

ABRAHAM: FATHER OF THE FEARFUL

Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-21:5

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Abraham: all three historically-rooted world religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—look back to “father Abraham.”¹ In the Bible, the name “Abram” occurs 59 times in Genesis (Gen 11:26-17:5), and 2 times outside of Genesis (1Thron 1:27; Neh 9:7). The name “Abraham” appears 129 times in Genesis, 42 times in the rest of the Old Testament, and 83 times in the New Testament. Except for Moses, Abraham is mentioned more often than anyone else in the Koran.²

Abraham lived near the beginning of the second millennium B.C. in southern Babylonia (Persian Gulf area). It was here that God called him to go to a land that God would show him. He moved to Haran in upper Mesopotamia (Syria) where he remained until the death of his father. Then, along with his nephew Lot, he made his way to Canaan (Palestine).

For almost three years, I have taught the Book of Genesis at Rochester College. This experience continues to be richly rewarding. I feel that I am just beginning to really understand Abraham. At the same time, I realize that I have so much more to learn. Only recently did I start to see a solution to a question that has baffled and bewildered me for years. My question is this: *Why is God so slow?* From the time God calls Abraham until Isaac is born is roughly twenty-five years. Twenty-five years! What in the world, for heaven’s sake, is God doing? God may be eternal, but Abraham and Sarah are not! Think of Abraham and Sarah. They leave their home to sojourn in a foreign land. They

¹See Tad Szulc, “Abraham: Journey of Faith,” *National Geographic* 200, no. 6 (December 2001): 90-129.

²P. A. Verhoef, “Abraham/Abram,” in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (Zondervan, 1997), 4:351, 358. Verhoef also notes, “A remarkable feature of this name is that it was borne by no one else until the sixth century A.D.”

go forth childless in the hopes of having a child. And God takes two-and-a-half decades to deliver on His promise! How many of us would wait so long, especially when the likelihood of bearing a child becomes less and less likely with the passage of time? Is it any wonder that Abraham wanted to adopt his servant Eliezer? Is it any wonder that Abraham and Sarah used Hagar as a surrogate to birth a child? Is it any wonder that Abraham and Sarah laughed when God finally set a time to give them a son with Abraham approaching 100 years of age and the barren Sarah going-on 90? And then, cruelty of cruelties—or so it seems to me—the promised son is to be named “Isaac,” which means “he laughs.” What is so funny after twenty-five anxious and agonizing years? *Why is God so slow?*

We begin at the twelfth chapter of Genesis.³ When God called Abraham to leave his homeland, God promised:

²“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. ³I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:2-3, NIV).

Abraham responded well to God’s challenge, and at the age of seventy-five he set out for the land of Canaan. Almost immediately, however—ten verses into the story—there is famine, and Abraham, on his own initiative, moves down to Egypt with his family and possessions. God had said to Abraham, “I will make your name great,” and now Abraham shows himself to be so fearful about this promised name that he chooses to protect it and promote it at his wife’s expense. In Egypt, Abraham approaches Sarah with a proposition that most of us find unthinkable:

“I know what a beautiful woman you are. ¹²When the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me but will let you live. ¹³Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you” (Gen 12:11b-13, NIV).

What is going on here? Abraham requests that Sarah avail herself sexually to the male population of Egypt “so that I will be treated well for your sake.” The outcome is just as Abraham, apparently, had imagined: his wife becomes another man’s wife.

³The discussion that follows is, for the most part, taken from Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard* (InterVarsity Press, 2001), 41-55.

¹⁷But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. ¹⁸So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife?" ¹⁹Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!" (Gen 12:17-19, NIV).

Instead of bringing blessing to all nations, Abraham has brought curse. Maybe, just maybe, Abraham was counting on God to intervene on Sarah's behalf. If so, he conveniently found it easier to trust God for his wife's fate rather than for his own fate.

We jump now to the twentieth chapter of Genesis. Hagar has given birth to Ishmael; God has changed the names of Abram and Sarai where we—along with Sarah—hear the first explicit news that Sarah's womb will bear the promised child. But Abraham once again jeopardizes his wife's womb. Once again Sarah becomes a sexual pawn in her husband's gambit to preserve himself, and to prosper at the same time.

¹Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, ²and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her.

³But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman."

⁴Now Abimelech had not gone near her, so he said, "Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? ⁵Did he not say to me, 'She is my sister,' and didn't she also say, 'He is my brother'? I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands."

⁶Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her. ⁷Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all yours will die."

⁸Early the next morning Abimelech summoned all his officials, and when he told them all that had happened, they were very much afraid. ⁹Then Abimelech called Abraham in and said, "What have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should not be done." ¹⁰And Abimelech asked Abraham, "What was your reason for doing this?" (Gen 20:1-10, NIV).

Abraham fears for his life; Abimelech, the supposedly lustful foreigner, is the one who fears God. Abraham gives away Sarah; Abimelech gives back Sarah. Earlier, in 15:15, God had assured Abraham, "You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age." Yet, Abraham fears that he will be murdered. And in 18:10, God had just told Abraham that in about a year's time Sarah will bear him a son. Yet, Abraham is

willing to sacrifice Sarah. Finally, Abraham had seen how God plagued Pharaoh's house in a similar situation, how then can he knowingly expose Abimelech's house to such a curse? Even if we make excuses for the first episode with Pharaoh, the second episode with Abimelech is inexcusable. This time, however, Abraham talks with the king—something he did not do, or get a chance to do, with Egypt's monarch.

¹¹Abraham replied, "I said to myself, 'There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' ¹²Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. ¹³And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother"'" (Gen 20:11-13, NIV).

"Everywhere we go"! . . . *"Everywhere we go, say of me, 'He is my brother'"!* All story long, the couple has been coming to different places. In each place the deception was practiced, confesses Abraham. Is this the first time in all the couple's travels that God has intervened to stop a repeat of what happened in Egypt, where Sarah actually became another man's wife?

Look now to 20:17. Here our storyteller saves for last some information that could have come before. As we read, we will ignore the chapter division that ends chapter 20 and begins chapter 21.

^{20:17}Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife and his slave girls so they could have children again, ¹⁸for [and here comes the flashback] the LORD had closed up every womb in Abimelech's household because of Abraham's wife Sarah.

^{21:1}Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. ²Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. ³Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. ⁴When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. ⁵Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him (Gen 20:17-21:5, NIV).

Remember, the original scroll for this story had no chapter or verse markings, so that if we read the episode in its entirety, it becomes clear that the flashback leads to the real conclusion: Sarah's pregnancy! Sarah's infertile and finally fruitful womb is linked to the infertility and then fruitful wombs of Abimelech's women. Sarah's womb, too, has been shut—a blessing under the circumstances of her being shuttled between her husband's bed and the houses of Pharaoh and Abimelech and who knows how many others. The cause of barrenness for Abimelech's women, and in all likelihood for Sarah

as well, is the scheming of Abraham—just as the cure for all these dormant wombs, including his wife’s, is triggered by Abraham’s prayer of intercession. *Abraham is to blame for the ongoing barrenness of Sarah!* And when Sarah finally does become pregnant, her condition changes due to the fact that Abraham’s character changes. Unlike the episode in Egypt with Pharaoh, with Abimelech Abraham prays for the one whom he himself has wronged. Abraham lives up to the designation of “prophet” conferred by God in pleading for the well-being of those he has victimized. Abraham comes out of this sordid scene a changed man. And it is precisely this point that provides us the reason for the long, long wait of twenty-five years: *Sarah’s change in condition is dependent upon Abraham’s change in character.* Before Abraham can come to be the “father of the faithful,” he must cease to be the “father of the fearful.” As fear gives way to faith, infertility gives way to Isaac.

Why is God so slow? He is waiting on Abraham to catch-up. “God’s will waits on human willingness.”⁴ God waits and waits and waits—He does not rush the slow process of transforming the lives of His servants. God is ready to deliver on His promises, but His people are not always ready to receive. The single biggest obstacle to the promises of God are the people to whom the promises are made. Just read the Book of Genesis.

Joel Hemphill is the author of a well-known Christian song entitled, *He’s Still Working On Me*. Listen as I read the lyrics.

He’s still working on me to make me what I ought to be.
It took Him just a week to make the moon and stars,
The Sun and the Earth and Jupiter and Mars.
How loving and patient He must be, He’s still working on me.

There really ought to be a sign upon the heart,
Don't judge him/her yet, there’s an unfinished part.
But I’ll be perfect just according to His plan
Fashioned by the Master’s loving hands.

He’s still working on me to make me what I ought to be.
It took Him just a week to make the moon and stars,
The Sun and the Earth and Jupiter and Mars.
How loving and patient He must be, He’s still working on me.

⁴Borgman, *Genesis*, 55.

In the mirror of His Word reflections that I see
Make me wonder why He never gave up on me.
He loves me as I am and helps me when I pray
Remember He's the Potter, I'm the clay.

He's still working on me to make me what I ought to be.
It took Him just a week to make the moon and stars,
The Sun and the Earth and Jupiter and Mars.
How loving and patient He must be, He's still working on me.

Now I understand why God seems so slow in working in my life. It is because I am so slow to change. "He's still working on me to make me what I ought to be." What about you?