

# God Will Be True to His Promise (Even When We Get in the Way)

By Kevin DeYoung

Genesis 12 explodes with good news. While Abram was still living in Mesopotamia (Acts 7:2) and part of a family of idol worshipers (Josh. 24:2), God came to him and promised a sevenfold blessing (Gen. 12:1-3). Abram would be a great nation, he would have a great name, and through him, all the families of the earth would be blessed.

But no sooner do we hear of God's promised blessing to Abram than we find the promise threatened by famine in Egypt and (even worse) by Abram's foolishness before Pharaoh. Fearing that his life will be in danger because of the beauty of his wife, Abram instructs Sarai to lie to the Egyptian king and say that she is his sister. This leads Pharaoh to shower Abram with riches and to take Sarai into his harem as his wife. Whether Pharaoh committed adultery with Sarai or not is unclear (I think not). What is clear is that when Abram is sent away by the king he leaves Egypt a much wealthier man than when he arrived.

The point of the story is not to moralize, good or bad, on Pharaoh or Abram or Sarai. It's not wrong to draw lessons from Old Testament history (1 Cor. 10:6), but Genesis 12:10-20 is not mainly about the patriarchs. It is first of all about the invincibility of God's promise.

Pharaoh's house was cursed when it looked like Pharaoh would dishonor Sarai (cf. Gen. 12:3). And meanwhile, Abram was blessed—blessed beyond his wildest expectation and certainly blessed well beyond all deserving. This is the story we see over and over again in Genesis: God's protection and God's provision for the sake of God's promise.

What did Abram do to deserve to leave Egypt a richer man than when he arrived? Nothing. Actually, less than nothing! And yet, Abram left with great wealth, because God is true to his promise. The promises of God are so sure, not even God's people can ultimately mess them up.

## Looking Back

There's a connection between the story about Abram and Sarai in Egypt in chapter 12 and the story about Adam and Eve in the Garden in chapter 3.

Both stories center around a temptation caused by food. In the garden, it's the fruit that looks good to eat and the temptation that arises from that, and in here it's the temptation arising from the lack of food.

In both instances, we see the disastrous results of a husband's poor leadership involving his wife.

We also see that both stories deal with deception. The serpent deceives the couple, and here the couple deceives Pharaoh. The result of both deceptions is this language, “they saw and they took.” The woman saw the fruit, she took and she ate. Pharaoh saw the woman and took her to be his wife.

In both stories, once the deception is found out, the ruler asks questions. God comes to Adam: “What have you done?” Pharaoh comes to Abram: “Why have you done this? Why didn’t you tell me?” In both cases the man’s excuse is to point to his wife: “Well, the wife that you gave me, she gave me the fruit.” “Well, the wife that I have, she’s simply too beautiful. I had to lie.”

And what’s the result in both stories? The couple is sent out. Adam and Eve are kicked out of Eden. Abram and Sarai are sent away from Egypt.

You could even look at the next passage to follow in each instance. After leaving the Garden there is family conflict between Cain and Abel. After leaving Egypt, there is family conflict between Abram and Lot. We are meant to see this episode in chapter 12 as another kind of fall from grace. The two stories track with each other in uncanny ways.

Except for this all-important detail. In Genesis Adam and Eve are kicked out of Eden, and they leave with cursing. In Genesis 12, Abram and Sarai are kicked out of Egypt, and they leave with blessing. They deserve cursing, just like Adam and Eve did in the garden, but here the promise of God is so operative that when they deserve the same cursing, instead they get what they don’t deserve, they get more blessing.

## **Looking Ahead**

And there’s a connection with this story, not only going back to the garden, but looking forward to the Exodus. Remember, Moses is writing this story is writing it for the people when they are wandering in the wilderness, on the cusp of entering the Promised Land. Think about the parallels they would have seen between their story this story.

Abram migrates to Egypt because of a famine. Jacob’s family, at the end of Genesis, will go down to Egypt because of a famine.

When Abram and Sarai approach the land, they plan a speech for Pharaoh so that it might go well with them. When Israel’s family journeys to Egypt at the end of the book, they plan a speech for Pharaoh so that it might go well with them.

Sarai becomes a sort of slave to Pharaoh. The Israelites will become, for many centuries, slaves to another Pharaoh.

God then afflicts that Pharaoh with plagues, just as he afflicts the Pharaoh in Genesis 12 with plagues. In both cases, the plagues result in Pharaoh sending God’s people out of Egypt.

And what happens when they leave Egypt? Both times they leave with great wealth from the Egyptians. And in both cases, the next stop is to journey in the Negev and then later arrive back in the land.

This story in Genesis 12 was meant to be a comfort to God's people wandering in the wilderness because of their sin. Parents would have been able to say to their children, "Remember what God did for Abram? He almost blew it. But God took care of him. God rescued him. God blessed him and brought him back to Canaan, all for the sake of his promise. Surely he will do the same for us."

### **Looking at Ourselves**

Obviously, the lesson from Abram and Sarai in Egypt is not that we should lie our way to wealth and prosperity. Abram's conniving is a rebuke to all of us who think God's plan needs help from the world's ways.

But mostly, the story is a word of hope. It's a firm reminder that nothing and no one can fully and finally derail the promises of God. You may look at your sin and stupidity and think that you've forfeited all of God's blessing for you. But you haven't. We may corporately look at the failures of God's people—worldly compromise, theological error, fallen leaders, hypocrisy, duplicity, sin, and scandal—and wonder how the church will ever accomplish the purposes God has for her. But don't forget: Jesus himself promises to build his church. This is not an excuse for us to be lazy, let alone to be disobedient, but it is reason for hope.

I don't know what God is up to in your church, your city, your denomination, or your country, but we can be absolutely certain of this: Christ will be true to his word. The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29). Nothing can fully and finally derail or destroy the promises of God. Not the world, not the flesh, not the devil. Not even us. Jesus Christ will have his way. He will keep his promises. He will bless his people. He will build his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

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## Question: "What is the Abrahamic Covenant?"

**Answer:** A covenant is an agreement between two parties. There are two basic types of covenants: conditional and unconditional. A conditional or bilateral covenant is an agreement that is binding on both parties for its fulfillment. Both parties agree to fulfill certain conditions. If either party fails to meet their responsibilities, the covenant is broken and neither party has to fulfill the expectations of the covenant. An unconditional or unilateral covenant is an agreement between two parties, but only one of the two parties has to do something. Nothing is required of the other party.

The Abrahamic Covenant is an unconditional covenant. The actual covenant is found in Genesis 12:1–3. The ceremony recorded in Genesis 15 indicates the unconditional nature of the covenant. When a covenant was dependent upon both parties keeping commitments, then both parties would pass between the pieces of animals. In Genesis 15, God alone moves between the halves of the animals. Abraham was in a deep sleep. God's solitary action indicates that the covenant is principally His promise. He binds Himself to the covenant.

Later, God gave Abraham the rite of circumcision as the specific sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 17:9–14). All males in Abraham's line were to be circumcised and thus carry with them a lifelong mark in their flesh that they were part of God's physical blessing in the world. Any descendant of Abraham who refused circumcision was declaring himself to be outside of God's covenant; this explains why God was angry with Moses when Moses failed to circumcise his son (Exodus 4:24–26).

God determined to call out a special people for Himself, and through that special people He would bless the whole world. The Lord tells Abram,  
"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.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2–3).

Based on this promise, God later changed Abram's name from *Abram* ("high father") to *Abraham* ("father of a multitude") in Genesis 17:5. As we've seen, the Abrahamic Covenant is unconditional. It should also be taken literally. There is no need to spiritualize the promise to Abraham. God's promises to Abraham's descendants will be fulfilled literally.

The Abrahamic Covenant included the promise of land (Genesis 12:1). It was a specific land, an actual property, with dimensions specified in Genesis 15:18–21. In Genesis 13:15, God gives Abraham all the land that he can see, and the gift is declared to be "forever." God was not going to renege on His promise. The territory given as part of the Abrahamic Covenant is expanded in Deuteronomy 30:1–10, often called the Palestinian Covenant.

Centuries after Abraham died, the children of Israel took possession of the land under Joshua's leadership (Joshua 21:43). At no point in history, though, has Israel controlled all of the land God had specified. There remains, therefore, a final fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant that will see Israel occupying their God-given homeland to the fullest extent. The fulfillment will be more than a matter of geography; it will also be a time of holiness and restoration (see Ezekiel 20:40–44 and 36:1—37:28).

The Abrahamic Covenant also promised many descendants (Genesis 12:2). God promised that the number of Abraham's children would rival that of "the dust of the earth" (Genesis 15:16). Nations and kings would proceed from him (Genesis 17:6). It is significant that the promise was given to an aged, childless couple. But Abraham "did not waver through unbelief" (Romans 4:20), and his wife Sarah "considered him faithful who had made the promise" (Hebrews 11:11). Abraham was justified by his faith (Genesis 15:6), and he and his wife welcomed Isaac, the son of promise, into their home when they were 100 and 90 years old, respectively (Genesis 21:5).

God reiterates the Abrahamic Covenant to Isaac and to his son Jacob, whose name God changes to *Israel*. The great nation is eventually established in the land where Abraham had dwelled. King David, one of Abraham's many descendants, is given the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:12–16), promising a "son of David" who would one day rule over the Jewish nation—and all nations—from Jerusalem. Many other Old Testament prophecies point to the blessed, future fulfillment of that promise (e.g., Isaiah 11; Micah 4; Zechariah 8).

The Abrahamic Covenant also included a promise of blessing and redemption (Genesis 12:3). All the earth would be blessed through Abraham. This promise finds its fulfillment in the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–34; cf. Luke 22:20), which was ratified by Jesus Christ, the son of Abraham and Redeemer who will one day "restore everything" (Acts 3:21).

Five times in Genesis 12, as God is giving the Abrahamic Covenant, He says, "I will." Clearly, God takes the onus of keeping the covenant upon Himself. The covenant is unconditional. One day, Israel *will* repent, be forgiven, and be restored to God's favor (Zechariah 12:10–14; Romans 11:25–27). One day, the nation of Israel will possess the entire territory promised to them. One day, the Messiah will return to set up His throne, and through His righteous rule the whole world will be blessed with an abundance of peace, pleasure, and prosperity.

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### **Question: "What was a blood covenant (Genesis 15:9-21)?"**

**Answer:** The scene would look quite ominous to modern-day observers—five bloody animal carcasses on the ground, three of them split in half, with the halves separated a short distance from each other. But in Abraham’s time it would not have been so menacing. The arrangement of divided animal carcasses would have been instantly recognized as the set-up for making a type of blood covenant.

When God called Abraham out of his hometown and away from all things familiar, He gave Abraham some promises. A covenant is a kind of promise, a contract, a binding agreement between two parties. The fifteenth chapter of Genesis reiterates the covenant God had made with Abraham at his calling. Except this time, God graciously reassures His promise with a visual of His presence. He asks Abraham to find and kill a heifer, a ram, a goat, a dove, and a pigeon. Then, Abraham was to cut them in half (except the birds) and lay the pieces in two rows, leaving a path through the center (Genesis 15:9-10).

In ancient Near Eastern royal land grant treaties, this type of ritual was done to “seal” the promises made. Through this blood covenant, God was confirming primarily three promises He had made to Abraham: the promise of heirs, of land, and of blessings (Genesis 12:2-3). A blood covenant communicated a self-maledictory oath. The parties involved would walk the path between the slaughtered animals so to say, “May this be done to me if I do not keep my oath.” Jeremiah 34:18-19 also speaks about this type of oath-making.

However, there was an important difference in the blood oath that God made with Abraham in Genesis 15. When the evening came, God appeared in the form of a “smoking fire pot and flaming torch [that] passed between the pieces” (Genesis 15:17). But Abraham had fallen “into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him” (verse 12). Thus, God alone passed through the pieces of dead animals, and the covenant was sealed by God alone. Nothing depended on Abraham. Everything depended on God, who promised to be faithful to His covenant. “When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself” (Hebrews 6:13-18). Abraham and his descendants could trust, count on, and believe in everything God promised.

This specific blood covenant is also known as the Abrahamic Covenant. The blood involved in this covenant, as with any blood covenant, signifies the life from which the blood comes (Leviticus 17:11).

The Mosaic Covenant was also a blood covenant in that it required blood to be sprinkled on the tabernacle, “the scroll and all the people” (Hebrews 9:19-21). “In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22). In the Mosaic Covenant, the blood of animals served as a covering, or atonement, for the sins of the people. The animal’s life was given in place of the sinner’s life. In the Abrahamic Covenant, God, in essence, was declaring He would give *His* life if His promises were broken. There could be no greater encouragement to believers, since God is eternal and can no more break an oath than He can die.

All of these things were only “copies,” or “shadows,” of the better covenant to come (Hebrews 9:23). The lives of animals could never remove sin; the life of an animal is not a sufficient substitute for a human life (Hebrews 10:4). The blood of bulls and goats was a temporary appeasement until the final, ultimate blood covenant was made by Jesus Christ Himself – the God Man (Hebrews 9:24-28). The New Covenant was in His blood (Luke 22:20).

The shadows became realities in Christ, who fulfilled all of the Old Testament blood covenants with His own blood. Christians can be confident that the gift of eternal life that God gives through Jesus is the true promise to people of faith. As the apostle Paul explains, the covenant was established with Abraham and his “Seed”—singular. Paul interprets this as the singular person of Christ (Galatians 3:15-16). Therefore, all who are “in Christ” are spiritual heirs of the promises made to Abraham (Galatians 3:29).

To put it simply, a blood covenant is a promise made by God that He will choose a people for Himself and bless them. The covenant was originally for Abraham’s physical descendants but was later extended, spiritually, to all those who, like Abraham, believe God (Galatians 3:7; cf. Genesis 15:6). God’s promise of eternal blessing is given only on the basis of faith in the saving blood of His Son, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9:12).

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**Question: "What was Abraham's religion before God called him?"**

**Answer:** Abraham is called the friend of God, the father of the Jews, and the father of the faithful. He is honored by Jews, Muslims, and Christians as a great man, but what religion did he follow before being called by Yahweh?

Abraham was born and raised in Ur of the Chaldees, which is in modern Iraq, near Nasiriyah in the southeastern part of the country. Joshua 24:2 says that Abraham and his father worshiped idols. We can make some educated guesses about their religion by looking at the history and religious artifacts from that period.

Ur of the Chaldees was an ancient city that flourished until about 300 BC. The great ziggurat of Ur was built by Ur-Nammu around 2100 BC and was dedicated to Nanna, the moon god. The moon was worshiped as the power that controlled the heavens and the life cycle on earth. To the Chaldeans, the phases of the moon represented the natural cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death and also set the measurement of their yearly calendar. Among the pantheon of Mesopotamian gods, Nanna was supreme, because he was the source of fertility for crops, herds, and families. Prayers and offerings were offered to the moon to invoke its blessing.

When God called Abraham (then called Abram) in Genesis 12:1, He told Abraham to leave his country, his kindred, and his father's house. Everything familiar was to be left behind, and that included his religion. We do not know what Abraham knew about the true God at that point, but it is likely that he had received some instruction from his father, as each generation passed down their history to the next. As a worshiper of other gods, Abraham must have been surprised to receive a direct revelation from Yahweh. The moon god and other deities were distant objects of worship, and they did not personally interact with men. Abraham obeyed God's call, and, when he arrived in the land of Canaan, he built an altar to Yahweh at Shechem (Genesis 12:7). The text indicates that God's appearance to Abraham was a deciding factor in his choosing to worship Him. Hebrews 11:8 says that Abraham's departure from Ur was an example of faith in action.

Abraham continued to learn about this God he now worshiped, and in Genesis 14:22, following the example of Melchizedek, Abraham calls Yahweh "the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth." This statement shows that Abraham set Yahweh above and apart from the moon god. His decision to worship God alone was settled in Genesis 17, when God established the covenant of circumcision with him. God appeared to Abraham, saying, "I am God Almighty, walk before me, and be blameless" (Genesis 17:1). In verse 7 God said the covenant He established with Abraham was to be everlasting and that He alone was to be God to Abraham and his offspring. Abraham chose to follow God alone, and he demonstrated his commitment by circumcising every male in his household.

Though Abraham forsook moon worship, the worship of heavenly objects became a continual problem with his descendants. Many times in the Old Testament, God rebuked the children of Abraham for their idolatry and renewed His call to worship Him alone. In Deuteronomy 17:2–5, God specified the punishment for idolatry—death by stoning. Moses described idolatry as doing what is evil in the sight of God and transgressing His covenant. Much later, King Hoshea of Israel was

defeated and the people taken captive. Second Kings 17:16 says the defeat happened because the people “bowed down to all the starry hosts.” In 2 Kings 23:4–5 King Josiah of Judah led a revival of Yahweh worship and deposed the false priests who burned incense to the sun, moon, and stars.

God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, wants people to worship Him, not the things He created. In Romans 1:18–20, we are told, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” When we worship creation instead of the Creator, we exchange the truth about God for a lie (Romans 1:25) and reject what God has revealed about everything in life. God saved Abraham out of idolatry, changed his name, and called him to follow Him. As a result of God’s blessings to Abraham, the whole world is blessed (Genesis 18:18).

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## Question: "Who was Abraham in the Bible?"

**Answer:** Aside from Moses, no Old Testament character is mentioned more in the New Testament than Abraham. James refers to Abraham as "God's friend" (James 2:23), a title used of no one else in Scripture. Believers in all generations are called the "children of Abraham" (Galatians 3:7). Abraham's importance and impact in redemptive history are clearly seen in Scripture.

The life of Abraham takes up a good portion of the Genesis narrative from his first mention in Genesis 11:26 all the way to his death in Genesis 25:8. Although we know much about Abraham's life, we know little about his birth and early life. When we first meet Abraham, he is already 75 years old. Genesis 11:28 records that Abraham's father, Terah, lived in Ur, an influential city in southern Mesopotamia situated on the Euphrates River about halfway between the head of the Persian Gulf and the modern-day city of Baghdad. We also learn that Terah took his family and set off for the land of Canaan but instead settled in the city of Haran in northern Mesopotamia (on the trade route from ancient Babylonia about halfway between Nineveh and Damascus).

Abraham's story really turns interesting at the start of Genesis 12. In the first three verses, we see the call of Abraham by God:

"The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. 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. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you'" (Genesis 12:1-3).

God calls Abraham out from his home in Haran and tells him to go to a land that He will show to him. God also makes three promises to Abraham: 1) The promise of a land of his own; 2) the promise to be made into a great nation; and 3) the promise of blessing. These promises form the basis for what will later be called the Abrahamic Covenant (established in Genesis 15 and ratified in Genesis 17). What really makes Abraham special is that he obeyed God. Genesis 12:4 records that, after God called Abraham, he went "as the LORD had told him." The author of Hebrews uses Abraham as an example of faith several times, and refers specifically to this impressive act: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8).

How many of us would leave behind everything that is familiar to us and just go without knowing our destination? The concept of family meant everything to a person living in the time of Abraham. In that time, family units were strongly knit; it was unusual for family members to live hundreds of miles apart from each other. In addition, we're not told anything about the religious life of Abraham and his family prior to his calling. The people of Ur and Haran worshiped the ancient Babylonian pantheon of gods, in particular the moon god, Sin, so God called Abraham out of a pagan culture. Abraham knew and recognized the call of Yahweh, the LORD, and obeyed willingly, not hesitantly.

Another example of Abraham's life of faith is seen in the birth of his son, Isaac. Abraham and Sarah were childless (a real source of shame in that culture), yet God promised that Abraham would have a son (Genesis 15:4). This son would be the heir of Abraham's vast fortune with which God blessed

him, and, more importantly, he would be the heir of promise and the continuation of the godly line of Seth. Abraham believed the promise of God, and that faith is credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). God reiterates His promise to Abraham in Genesis 17, and his faith is rewarded in Genesis 21 with the birth of Isaac.

Abraham's faith would be tested regarding his son, Isaac. In Genesis 22, God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on the top of Mount Moriah. We don't know how Abraham reacted internally to this command. All we see is Abraham faithfully obeying the God who was his shield (Genesis 15:1) and who had been extraordinarily gracious and good to him up to this point. As with the earlier command to leave his home and family, Abraham obeyed (Genesis 22:3). We know the story ends with God holding back Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, but imagine how Abraham must have felt. He had been waiting decades for a son of his own, and the God who promised this child to him was about to take him away. The point is that Abraham's faith in God was greater than his love for his son, and he trusted that even if he sacrificed Isaac, God was able to bring him back from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19).

To be sure, Abraham had his moments of failure and sin (as we all do), and the Bible doesn't shrink from relating them. We know of at least two occasions in which Abraham lied regarding his relationship to Sarah in order to protect himself in potentially hostile lands (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18). In both these incidents, God protects and blesses Abraham despite his lack of faith. We also know that the frustration of not having a child wore on Abraham and Sarah. Sarah suggested Abraham have a child with Sarah's servant, Hagar, on her behalf; Abraham agreed (Genesis 16:1-15). The birth of Ishmael not only demonstrates the futility of Abraham's folly and lack of faith but also the grace of God (in allowing the birth to take place and even blessing Ishmael). Interestingly, Abraham and Sarah were called Abram and Sarai at that time. But when Ishmael was thirteen years old, God gave Abram a new name along with the covenant of circumcision and a renewed promise to give him a son through Sarai, to whom God also gave a new name (Genesis 17). Abram, meaning "high father," became Abraham, "father of a multitude." Indeed, Abraham had many physical descendants, and all who put their faith in God through Jesus are also counted as spiritual heirs of Abraham (Galatians 3:29). The "Father of the Faithful" had his moments of doubt and disbelief, yet he is still exalted among men as an example of the faithful life.

One obvious lesson to draw from Abraham's life is that we are to live a life of faith. Abraham could take his son Isaac up to Mount Moriah because he knew God was faithful to keep His promises. Abraham's faith wasn't a blind faith; his faith was a settled assurance and trust in the One who had proved Himself faithful and true. If we were to look back on our own lives, we would see the hand of God's providence all over it. God doesn't have to visit us accompanied by angels or speak from burning bushes or part the sea waters to be active in our lives. God is superintending and orchestrating the events of our lives. Sometimes it may not seem that way, but Abraham's life is evidence that God's presence in our lives is real. Even Abraham's failures demonstrate that God, while not protecting us from the consequences of our sin, graciously works His will in us and through us; nothing we do will thwart His plan.

Abraham's life also shows us the blessing of simple obedience. When asked to leave his family, Abraham left. When asked to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham "rose up early the next morning" to do so. From what we can discern from the biblical narrative, there was no hesitation in Abraham's obedience. Abraham, like most of us, may have agonized over these decisions, but, when it was time to act, he acted. When we discern a true call from God or we read His instructions in His Word, we must act. Obedience is not optional when God commands something.

We also see from Abraham what it looks like to have an active relationship with God. While Abraham was quick to obey, he did not shy away from asking God questions. Abraham believed that God would give him and Sarah a son, but did wonder at how it could be (Genesis 17:17–23). In Genesis 18 we read the account of Abraham interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham affirmed that God was holy and just and could not fathom Him destroying the righteous with sinners. He asked God to spare the sinful cities for the sake of fifty righteous and continued to work the number down until ten. Ultimately there were not ten righteous men in Sodom, but God did spare Abraham's nephew Lot and his family (Genesis 19). It is interesting that God revealed His plans to Abraham before destroying the cities and that He was not taken aback by Abraham's questions. Abraham's example here shows us what it looks like to interact with God regarding His plans, intercede for others, trust God's justice, and submit to His will.

Abraham's lapses of faith, particularly in regards to the situation with Hagar and Ishmael, show us the folly of trying to take matters into our own hands. God had promised a son to Abraham and Sarah, but, in their impatience, their plan to provide an heir to Abraham backfired. First, conflict between Sarah and Hagar arose, and later on conflict between Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael's descendants ended up becoming bitter enemies of the people of God, as we later learn in the Old Testament narrative, and so it continues to this day in the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors. We cannot fulfill the will of God in our own strength; our efforts ultimately end up creating more problems than they solve. This lesson has wide-ranging applications in our lives. If God has promised to do something, we must be faithful and patient and wait for Him to accomplish it in His own timing.

Theologically speaking, Abraham's life is a living example of the doctrine of *sola fide*, justification by faith alone. Twice the apostle Paul uses Abraham as an example of this crucial doctrine. In Romans, the entire fourth chapter is devoted to illustrating justification by faith through the life of Abraham. A similar argument is made in the book of Galatians, where Paul shows from Abraham's life that the Gentiles are heirs with the Jews to the blessings of Abraham through faith (Galatians 3:6-9, 14, 16, 18, 29). This goes back to Genesis 15:6, "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." Abraham's faith in the promises of God was sufficient for God to declare him righteous in His sight, thereby proving the principle of Romans 3:28. Abraham did nothing to earn justification. His trust in God was enough.

We see in this the workings of God's grace very early in the Old Testament. The gospel didn't start with the life and death of Jesus but goes all the way back to Genesis. In Genesis 3:15, God made a promise that the "seed of the woman" would crush the head of the serpent. Theologians believe this is the first mention of the gospel in the Bible. The rest of the Old Testament chronicles the outworking of the gospel of God's grace through the line of promise beginning with Seth (Genesis 4:26). The calling of Abraham was just another piece in the story of redemption. Paul tells us that the gospel was preached beforehand to Abraham when God told him "all nations will be blessed through you" (Galatians 3:8).

Another thing we learn from Abraham's life is that faith is not hereditary. In Matthew 3:9, Luke 3:8, and John 8:39, we learn that it is not enough to be physically descended from Abraham to be saved. The application for us is that it is not enough to be raised in a Christian home; we do not enter into fellowship with God or gain entry into heaven based on someone else's faith. God is not obligated to save us simply because we have an impeccable Christian pedigree. Paul uses Abraham to illustrate this in Romans 9, where he says not all who descended from Abraham were elected unto salvation (Romans 9:7). God sovereignly chooses those who will receive salvation, but that salvation comes through the same faith that Abraham exercised in his life.

Finally, we see that James uses the life of Abraham as an illustration that faith without works is dead (James 2:21). The example he uses is the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah. Mere assent to the truths of the gospel is not enough to save. Faith must result in good works of obedience that show a living faith. The faith that was enough to justify Abraham and count him as righteous in God's eyes (Genesis 15) was the very same faith that moved him into action as he obeyed God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham was justified by his faith, and his faith was proved by his works.

In the final analysis, we see that Abraham was an exemplary individual, not so much in his piety or perfect life (he had his shortcomings, as we saw), but because his life illustrates so many truths of the Christian life. God called Abraham out of the millions of people on the earth to be the object of His blessings. God used Abraham to play a pivotal role in the outworking of the story of redemption, culminating in the birth of Jesus. Abraham is a living example of faith and hope in the promises of God (Hebrews 11:8–10). Our lives should be so lived that, when we reach the end of our days, our faith, like Abraham's, will remain as an enduring legacy to others.

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## Question: "Who were the Rephaim?"

**Answer:** There are several passages in the Old Testament that speak of the Rephaim (or Rephaites), and the context describes them as giants. The name of these people literally means "terrible ones."

The Hebrew word *Rephaim* has two distinct meanings: first, in poetic literature it refers to departed spirits whose dwelling place was Sheol. It is a figurative description of the dead, similar to our concept of a ghost. The second meaning of *Rephaim* is "a mighty people with tall stature who lived in Canaan." The word doesn't seem to be ethno-centric like "Jew" or "Egyptian" but is more of a descriptive term. This second meaning will be the focus of this article.

The first reference to the Rephaim is Genesis 14:5, when the Rephaim, Zuzim and Emim people were defeated in a battle with Kedorlaomer and his allies. When the Israelites first approached the Promised Land after the Exodus from Egypt, they were afraid to enter the land because it was filled with "giants" (the word used in Numbers 13:33 is *Nephilim*), the sons of Anak. Giants were widely scattered through Canaan, but were known by different local names, including Rephaim, Zuzim, Emim, and Anakim. Deuteronomy 2:20–21 says the Rephaim were strong and tall, like the Anakites. Og, king of Bashan, was described as the last of the Rephaim in his land (Deuteronomy 3:11), and his bed was thirteen feet long and six feet wide.

Is it possible that the Rephaim were literal giants? The Septuagint uses the Greek words *gigas* and *titanes* (the source of the English *titan*) to translate these and other verses, so the ancient Jews certainly considered them to be giants. They are described generally as being between 7 and 10 feet tall and are called "mighty men." The Egyptians wrote about giants who lived in the land of Canaan, and the folklore of other nations is full of such references. The people of the ancient world accepted the presence of giants as a fact of history, and the Bible presents them as enemies who were destroyed either by the judgment of God or in battle with men.

So where did these giants come from? One theory, based on Genesis 6:1–4, is that fallen angels (the sons of God) had sexual relations with women, resulting in the birth of giants. This is remarkably similar to Greek and Roman myths about demi-gods, but the theory has some theological and biological obstacles. Another theory, also based on Genesis 6, is that the fallen angels, having knowledge of human genetics, indwelt certain men and women who would have the right traits to produce a race of giants and induced them to cohabit with each other. A third theory is that the giants were simply the result of normal genetic variability within a society. Whatever the origin of the Rephaim, it is certain that a race of "giants"—strong, tall people—did exist at one time, and many cultures had dealings with them. Even today, there are people who grow to extreme sizes, whether through genetic disorders like gigantism or through normal heredity.

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### Question: "Why did God punish Pharaoh for Abram's lie (Genesis 12:17)?"

**Answer:** In Genesis 12, Abram and his wife Sarai (their names were later changed to Abraham and Sarah) traveled to Egypt due to a famine in Canaan. Abram instructed his wife to tell people in Egypt that she was his sister instead of his wife. His reason was to protect himself. Because Sarai was so beautiful, Abram feared someone would kill him and take Sarai as his wife. The plan to pass her off as his sister would ensure that Abram would be well received by those he met.

In Egypt, Sarai's beauty attracted the attention of Pharaoh, the ruler of that country. Sarai was taken into Pharaoh's house, and many gifts were given to Abram (Genesis 12:16). Genesis 12:17 says, "But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife." This seems puzzling. After all, the king was the victim of Abram and Sarai's deceit.

The result of this punishment reveals the reason for it. When Pharaoh realized Sarai was Abram's wife, he summoned Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go" (Genesis 12:18-19). If God had not caused the plagues to come upon Pharaoh and his household, he may not have known anything was wrong. The affliction led to the discovery that Sarai was Abram's wife. If Pharaoh had kept Sarai, Abram would not have had a son by Sarai in fulfillment of God's promise to him (Genesis 12:2; 17:19). Abram was wrong to lie, but God graciously intervened in order to keep His covenant with Abram.

In the end, Pharaoh returned Abram's wife and provided protection for him: "Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had" (Genesis 12:20). Despite Abram's wrongdoing, God worked to fulfill His promise. Abram left Egypt with his wife Sarai, the protection of the king, and added prosperity.

This incident is a good example of how God sometimes allows bad things to take place in someone's life as part of a larger situation. God used the affliction of Pharaoh's household to bring about good for Abram. We may not always know why bad things happen, but that does not mean they are without purpose. God has a larger purpose behind everything that takes place in life (Jeremiah 29:11). As Paul taught in Romans 8:28, "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

Abram unwisely trusted in his own cunning to preserve his life, and he was caught in a lie. God proved His strength is perfect and that He is the only One with the power to save. Further, we see God has a greater purpose in all things, including suffering. His will is sovereign, and His Name will be glorified.

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