

Journey INTO THE Bible

Leader's Guide

Genesis, Part Two: Lesson One

Genesis 21—22

Suggestion: When you are ready to begin the Bible study, it is appropriate to start off with a prayer. The one given below is only a suggestion. You may have one of your own. If so, please do not hesitate to use it. It may be practical to link your prayer with some aspect of the lesson, for example, God's absolute rule over human life or Abraham's tenacious faith in view of God's harsh command.

Opening Prayer

Gracious and loving God, you seem at times to make demands that utterly surpass our human powers to comprehend. First you promise Abraham and Sarah a son, then fulfill your promise, and then inexplicably demand the sacrifice of that son. We fervently pray that your will, not ours, be done. Faced with such circumstances, however, we recognize that our faith is not as strong as that of our father and mother in faith, Abraham and Sarah. We ask you to increase our faith. Make us as pliable to your demands as your son Jesus was. Like him in the garden, may we prefer your will to our own. We make this prayer through Christ our Lord.

Suggestion: This may be a good opportunity to welcome newcomers and returning participants. It is also the appropriate time to make announcements to the group. Afterwards, read aloud "Setting the Stage."

Setting the Stage

Our first reading begins on a decidedly optimistic note. Isaac, the child of promise, is finally here. As a result, an atmosphere of exultation pervades the start of our episode. Laughter captures the intensity of this joy—it is a laughter that drowns God's prior reluctance to deliver on his promise. However, this joy is short-lived owing to the presence of Ishmael. Assured by God's intervention, Abraham somewhat reluctantly agrees to his wife's request to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. The author softens the harsh-

ness of this decision by having God appear in the wilderness and provide for the needs of mother and son. While the promise of making Ishmael a nation is confirmed, there is no mention of any special privilege for Hagar. At the end of the account, she remains the same—continuing to meet the needs of her son.

Our second reading reveals God's intention to test Abraham. The command to sacrifice Isaac, the very future of Israel, strikes us as preposterous. Although Abraham earlier disputed the divine decision to destroy the sin cities, here he offers absolutely no resistance to God's seemingly nonsensical demand.

As the scene progresses, we learn that this command is calculated to be a divine learning experience. Only after Abraham has demonstrated his intention of carrying out the divine will do we read that God finally knows that Isaac's father is truly God-fearing.

The multiple use of the terms "father" and "son" informs us of the bonding between Abraham and Isaac. However, the text seems to ignore the mother of the victim. After all, Isaac is also *her* son. The whole scene celebrates patriarchy, not matriarchy. We are challenged to ask: How shall we exonerate Sarah?

Text (Genesis 21:1-21)

Suggestion: It may be helpful to have four readers: (1) narrator; (2) Sarah (21:6-7, 10); (3) God (21:12-13, 17-18); and (4) Hagar (21:16).

Think and Talk Questions

1. Why is the notion of laughter so central in Genesis 21:6?
2. Why is the presence of Ishmael a problem after Isaac's birth?
3. How would you contrast Abraham's reaction in Genesis 16:2, 6 with that in Genesis 21:11, 14?

Additional Questions

1. Do you think that God mitigates having Hagar and Ishmael expelled by providing for them in the wilderness? Perhaps the leader can refer the group to previous scenes of divine mitigation. For example, in Genesis 3:21, the Lord God makes clothes for the naked couple since they are unable to provide for themselves. In Genesis 4:15 the Lord puts some kind of mark on Cain that prevents him from being killed by those who would come upon him.
2. Do you see any differences in the role of the wilderness in Genesis 21 as opposed to Genesis 16? Perhaps the leader can point out that in Genesis 16:7 Hagar finds herself by a spring of water and subsequently receives the command to return to her mistress. However, in Genesis 21:15-16 the wilderness is much more hostile. Hagar's water supply has run out, and she anticipates her own death as well as that of Ishmael. However, in Genesis 21:19 God opens her eyes, and she sees a well of water. In this scene there is only expulsion—there is no option of returning to Abraham and Sarah.

Break

At this juncture it is most likely practical to break for about ten minutes. Afterwards, call the group together and begin the text.

Text (Genesis 22:1-19)

Suggestion: It may be useful to have five readers: (1) narrator; (2) God (22:1, 2); (3) Abraham (22:1, 5, 7, 8, 11, 14); (4) Isaac (22:7); and (5) the angel of the Lord (22:11, 12, 16-18).

Think and Talk Questions

1. What character strengths do you admire in Abraham and Isaac?
2. How would you describe the difference between Abraham in his conversation about the sin cities (Genesis 18:17-32) and the father accepting the divine command to sacrifice Isaac?
3. Do you think that Genesis 22 should also discuss the testing of Sarah?

Additional Questions

1. Do you think that this story is based on the conviction that all life belongs to God? Perhaps the leader could point out passages in the Bible where such a divine right is emphasized. For example, in Exodus 22:29, God states that the firstborn of Israel's sons belongs to him. In Exodus 34:19-20, all the firstborn of Israel's sons are to be redeemed.
2. What role does divine providence have in this episode? The leader may choose to point out the number of times "seeing to/providing" is mentioned in the text. The leader may also opt to point out some of the psalms of trust or confidence in the Bible. The following may serve as examples of the God who provides: 11, 16, 23, 62, 121.

Wrapping Up

When there are about twenty minutes left in the Bible study, bring the discussion of Genesis 22:1-19 to a close. You may want to ask if any participant or participants would care to share with the group something that they learned during the Bible study. This is not intended to be an open-ended sharing session; suggest that participants keep their comments brief.

Closing Prayer

The leader may choose any concluding prayer. Since Genesis 22 focuses on trust and confidence in God despite formidable obstacles, a psalm from that category may be appropriate. Psalm 131 is a very brief psalm of trust and confidence. The translation from the New Revised Standard Version is as follows:

"O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore."

Suggestion: Remind everyone about the next meeting time and place and to read Lesson Two before the next Bible study session.