

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 2. One Tiny Bud.

Thirteen years passed. Abraham was now 99 and still without the heir that God had promised him. But a lot was going to happen in the coming year.

In Genesis chapter 17 God elaborates on His original promise, and it is mind-boggling. “You will be the father of many nations,” He told Abram. “No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham. Kings will come from you. I will establish My covenant as an everlasting covenant between Me and you and your descendants ... to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; *and I will be their God.*” God continued that Sarai’s name should also be changed to Sarah, that He would bless her and give Abraham a son by her. She would be the mother of nations and kings of peoples would come from her.

As a sign of this covenant God initiated the rite of circumcision for all males who came under the umbrella of Israel, whether born there or bought as servants. It is significant to note that God ordered this to be done on the 8th day of the son’s life; medical science tells us that on the 8th day of a baby’s life the blood-clotting agent rises to 110%, falling back to normal on the 9th day! Abraham, though sceptical with impatience at the delay in God’s promise of a son, and secretly laughing at the absurdity of it, was strictly obedient to God’s command, undergoing the trial of circumcision himself before he carried it out on the rest of his household that very day.

Note verse 4 – “You will be the father of many nations.” God’s plan for Israel did not exclude the rest of us, and this is only one of many Old Testament references to the inclusion of the Gentiles in that plan. Paul in Romans 4:17 quotes this verse to his Gentile readers to drive home the point that, through our faith in Abraham’s God, Abraham is the father of us all. Note too the repetition of the word “everlasting” in God’s promise. How else do we account for the fact that tiny Israel exists to this day, right in the midst of the huge, ferocious, antagonistic nations surrounding her? And thanks to Israel’s Eternal King we can share in the “promised land” where live the sons and daughters of God.

In the midst of this there came another test for Abraham. In Chapter 18:3 messengers of God came to him in the form of travellers and foretold the doom of Sodom and Gomorrah in punishment for their extreme wickedness. Abraham, still feeling responsible for his wayward nephew Lot, bargained with God against the sentence. If just 50 people in Sodom were found to be righteous, would God still destroy the city? No, God would withhold His hand for sake of 50. What about 45 or 40, or perhaps 30? Abraham in bold desperation brought the stakes down to 20 and then 10, and still God listened to his pleas. Confident in the justice of God, Abraham dared to make the challenge, “Far be it from you to kill the righteous with the wicked. Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

But not even Lot and his household could produce 10 people who could be called “righteous.” From his vantage point in the hills Abraham watched with horror next morning as burning sulphur rained down on the 2 cities. With the urgent help of the same messengers who had come to Abraham, Lot managed to escape with his wife and 2 daughters. But even then his wife, in disobedience, stopped to look back nostalgically at Sodom, and was immobilised as the teeming salt engulfed her. As for the daughters, they may have left Sodom but Sodom had not left them. Horrified that there were no men to give them heirs in this desolate country, they schemed to make their father drunk so that they could commit incest with him. They got their wish; both bore sons, Moab and Ben-Ammi, whose progeny, the Moabites and the Ammonites, were to

become bitter enemies of the nation of Abraham's children. Ezekiel 25 contains God's words of judgement against both nations.

How discouraged do you feel when the prayers of years for your nearest and dearest are not answered as you had hoped? Bringing judgement on sinners is just as heart-breaking for God as it is for us, yet He will not violate the freewill with which He has endowed mankind. There is no trite consolation; our only way to peace is to leave the management of the situation in God's hands.

Chapter 20 is almost unbelievable. For a second time Abraham moved out of the territory God had promised him, towards the well-watered Philistine country along the coast, and in fear of the king Abimelech, he asked Sarah once again to pose as his sister to save his own skin. No matter that God had promised his son would come from Sarah, and that surely she should then have had her purity strictly guarded! By the grace of God Abimelech detected the deceit before he had committed any violation, and gave Abraham the rebuke he deserved. Yet this "pagan" showed tremendous grace, bringing a gift of slaves and livestock and 1,000 shekels (about 11.5 kilograms) of silver to Abraham, along with the invitation, "My land is before you; live wherever you like." Later the pair were to enact a treaty of goodwill and mutual kindness, prompted by Abimelech's realisation that "God is with you in everything you do." (Chapter 21:22.)

Do you know non-believers who put Christians to shame with their kindness, honesty, courage and unselfishness? Even as we admire Abraham we can see only too well that he had his faults. Yet God chose him, as He chose the vacillating, complaining, fickle race that came from him! We can never understand the ways of God: we just have to be grateful that He doesn't wait for us to be perfect before He chooses us!

How can we measure the abounding grace of God? For Chapter 21 brings us to the peak of our story, the culmination of all the waiting and hoping and longing. It simply tells us that the Lord was gracious to Sarah and did exactly what He had promised; she became pregnant and bore a son. She was 90; Abraham was 100. As instructed by God in chapter 17:19, Abraham named the baby Isaac, which means, "he laughs." Sarah had her own special joy. "God has brought me laughter," she exulted, "and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me."

But even on this joyful situation a shadow fell. At the weaning of the boy there were special celebrations, but Sarah noticed the fourteen-year-old Ishmael mocking her own son. There was no way she could stand that, and in verse 10 gave a strident command to Abraham – "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, he will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." Abraham was distressed: after all, Ishmael was his son too, and to cast him out would be to violate every code of the prevalent law. Yet God spoke to him gently; it had to be this way, for it was to be through Isaac, the child of promise, that Abraham's blessing would find fulfilment, while God Himself would look after Ishmael and his future.

How do you feel as you read verses 14-20, the culmination of all the unfairness Hagar had suffered? Yet God did not forsake her, and verse 20 shows He kept His promise – "God was with the boy as he grew up." We live in a God-forsaking world with all its heartache, yet we can cling to one steadfast hope - our God will never forsake us.

In Chapter 22 Abraham faced the greatest challenge to his faith in God. How could he accept God's incomprehensible command to him in verse 2, "Take your son, your only (or "precious") son, Isaac, whom you love, and sacrifice him as a burnt offering" ? Yet verse 3 shows Abraham's courage and unquestioning obedience – "Early the next morning" he prepared for the journey to where God had stipulated this sacrifice should be carried out – Mount Moriah.

We can only imagine the tension as Abraham left his 2 servants and the donkey at a distance while he and Isaac went on towards the mountain, the boy with the wood strapped to his back. As any teenager would, Isaac wanted to know where was the only missing ingredient in this act of worship – the sacrificial animal? All he got was Abraham’s enigmatic answer – “God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”

It is hard to know whose was the greater agony as the father built the altar, arranged the wood on it and then bound the son as the sacrifice. It tells us a lot about the submission of Isaac as he lay there, a stripling who could have overpowered his ageing father if he had wanted to escape. It seems the faith and obedience of Abraham had become ingrained completely in his son.

And then, even as Abraham raised the knife, deliverance came. “Abraham! Abraham!” God called from heaven. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from Me your son, your only son.” And there, caught by his horns in a thicket, was a ram to be used for the sacrifice.

There and then God repeated the covenant He had made with Abraham – His blessing in the growth of a conquering nation, and a blessing that would be passed on to all nations of the earth. Little could Abraham dream of the extent of that blessing. It is interesting to note the extent of the influence which Jews have wielded over the world down through the centuries. Nobel laureates, historians, scientists, philosophers, doctors, economists, musicians, writers, artists, lawyers – all descended from Abraham!

But of course the ultimate blessing comes from Abraham’s greatest son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the sacrifice whom God provided. God’s one and only Son, promised before He was born, bearing to the Cross the wood for His sacrifice, submitting willingly to be bound to the Cross, dying yet being raised again to life, that those who believe and are committed to Him, should become not only children of Abraham, but wonderfully, children of God.

Before we leave the story of Abraham there is one more glowing example of his faith that is worth noticing; turn to chapter 23. At the age of 127 Sarah died in Hebron, a Canaanite town controlled by the Hittites. For a burial place in the locality Abraham sought to buy a cave belonging to Ephron, but Ephron took advantage of Abraham’s grief to bargain that the cave could not be bought without the field surrounding it – and for the exorbitant price of 400 shekels of silver. (In Jeremiah 32:9 the prophet bought a similar piece of Palestinian real estate for 17 shekels of silver!) Abraham only needed the cave, but did not lower himself to haggle. He was careful to have the document of sale drawn up with elaborate detail, and with legitimate witnesses, and thus became a landowner in the land of Canaan. We have been told already that Abraham believed God; here he showed his faith by forking out without question a huge sum as his initial stake in the promised land, in the confidence that God would fulfil His promise that eventually the whole land of Canaan would belong to him and his descendants.

We may urge people to “put their money where their mouth is” to show they are genuine. We may declare our faith in God, but do we balk when faced with the cost of following that faith?