place (22:13–14)?

7. (a) What would happen through Abraham's offspring—his "seed" (Genesis 22:18)? (b) What "seed" did we read about last week that was promised to Eve²⁷?

God sometimes asked prophets to perform actions that foreshadowed and explained important future events. Abraham and Isaac were both prophets, and their actions told their descendants that God can provide a substitute for someone destined for death. They didn't know it yet, but their actions also foreshadowed how the seed promised to Eve and now to them would one day crush the serpent and bless all peoples.

Jacob

Pages 21–24

Isaac married Rebekah when he was forty. She, like Sarah, was barren. Isaac prayed for her, and finally, twenty years later, she became pregnant. God told her she carried twins, both of whom would become nations, but the older would serve the younger. She gave birth to Esau and Jacob. They grew into manhood, with Isaac favoring Esau and Rebekah favoring Jacob.

Esau was born first and normally would have received both a double inheritance and the covenant promise of fathering the nation that would belong to God. But he came home hungry one day and found Jacob cooking red lentil stew. In exchange for a bowl, he swore an oath giving Jacob his birthrights, thus despising God's covenant and showing himself to be godless.²⁸

When Isaac was old and blind, he asked Esau to hunt game and fix him a meal, after which he would bless Esau.²⁹ Rebekah overheard, and she and Jacob tricked Isaac into blessing Jacob. Isaac blessed him with the riches of the land, with ruling over his relatives, and with blessings for those who bless him and

²⁷ Genesis 3:15

²⁸ Genesis 25:34; Hebrews 12:16.

²⁹ Oral deathbed blessings were legally binding.

curses for those who curse him—all aspects of God’s promises to Abraham and an unwitting affirmation of God’s promise to Rebekah.

When Esau discovered Jacob had received the blessing Isaac intended for him, he was furious and said he would kill Jacob after Isaac died. Wanting to keep Jacob safe, Rebekah convinced Isaac to send Jacob to her brother to marry one of her nieces.

As Jacob journeyed, the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told him the covenant promise would be through him, and God would watch over him and bring him back safely.³⁰ Jacob named the place where God spoke to him Bethel.³¹

Jacob fell in love with his cousin Rachel and arranged to marry her in return for seven years’ work. But after the seven years, his uncle deceived Jacob into marrying Rachel’s sister Leah. When Jacob discovered he’d married the wrong girl, he angrily confronted his uncle. The girl’s father agreed to let him marry Rachel a week later in return for Jacob’s promise of another seven years’ labor.

Through the years, the sisters’ dad repeatedly tricked and cheated Jacob, but God intervened and made Jacob wealthy at the expense of his deceitful uncle. Twenty years later God told Jacob to return home.³² Jacob feared facing Esau, but obeyed.

The night before reaching his brother, a man wrestled with Jacob until daybreak.

8. (a) How did the man show Jacob he could disable him at any time (Genesis 32: 25)? (b) Jacob apparently realized the man was no ordinary human. For what did he ask (32:26)? (c) The man gave Jacob a new name: Israel.³³ With whom had Jacob been wrestling (32:28–30)?³⁴ (d) Who was the true source of all his blessings (32:29)?

³⁰ Genesis 28:13–15.

³¹ Genesis 28:19.

³² Rebekah had promised to send for Jacob as soon as Esau’s anger subsided (Genesis 27:45), probably anticipating a short separation. She never called for him and may not have lived to see his return or the reuniting of the brothers. By manipulating her husband and children to get what she wanted for her son, she lost her treasured relationship with her son. She hurt Isaac and Esau, and she indirectly caused Jacob to suffer as he unlearned the deceitfulness she taught him. She didn’t trust God to fulfill his promise to her without her intervention.

³³ *Israel* means “God struggles” or “he struggles with God.”

³⁴ God appeared in the form of an angel so that Jacob could wrestle with him (see Hosea 12:3–4). Some Christians think such appearances are of the preincarnate Christ.

Jacob had used trickery to get the blessing his father wanted to give Esau, and suffered the consequence of estranged relationships. Jacob learned what it was like to be at the receiving end of deceit and trickery when he suffered under his uncle's treachery. But though God disciplined Jacob, he also blessed him and showed him repeatedly that it was he who was the true source of blessings.

9. (a) Briefly describe how deception hurt a relationship in your life, without naming names.
(b) God commands us not to lie or use deceit.³⁵ How does using deception to obtain what we want rather than obeying God show lack of faith in God?

Israel

Pages 24–27

Instead of trying to kill him, when Esau met Jacob, Esau embraced and kissed him. God had changed Esau's heart and kept Jacob safe, as he promised.

10. (a) Describe a time God mended a relationship in your life by changing someone's heart (yours or another person's). (b) Write a praise to God for this restoration.

God sent Jacob back to Bethel, where he had appeared to him previously. There he told him again that his new name was to be Israel, and that he would give his descendants the land promised to Abraham and Isaac.

11. Many years later, a New Testament author wrote about the faith of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob. What stands out to you the most from Hebrews 11:6–20? Why?

³⁵ "Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another" (Leviticus 19:11). See also Romans 1:29; 2 Corinthians 4:2; Ephesians 4:25; Colossians 3:9; 1 Thessalonians 2:3; 1 Peter 2:1.

12. Which one of the following attributes of God that we've read about this week do you most need to remember today? Why?

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| Your shield | Your very great reward |
| Credits your faith as righteousness | Has power to do what he promises |
| Hears your cries | Sees you |
| Is faithful | Will provide |
| Is God almighty | |

From the twelve sons of Israel would come a nation of twelve tribes. But there would be hard times first. When the Lord made his covenant with Abraham, he told him this:

Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites³⁶ has not yet reached its full measure. *Genesis 15:13–16*

The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob needed to remember the miracles the Lord had done in the patriarchs' lives if their faith wasn't to waiver.

³⁶ The Amorites were Canaanites. God would remove the Canaanites because of their great wickedness. Though God judged two Canaanite cities in Abraham's time (Sodom and Gomorrah—see Genesis 18–19), the people in the rest of the land would not reach the level of sin that would justify removal for four hundred years.