Lesson 3 Study Guide: Abraham’s Family: Living By Faith to be a Blessing to All Nations

In this lesson we will cover the story of Abraham and Sarah’s family. God called them by his grace and gave them promises. God helped them grow in faith until they became a blessing to all nations. God’s ultimate purpose was to save the world lost in sin by sending the Savior Jesus through them (Gal3:8).

Even after the flood of Noah’s time, people did not stop sinning. They built the Tower of Babel, and idol worship became rampant. Despite people’s rebellion against him, God began a new work of world salvation by calling one family, Abraham and Sarah. We can learn from this family’s story how crucial it is to live by faith. God could bring his salvation to the whole world through even one family’s struggle to live by faith in his promise.

We can find seven stages in Abraham and Sarah’s life of faith: First is calling (12:1–9); second, training (12:10–14:24); third, righteousness by faith (15:1–6); fourth, covenant relationship (15:7–17:27); fifth, friendship (18:1–20:18); sixth, receiving God’s blessing (21:1–7); seventh, testing and confirmation (22:1–19).

We need to look at the story of Abraham and Sarah’s life from two perspectives: from theirs, and, from God’s. When we look at their perspective, we see how their faith grew. Their faith began as they obeyed God’s calling, holding on to his promise (12:1–4). Their faith developed as they built altars of thanks to God in the Promised Land, despite hardships, failures and disappointments (12:7–8; 13:4,18). Sarah followed quietly and bore with Abraham’s weaknesses by faith. Through the famine in Canaan and going to Egypt (12:10), as well as through conceding land to his nephew Lot, Abraham learned the faith to depend on God alone for material provisions (13:8–9; 14:21–23). He exercised his faith in God as he fought to rescue Lot at the risk of his life and possessions (14:12–16). He learned the faith to tithe to God at a time of victory and to refuse to compromise with a worldly ruler (14:20–24). When he reached his human limitation with the reality of having no heir, he heard God’s promise of having a son from his own body, saw God’s glory in the stars, and he believed the LORD. In this way his faith took him into a deeper relationship with God.

But there was a major setback in their lives of faith. When Sarah heard that Abraham would have a son from his own body, she became fatalistic about herself, interpreted God’s word in her own way and tried to have an heir by following cultural customs (16:1–2). When Abraham blindly followed her advice and took a concubine, he lost spiritual leadership in the family (16:6). After thirteen years of silence, God made a covenant with them that they would be the father and mother of nations, promising that Isaac would be born to Sarah (17:4–5,15–16). Abraham accepted God’s covenant plan for Isaac, not Ishmael (17:18–19). He also obeyed God’s covenant of circumcision (17:23) with his entire household. Then he grew in faith, restored his spiritual leadership in his family (18:12; 1Pe3:6), and the atmosphere of his home changed.

We can see the fruit of their growing faith in the way they opened their home to the three visitors, offering the best they had and all working together willingly (18:2,6–8). We also see their growth in faith through Abraham’s intercessory prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah, and particularly, for Lot (18:16–33; 19:29). In his prayer Abraham reveals a deepening knowledge of God as the God of both justice and mercy (18:25,32).

When Abraham and Sarah moved to Gerar in the land of the Philistines, it became clear that Abraham’s inner fear was unresolved (20:11). Perhaps his understanding of God was still somewhat localized. In his fear he lied about his wife again, and she was taken to king Abimelek’s harem, just as had happened in Egypt. But by God’s grace Abraham became a prophet and man of prayer, through whom God brought healing to the people of that place. Through this experience he realized that God is indeed the God of all places and peoples.

By God’s grace Sarah also became pregnant and learned of God’s almighty power, his graciousness and keeping his promises, and her previously cynical laughter (18:12) turned into joyful, holy laughter (21:6). This not only healed Sarah of her deeply rooted fatalism but also restored her position in the family and confirmed her calling as a mother of nations. Abraham and Sarah were so old that they were as good as dead, but by holding onto God’s promise and believing in his almighty power they were enabled to have a son, and eventually, descendants as numerous as the stars (Ro4:19–20; Heb11:11–12).

When a conflict between Ishmael and Isaac arose at Isaac’s weaning party, Sarah demanded Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. At first Abraham was distressed because of his love for his son Ishmael. But when God confirmed this direction, Abraham took action, though it was very painful to him personally. With God’s promise concerning Ishmael’s future, he entrusted them into God’s hand, so that his family could be God-centered, based only on faith in God’s covenant promise through Isaac. Then Abimelek came out to meet Abraham, and this time, Abraham was not afraid, but made a treaty with him. Afterwards, Abraham planted a tamarisk tree and called on the name of the LORD, the Eternal God (21:33). It was the expression of his mature faith in God, the God who is everywhere, above everyone, and eternal.

Abraham grew in faith to the extent that he could pass God’s test. He was ready to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. He could do this because he trusted God and his promise absolutely (Heb11:17–19), and because he loved God more than his beloved only son. When he obeyed, he experienced that God provided a ram for the burnt offering (22:13). Through God’s confirmation, Abraham gained confidence in God’s covenant with Isaac. Based on this faith, he was sure that God would provide a wife for Isaac (24:7). Abraham’s faith became a role model and a source of blessing for all peoples of all nations (Ro4:16–18; Gal3:8).

When Abraham had a close love and trust relationship with God, he also had a close love and trust relationship with his son Isaac (22:2,6b,8b,12). He planted faith in Isaac that God would provide (22:14), and Isaac learned how to fear God from his father Abraham’s faith (22:12; 31:42,53b).

In summary, Abraham and Sarah faced many practical problems (barrenness, financial, security, relationship, etc.). They also had their own weaknesses (fear, impatience, doubt, bad habit of lying, complacency, etc.). They had no example to follow—they were pioneers. Despite these challenging factors, they lived by faith, holding on to God’s promise; they obeyed God and denied themselves to follow God’s way.

We also need to look at the story of Abraham and Sarah’s life from God’s perspective. God took the initiative to call Abraham with hope, according to his own plan. God one-sidedly gave him his promise, by his grace, by saying, “I will…I will…I will…” God’s promise was not just for Abraham’s family but also for the whole world. His promise looked forward to Jesus. After calling them, God bore with Abraham and Sarah’s weaknesses. At critical moments God gave them his word of promise and protected them. He protected them from both Pharaoh and Abimelek, and gave Abraham victory in battle. God helped them to hold onto his promise and planted faith and vision in them. God made a covenant relationship with them. God rebuked Abraham not to live complacently, but as a father of many nations. God helped Abraham to grow as his friend. Through this, God revealed his character to Abraham as the Righteous Judge. God wanted Abraham to participate in his work through prayer and through training his children. God made Abraham a prophet, despite his weaknesses. After much training, God kept his promise to Abraham to give him a son. God turned Sarah’s cynical laughter into a genuine expression of joyful faith. God helped Abraham to love him more than the blessing. God then confirmed his promise to Abraham by swearing by himself. Finally, God made Abraham a blessing for all nations through his offspring, Jesus the Messiah.

We learn through this that God is the God of hope and vision. God never despaired about the fallen world; he began his redemptive work by calling one weak family. God’s calling for them was truly amazing. His promises to them were so great, to make them great and source of blessing for the whole world. They did nothing to deserve this great calling; it was totally God’s favor. Their greatness was that they responded to God’s calling with obedient faith. This enabled them to begin a personal relationship with God. Their obedience to God’s call became a handle by which God could work in and through them.

After calling, God would train them for 25 years, and the purpose of his training was to help them live by faith in him. Through his training in faith, God would transform Abram and Sarai into Abraham and Sarah, a father and mother of nations. God’s training in their lives had three phases: training to depend on God for material provisions (13:8–9; 14:21–23); training to become God-centered instead of human centered ( ); and finally, training to love and trust God himself above all else ( ). In each phase, God’s method of training was to help them hold onto his promise alone. He did not begin by demanding them to live by some moral or ethical standards; he just planted faith in their hearts. As he promised, he blessed Abraham and Sarah in every way. However, the nature of God’s blessing is transformational—God raised Abraham and Sarah from useless and selfish people into people who bore his image, became his friends and shared his heart to save the world. Finally, based on his promise to Abraham, God sent his one and only Son Jesus through Abraham’s offspring. God made Abraham’s family an exemplary family for those who follow their footsteps of faith.