

The Family of Abraham: Understanding Grace & Law

Genesis 15 - 25

JULY 19, 2023

Grace and Law and Redemption in the Bible

Did you know: The cross is more than the symbol of the place where Jesus Christ was crucified. In Christian faith, the vertical portion of the cross represents God reaching down to mankind through Christ. It also represents the chasm of sin that separated man from God. The horizontal portion represents the bridge built by Christ's sacrifice between God and man so that we may be reconciled to Him.

A thorough examination of the story of Isaac and Ishmael requires a brief survey of God's plan for mankind's redemption from sin. The consequences of the biblical events of the lives of these half-brothers are still felt in the modern world; both of these young men illustrate God's great **grace** and **mercy** as He made a way to reconcile all of humanity to Himself. We will go into this subject in greater detail when we examine the life and writings of Paul the Apostle. For now, let's look at the core principles of redemption:

- 1) When Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating from the forbidden tree, sin and death entered the world and infected every one of their descendants. God is holy, just, and righteous and is the center of the realm of the spirit. He cannot dwell in the realm of the flesh, which is marked by sin and wickedness. Death was the penalty required for sin.
- 2) Because of this, we face the inevitable, permanent death of our flesh and eternal separation from God. This was not what God desired for us; He still desires eternal relationship with us. A way had to be made for the wages of sin to be paid and a bridge to be established between man and God.
- 3) God determined that one perfect sacrifice could pay the wages for all of mankind. The problem is that no human, animal, or anything on earth was "perfect" (meaning free from sin, death, and decay). The only way was for God to send His Son, who was holy and perfect, to live a life free of sin in the realm of the flesh. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, the one who paid the required penalty of sin.
- 4) Mankind can do NOTHING to earn his or her own redemption from sin and eternal salvation EXCEPT for making the choice to believe in Jesus Christ and have faith that we are reconciled to God because Jesus paid the penalty for our sins when He died on the cross. This is NOT freedom to do as we please and be sinful, but we'll get into that in a later study.

Grace and Law and Redemption in the Bible

- 1) In our previous lesson, we read that God made a covenant with Abraham that all nations of the world would be blessed through his descendants. God had already determined that the Son would be born to one of Abraham's descendants, BUT, God also knew that there would be quite a long interval (by human standards) between the onset of the Abrahamic Covenant and the birth of Jesus the Messiah. God had to first make a nation of Abraham's off-spring as part of the covenant. Obviously, that was going to take some time.
- 2) As God had determined to make Abraham's family into His own special nation, His own special people, He was going to need to teach them how to live holy lives that were pleasing to God. They were to take on the responsibility of modeling holiness to the rest of the people of the world, after all. For that reason, the book of Exodus documents God giving Abraham's descendants "the Law" (which includes the Ten Commandments and a host of other prescribed rituals for worship and guidelines for holiness in daily living and temporary sanctification by animal sacrifices). THIS LAW WAS ONLY MEANT TO SERVE AS A GUIDE UNTIL THE ARRIVAL OF JESUS CHRIST.
- 3) The problem was that many of God's people would mistakenly believe that following the law, not faith in Christ, was the means for being justified, sanctified, and made righteous. This is called **legalism**. If that were the case, there was never a point in Christ coming to earth or dying on the cross (or for that matter, making a separate nation of Abraham). As we saw, mankind has been enslaved by sin and no matter how many works we do, we cannot become holy enough to attain righteousness on our own.
- 4) Therefore, we have a choice: We can be "slaves" to the Law (which means thinking that we can be "good enough" by doing good deeds and obeying all of the rules in God's Law) or we can be "free" in Christ (meaning the pressure's off, Christ did the work for us). This is what "freedom in Christ" means: As a gift because of His grace and mercy, God paid the penalty for us. We did nothing to deserve it but He did it anyway. We endeavor to be thankful and do right out of gratitude and faith, not because we think if we do enough good deeds we can go to heaven.

ABRAHAM: TEACHING US TO TRUST GOD

"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter (being acceptable to God)? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." (Romans 4:1-3)

- Abraham is considered the father of faithful (Romans 4:1-3) and a friend of God (James 2:23). From the moment he left his father's home to answer "yes" to God's call, his life was a model for walking in trust of God.
 - *Abraham was willing to give everything up for God, from moving to live in a foreign land to being asked to sacrifice his promised son, Isaac. If he ever had doubts about God's commands, his faith was certainly greater than his fear.*
 - *Abraham taught us to believe God's Word and God's ability to do anything He promises. When God promises Abraham and Sarah would have a son in their old age, Abraham never doubted God's ability to fulfill that promise (though there was some misunderstanding about God's method as we will see). When God promised to make a great nation of him, Abraham never doubted God.*
 - *He taught us that we can be faithful to God and yet still be human beings. He made mistakes (such as deceiving the Pharaoh about Sarai or giving in to Sarai's demands that he have a son by her handmaid). But he believed God all the while and is called the friend of God. Great as our sins may be, God's capacity for forgiveness is infinitely greater.*
 - *Abraham teaches us that being part of God's family includes suffering and troubles. Abraham had trouble during his life, and so will we. But God uses suffering to teach us to trust His deliverance, to build our character, to purify our faith, to demonstrate His capacity to deliver us from trouble, and to discipline us when we stray into sin.*
 - *Abraham taught us thankfulness to God. When your church speaks of tithing, the tradition began with Abraham in Genesis 13, when he expressed thanks and gave proper credit to God after a victory over enemies. Abraham never forgot that all he had was given by God.*
 - *Faith is one part believing and one part doing. As we are about to see, motivation is the key to good works. If we do any work with the intention of gain, notoriety, or thinking we are earning our righteousness, we labor in vain. In all things we do, our motivation should be pleasing God and demonstrating God's love to others.*

Where does this leave us?

- We have a choice of two ways to live: We can live under “Grace”, which means that Christ has earned our salvation and God, out of grace, declares us as justified and righteous because of our faith in Christ. Yes, it’s a little more complicated than that (we need to be baptized, confess our faith, and choose to live good lives under God’s guidance, but again, we’ll dive deeper into that when we study Paul’s teachings).
- Alternately, we can live “under the flesh”, which means we keep trying to earn righteousness on our own through good deeds or we reject the idea of God and the work of Christ altogether. When we choose from the heart to believe and follow Jesus, the Spirit within us helps us live in the ways that the Law describes out of gratitude and out of love of Christ and love for all mankind. The Law is a PARTNER of grace, meant to show us what is sinful so that we understand our need for Christ to overcome sin. Law is NOT a substitute for God’s grace and mercy or Christ’s death on the cross.
- Why do we need to know this? Because the story of Isaac, Ishmael, Sarah, and Hagar symbolizes these two paths of mankind. Sarah and Isaac are the ancestors of Christ and God’s holy nation of Israel (formed of Abraham’s descendants). Hagar and Ishmael are symbolic of the flesh, man’s attempts to earn righteousness our own way. As we will see, **this does not mean that Hagar and Ishmael were forsaken by God.** Indeed, it was as much for the redemption and salvation of their descendants as Abraham’s that Jesus Christ died.
- With this in mind, we should NEVER think that any race or nation of man is greater or lesser than others in the eyes of God. His wish is relationship with every person. It is our freedom to say yes or no to that relationship.

"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; ² so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said.

So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. ⁴ He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me."

"Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her. The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. ⁸ And he said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." The angel added, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count." The angel of the LORD also said to her: "You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery. He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers."

She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael." (Genesis 16)

*SARAH AND
HAGAR:
TRUSTING
GOD'S WAY VS.
DOING THINGS
OUR OWN WAY
(and the
consequences)*

Hagar: Symbolizing the Law

- Hagar was born a slave, which means in bondage. Likewise, every man and woman is born into the realm of the flesh, which means we are in bondage to sin.
- Hagar became Abram's second wife, added alongside Sarai. We saw that the Law was meant to work alongside God's existing grace, just as Hagar as a servant was meant to work alongside Sarai.
- Hagar was not supposed to have a child with Abram. When Sarai gave Hagar to bear Abram a child, they were attempting to bring about God's promise for Abram to have a child by human efforts instead of trusting God's ability to do all He had pledged. The result was misery for all of them.
- Hagar gave birth to a slave.

Sarah/Sarai: Trusting God's Grace

- Sarai was born a free woman, representing the freedom we are gifted through God's grace.
- She was the first wife of Abram, just as God's grace preexisted the Law.
- She would be the mother of Isaac, through whom God would build the nation of Israel. Through these descendants of Abram, God would bless the whole world and free those enslaved to flesh, sin, and death.
- IT HAD TO BE SARAI. Why? Because Sarai was beyond child-bearing years. It was impossible for Sarai and Abram to have a child without the grace of God, His divine intervention. Isaac could ONLY exist by God's power, not man's efforts and not by law. Only grace can give life; the law only reveals our sinful condition and legalism (self-works) ends in death.
- Sarai/Sarah gave birth to a free man

What did we learn from Sarai and Hagar's story?

- God is not obligated to give us blessings. He does so because He loves us and wants what's best for us. Sometimes, we get the idea that God should bless our every ambition or grant our every wish, and if He doesn't we respond by doubting His kindness, His love of us, sometimes His existence. Sarai and Abram's mistake shows us that God is willing to bless our efforts---when His work is done according to His will in the way He commands. How can we discern his will? Start by praying, then keep praying and open your mind and heart to God's response.
- Choosing to live under Law produces enslavement to sin or legalism, not freedom. No religious system should ever lead us into bondage. Freedom is not to do as we please as though our every action is right. It is a choice to live the way that pleases God, living with the Law in your heart rather than living under its thumb.
- The Law cannot save us. The Law cannot sanctify us. The Law is meant to reveal what is sinful as contrasted to what is holy in God's eyes. It helps us see just how difficult it is to break away from the instinct to follow fleshly ways and temptations without God's help, His mercy.
- When we try to become righteous on our own, we end up in a mess like Abram, Sarai, and Hagar. We can't do it our way; we need to be patient, wait for God's guidance, and live according to His plan. We need to trust that He knows the best way for us, even if it takes us down a path we weren't expecting. Abram wasn't expecting to leave his father's land to move to Canaan, but he trusted that God's path was the right path.
- Let's see what happened to Abram and family next:

“Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” And she added, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. But God said to him, “Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring.”

Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, “I cannot watch the boy die.” And as she sat there, she began to sob.

God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.”

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.” (Genesis 21)

ISHMAEL: TEACHING US THAT WE ARE SEEN AND HEARD BY GOD

ISHMAEL: "GOD HEARS"

- The first baby in the Bible to be named before his birth (Isaac was second). God was with Ishmael his whole life. He responded to the boy's cries.
- God did not overlook Ishmael or forget him when he left Abraham's house. God would keep his promise to make a nation of Ishmael. He would be the patriarch of the Arab nations. Despite Sarah's word about inheritance, Ishmael's descendants share the invitation to salvation through Christ just as much as Isaac's. We will see in later studies that nations outside Israel (called pagans or Gentiles) will be adopted into Abraham's family.
- Represents the believer's first birth into the flesh, which is subject to death.
- Born through man attempting to fulfill God's will through human means.
- Born to a slave (representing how we are enslaved by our sinful nature).
- Brought dissension into Abraham's house.
- God often passed over the firstborn children in favor of the second or even third child. He rejected Cain and chose Abel (Genesis 4). He chose Jacob instead of Esau (Genesis 25) and Ephraim instead of Manasseh (Genesis 48).

ISAAC: "HE LAUGHS"

- Means "He Laughs" because he brought joy to Abraham's house. This represents Jesus' teaching that joy results when lost sinners are found by the Lord.
- Born to a free woman (again representing freedom in Christ)
- Born into the Spirit by the divine power of God. He represents the "second birth" that future believers would receive through faith in Christ the Messiah.
- The covenant heir through whom the lineage of the Messiah would continue.
- Experienced persecution, just as we are told as children of God to expect troubles in this world. God was with him, as God will be with us.
- Reminds us to look for God's provision and to have confidence that His promises for our good, our redemption, and our salvation will be fulfilled. Reminds us that nothing is impossible for God. In our previous lesson, we saw that Abraham trusted God so much that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac if God required it.

ISAAC: A LIFE THAT FORESHADOWS CHRIST

Biblical “types” are representations of one thing by another—they illustrate or foreshadow something that will occur or a person who will appear in another part of Scripture. In the case of Isaac, some events of his life are a biblical type for Christ.

- *God’s command that Abraham sacrifice Isaac foreshadows God sacrificing His own Son, Jesus Christ.*
 - Both were born by the power of God.
 - Abraham loved Isaac and God the Father loved Christ the Son.
 - Neither God nor Abraham spared their sons. In the case of Jesus, obviously a ram could not take His place on the altar of sacrifice. Jesus’ was the only blood that could permanently take away man’s sins.
 - Both endured persecution (in Isaac’s case, it came from his brother, Ishmael)
 - Both were forsaken by the father. In Jesus’ case, He had to experience suffering and death for God’s judgement so that mankind could be freed from sin. In Isaac’s case, the boy still had to fulfill his place in preserving the Messianic line, which meant he would have a child of his own one day. God COULD have resurrected Isaac if Abraham had sacrificed the boy. It was not the Lord’s power being tested, however, it was Abraham’s faith in the Lord. Isaac’s “death” was symbolic. Being delivered from the altar of sacrifice by the mercy of God foreshadows Jesus being resurrected after his own sacrifice on the cross.

ISAAC: A LIFE THAT FORESHADOWS CHRIST

Isaac's marriage to Rebekah foreshadows the day when Jesus Christ will return to gather His church (the whole body of the faithful) to be with Him eternally.

- For the Abrahamic Covenant to be fulfilled, Isaac (the covenant son) needed to bear off-spring. Parents traditionally arranged the marriage. By the same token, God decided to provide a bride for His Son, Christ, as a gift of love (God is self-sufficient, so a bride is not an actual necessity). That bride is the Church. *Jesus is God's gift to the world and the believers are God's gift to Jesus.*
- Abraham was very old and needed his trusted servant to find this bride. Isaac was forbidden to return to Mesopotamia (land of Abraham's father), he had to remain in the promised land (which represents Heaven). Mesopotamia symbolizes the current world of the flesh. **Believers are the servants being sent into the world** to gather the faithful to join the church, to be married to Christ. We are sent to give witness about our master, Jesus, just as the servant gave witness about Isaac to Rebekkah.
- As Isaac inherited all that God had given Abraham, **the servant had great gifts to offer** the bride. As Christ's servants, we offer new believers the gifts God's Word, His love, forgiveness, redemption, and salvation from death into eternal life.
- When the servant arrives in Mesopotamia, he immediately **prays for God's guidance** as to which woman God desired as the bride of Isaac. Before we do anything in God's name, we should pray and be sure that we are in God's will.
- Rebekah and the servant would meet at a well. The well here represents water baptism, the means by which we confirm our faith and desire to enter God's family and receive His salvation (to be wed to Christ).
- Isaac's wife would come from Abraham's family (Rebekah is the sister of Laban, who would be the father of Jacob's wives). Isaac could not marry a pagan. **Rebekah had to consent to go with the servant and become Isaac's wife, just as the believer must say yes to becoming part of the body/bride of Christ.**
- The servant was commanded to bring the bride to Isaac. By the same token, we will be **brought out of this world of sin** to the land where we will dwell with Christ, the bridegroom. This land is called the New Jerusalem in the New Testament.

ISAAC: A LIFE THAT FORESHADOWS CHRIST

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- As Abraham was known for his altars, Isaac is known for establishing wells. It's no coincidence that when he first meets Rebekah Isaac is standing at the same well as Hagar.
- By cultural protocols, Rebekah wears a veil when she meets her bridegroom. This garment was a mark of modesty and submission to the bridegroom, just as believers are called to walk in humility and submit to the will of Christ. Submission is an act of love. Within the Holy Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in constant submission to one another out of love. The Son submitted to the Father's will on the cross. The Father and the Son submitted to the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, allowing it to come baptize the new apostles and the believers. Love, humility, and mutual submission are to be hallmarks of the body of believers as we are sent into the world.
- Rebekah arrives at "eventide", which means evening. Jesus Christ will return for His bride at a time of great spiritual darkness as well. Just as Isaac, He will claim His bride. When He arrives, we, his servants, will give an account of our travels and works done in His name.

THE DEATH OF SARAH

GENESIS 23-25

- Despite Sarah's misstep with Hagar, God still named her "princess" and she is listed among the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11:11. Peter calls her a model for Christian wives (1 Peter 3:1-6) and Paul uses her as an illustration of God's grace working in the life of the believer.
- In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul reminds us that, while we are expected to grieve for the dead, our grief should not come from a feeling of hopelessness. There was great concern among the Thessalonians that believers were passing away before the return of Christ. Paul reminded them that those who have died in the faith are not lost. At death, the believer goes into the presence of Jesus. They will be raised with Christ on the last day. The Bible teaches that the place between death and resurrection is known as Sheol, and it is divided in two areas: The place for the believers who wait for Christ, and the place for the unbelievers awaiting judgement. Jesus rose from Sheol and will not leave the faithful there, abandoned. Thus, we may grieve (even Jesus wept in John 11:35), but never despair. John promises in Revelation 21:4 that God will one day wipe away all tears.
- Believers in the Bible always buried their dead, never cremated them. Does it matter? Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 15:35-38 that the continuity between our fleshly bodies and the new bodies we will be given at our resurrection lies in identity. God has no plans to restore our old "bodies of humiliation". He intends to give us glorified bodies. And, again, nothing is impossible for God. Certainly, he can find us wherever we are laid to rest and restore us in our identity regardless of whether we were cremated.
- Abraham had a good reputation as a man of God among the Hittites. They were willing to sell him a place to bury Sarah. Christians in this world should endeavor to deal with all people—believers or unbelievers—with honesty and integrity as we model the Lord in this world so that others see our good works and are drawn to Jesus.

THE DEATH OF ABRAHAM

GENESIS 23-25

- The tomb of Sarah would eventually also become the burial place of Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Leah, and Jacob.
- The Bible tells us that Abraham died in a good old age as promised in Genesis 15:15. He walked with God as a friend for over a century and died in the faith “full of years” (Gen 12:4, James 2:23, Gen 25:8). This translates to mean that Abraham died satisfied with life and at peace with God (Romans 5:1).
- When the Bible says Abraham was “gathered to his people” (Gen 25:8), it is assumed to mean that he was gathered (like the rest of the faithful) into the waiting place in Sheol as depicted in Luke 16:19-31).
- For the rest of us, Abraham is the patriarch God’s chosen people. This nation of believers is not limited to his blood descendants. Because of Christ, people of all races, genders, and nationalities have the opportunity to say yes to becoming part of the church bride of Christ. Being born to any specific religion (Jewish or Christian) does not confer righteousness on us or guarantee our salvation. As we’ve seen, it’s not enough to believe in Christ intellectually without submitting to Him and following His ways. Neither is it enough to follow God’s laws without believing in the salvation act of the Son on the cross. It is faith and the good works motivated by faith and love and guided by the Spirit that makes us God’s true people.

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