



Question: "How long did Abraham and Sarah have to wait for Isaac?"

Answer: Genesis 12 begins the story of Abraham (then called Abram) and his barren wife Sarah. Verses 1 through 4 record God's first words to him about a homeland for his offspring. Even though the gift of a son is not directly mentioned in this first communication, God hinted at His plan for Abram. Abraham was 75 years old when he first received the promise, and Genesis 21:5 tells us he was 100 years old when Isaac was born. Sarah was 90. So Abraham and Sarah waited 25 years for the fulfillment of God's promise.

In that 25 years between the time that Abram was promised a son and the birth of Isaac, Abram and Sarah had certain ideas of how they might facilitate the keeping of the promise. One was that Abraham's steward, Eliezer, would become the heir of Abraham's household (Genesis 15:2–3). Another idea was that Abraham could have an heir through a son conceived by Sarah's slave, Hagar (Genesis 16:1–2). In both cases, God rejected those men as Abraham's heirs, pointing Abraham and Sarah to a literal, miraculous fulfillment of the promise.

Abraham is called the father of faith (Romans 4:11–12) because of his response to God both in leaving his homeland and receiving a son in his old age. Genesis 15:4–5 again describes God's promise to Abraham that his offspring would be as "the sands of the sea." Even though Abraham was old and had no sons, he never doubted that God would do as He promised. He did not understand how such a thing could be possible, but he humbly accepted God's word as truth. Mary had the same response when the angel Gabriel told her she would be the mother of the Messiah (Luke 1:26–38). She did not understand how such a thing could be possible since she was a virgin. But she never doubted that God would do as He said. That response is the kind of faith that pleases God (Hebrews 11:6).

Genesis 15:6 lays out the truth that salvation is by faith, apart from works: "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." Romans 4:3–5 and Galatians 3:5–7 elaborate on this truth. Just as Abraham was counted as righteous before he did anything worthy of praise, so we are counted as righteous by simply believing that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is sufficient payment for our sin (2 Corinthians 5:21).

However, that faith produces actions that validate it. James 2:14–18 helps us understand the kind of faith Abraham had. It was a faith that acted. He moved because God said to move. He trusted because God said to trust. He prepared to welcome a son because God promised him a son. By acting on his faith, Abraham proved that he trusted God, and that trust was credited to his account. His faith in the promises of God saw him through years of waiting. He never doubted God's goodness or His word, and, for that, God considered him righteous.

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Question: "What is the story of Sarah and Hagar?"

Answer: Sarah was the wife of Abraham. Hagar was the servant of Sarah. God had promised Abraham many descendants, but, ten years after the promise, Sarah was still unable to have children, and they were both on the verge of becoming too old to have children at all. Sarah chose to give her servant Hagar to Abraham, in accordance with the custom of day, so that Sarah could have a child through her (Genesis 16:2).

Hagar conceived, and Sarah despised her. Sarah began to deal harshly with her, and Hagar fled to the desert to escape the resentment of her mistress. The angel of the Lord met Hagar in the wilderness, commanding her to return to Abraham and Sarah. The angel relayed a promise from God: "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude" (Genesis 16:10). The angel also predicted Ishmael's name and character (Genesis 16:11-12).

Later, God fulfilled His promise to Abraham and Sarah. Sarah gave birth to a son named Isaac (Genesis 21). Hagar's son Ishmael would have been about 14 years old at the time of Isaac's birth. Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away after Isaac was weaned (around age 2 or 3, making Ishmael approximately 16), according to God's command. At that time, God repeated His promise that Ishmael would father a great nation. Hagar was in the desert and near death when the angel of God called to her, saying, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation" (Genesis 21:17-18).

Ishmael and his mother lived in the wilderness of Paran, where he became an expert with a bow and later took an Egyptian wife (Genesis 21:20-21). He is seen once again in Scripture when he returned to help bury his father Abraham (Genesis 25:7-10).

Ishmael, the son of a bondservant, became the father of 12 sons who were called princes. He lived to 137 years of age. Sarah died at the age of 127 in Hebron, where she was buried (Genesis 23:1-2). The Bible does not record Hagar's death. She is last mentioned in Genesis 25:12.

Many observations can be made regarding the story of Sarah and Hagar. First, God can and often does work through ways that appear unlikely from a human perspective. Abraham miraculously became a father at age 86 and again at age 99. Isaac's mother, Sarah, was barren. God's promise to Abraham did not depend on human strength, and with God nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37). God used a seemingly impossible situation to make Abraham the father of the Jewish people, just as He had predicted.

It is clear from this story that God works despite misguided human effort. Sarah had no business offering her servant to Abraham, and Abraham had no business sleeping with Hagar. And Sarah was wrong to mistreat her servant as she did. Yet God worked through these situations. Hagar was blessed, and Abraham and Sarah were still the recipients of the promise. God's mercy is great, and His sovereign will is accomplished regardless of human frailty.

This unlikely family story is one readers would expect to end badly. Yet God kept His promise;

Isaac became the son of promise through whom the tribes of Israel would arise. Hagar's son, Ishmael, also became a great leader. Regardless of how a situation looks from a human perspective, God continues to work both to accomplish His will and to fulfill His promises.

In Galatians 4, Paul uses the story of Sarah and Hagar to illustrate the results of two different covenants: the New Covenant, based on grace; and the Old Covenant, based on the Law. In Paul's analogy, believers in Christ are like the child born of Sarah—free, the result of God's promise. Those who try to earn their salvation by their own works are like the child born of Hagar—a slave, the result of human effort.

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Question: "Who was Isaac in the Bible?"

Answer: The name Isaac, which means "he laughs," was derived from his parents' reaction when God told Abraham that he, at 100 years old, and his wife Sarah, at the age of 90, would have a son (Genesis 17:17; 18:12). Isaac was Abraham's second son; his first, Ishmael, was by Sarah's maidservant, Hagar, as a result of Sarah's impatience to give Abraham a family (Genesis 16:1-2). As soon as Isaac was weaned, Sarah insisted that Abraham send Hagar and her son away, ensuring the family inheritance would go to Isaac (Genesis 21:3-12).

Many years later, Isaac was taken by his father up a mountain where Abraham, in obedience to God, prepared to sacrifice him (Genesis 22:1-14). Abraham, Isaac, and two of Abraham's servants loaded up donkeys and made a three-day journey to Mount Moriah. Leaving his servants behind, Abraham and Isaac carried up the wood, knife, and materials for the fire, saying they would worship and then return. Curious, Isaac asked about the location of the lamb for the offering. Abraham told Isaac that God Himself would provide the lamb. Abraham proceeded to build the altar and tie up Isaac to lay atop it. The Bible gives no indication that Isaac resisted. As Abraham prepared to kill Isaac, an angel stopped him. Abraham then saw a ram in a thicket and offered it instead. There is an interesting analogy in this account that mirrors God giving up His only Son, Jesus, to be sacrificed. God did indeed provide the Lamb—literally for Abraham and Isaac then and figuratively for all of humanity willing to accept the sacrifice of Jesus (John 1:29; Hebrews 10).

Sarah died when Isaac was in his late thirties. After her death, Abraham sent one of his servants to find a wife for Isaac from their clan, as Abraham was determined his son should not have a Canaanite for a wife (Genesis 24:1-51). Abraham's servant prayed to have success in finding a suitable wife, and God directed his quest. When he was forty, Isaac married his cousin Rebekah (Genesis 25:20). The Bible tells us that "he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (Genesis 24:67).

At age sixty, Isaac became the father of twins—Jacob and Esau. While Isaac favored his elder son, Esau, Rebekah's favorite was Jacob. This caused great rivalry within the family and led to Jacob, the younger son, receiving the inheritance and his father's blessing that should have gone to Esau, the older son, after Isaac and Esau were deceived by Rebekah and Jacob. Isaac became aware of the deceit but could not revoke his blessing on Jacob (Genesis 27). Rebekah learned of Esau's plan to kill Jacob after Isaac's death and convinced Isaac to send Jacob to her brother Laban to find a wife among her relatives. Isaac again blessed Jacob before sending him on his way, praying that God would give Jacob the blessing given to Abraham.

Abraham died when Isaac was about seventy-five and left everything to him (Genesis 25:5). Though Ishmael had been sent away when Isaac was weaned, both Isaac and Ishmael buried Abraham (Genesis 25:9). The Bible does not talk specifically about their relationship, and the descendants of Ishmael and those of Isaac have historically been enemies; animosity remains to this day. But it is interesting to note that the two men apparently united in mourning their father.

When there was a famine in the land, God appeared to Isaac and told him not to go to Egypt but to remain in the land. God promised to be with Isaac and bless him and give the land to Isaac's

descendants. God reaffirmed the covenant He had made with Abraham, saying that He would make his descendants as numerous as the stars and bless all the nations of the earth through them (Genesis 26:1–6).

Isaac remained in the land of Canaan. But, similar to what his father had done years before his birth, in fear, Isaac presented Rebekah as his sister rather than his wife (Genesis 26:7–11). But, just as God had protected Sarah, He also protected Rebekah. God blessed Isaac with bountiful crops and wealth, so much so that the Philistines became jealous and stopped up the water wells Abraham had dug. The Philistine king asked Isaac to move, and Isaac complied, moving from place to place digging new wells when his enemies quarreled with him over the water. The Philistine king soon recognized that Isaac had been blessed by God and made a treaty of peace between them (Genesis 26:26–31).

Isaac died at the age of 180 and was buried by both his sons. God affirmed His covenant with Isaac's son, Jacob, whom He renamed Israel.

Though much of Isaac's story is narrative without many readily applicable lessons to our lives, we do see in Isaac a heart surrendered to God's will. For example, he was obedient to Abraham and Sarah and apparently trusting of their guidance. He obeyed when God told him to remain in the land despite the famine and the attacks of his enemies. When Isaac discovered that he had been deceived by his son Jacob, he accepted and submitted to what he recognized as God's will, in spite of it being completely against the accepted tradition at the time. Just as Isaac discovered, we, too, must remember that God's ways are not our ways or His thoughts the same as ours (Isaiah 55:8). Isaac's story also demonstrates God's faithfulness to His promises—He had made a covenant with Abraham and would continue to uphold it with Isaac and with Isaac's son Jacob.

Though there are no great achievements to speak of concerning Isaac's life, it was Isaac whom God chose to continue the covenant line, the same line that would produce the Messiah, Jesus. And for many generations the Jewish nation described their God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Indeed, there are several passages of Scripture where God describes Himself in the same manner (e.g., Exodus 3:6). Isaac is listed with the other patriarchs and has a place in God's kingdom (Luke 13:28). And there is no greater honor we can hope to achieve.

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