

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Lord God; when we are troubled, lead us into Your peace;  
when our minds are confused, bring us Your understanding;  
when our hearts are broken, comfort us with Your unsurpassed love;  
when our strength is failing, touch us with Your help and healing;  
when our feelings are bruised, give us the calm hand of Your Spirit.  
For in You, and in Your hands, we are blessed. AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

General theme for the week: HEALING

**1. For yourself**

*Pray about the health of your mind. It can sound threatening to even think of this, but our minds work best when submitted to God and not to things of this world; pray about this ...*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Pray for any of your family and friends whose minds are troubled, perhaps ravaged by tragedy or old age, for example*

**3. For the church and its work**

*Pray that God's people will be a people who demonstrably trust in God, and who can present a good case for their faith to people in the world. Pray for the church's theologians*

**4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)**

*Pray about the sicknesses in the world that come from its godless beliefs and rebellion against its maker. You may find this difficult, but submit the troubles of the world to God and see what He says to you about its underlying sin and sickness*

### Meditation

'Follow my steps' Jesus asked me;

'Confess your sins' Jesus urged me;

'Change your ways' Jesus warned me;

'Fight against the enemy' Jesus charged me;

'Love your neighbour' Jesus commanded me;

'Walk in faith,' Jesus directed me;

'Be bold and strong,' Jesus told me;

'Pray at all times,' Jesus advised me;

'Be close to my Word', Jesus implored me;

'Love the Lord your God' Jesus appealed to me;

For:

'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life', Jesus revealed to me.

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Genesis 22: 15-24

<sup>15</sup> The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time, <sup>16</sup> and said,

'I swear on my own name, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not held back your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup> I will most certainly bless you, and I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore, and they will capture the city gates of their enemies. <sup>18</sup> and all the nations of the world will gain blessing for themselves through your descendants, because you have obeyed my voice.'

<sup>19</sup> Abraham then returned to his servants, and they set off together to go to Beer-sheba; where Abraham had made his home.

<sup>20</sup> Now, some time later Abraham was told that Milcah and his brother Nahor now had children:

<sup>21</sup> Uz the firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, <sup>22</sup> Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel; <sup>23</sup> and Bethuel became the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother; <sup>24</sup> he also had a concubine named Reumah, who bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

## Review

The drama of the story of Abraham and Isaac in the verses immediately preceding this passage is so intense and so important for the whole Bible, that the following verses are easily forgotten. To do this, however, would be a serious mistake, because in this passage today, the angel of the Lord delivers to Abraham a very important message. The angel had just called out to Abraham in a moment of high drama to stop him from slaughtering Isaac as a sacrifice (22:11,12). Now, he delivers the Lord's full response to Abraham's obedience in laying Isaac on the altar of sacrifice. The message re-affirms the great Covenant blessing which the Lord first gave Abraham when he was told to go to the land of Canaan (12:2,3) and it also reflects other aspects of the Covenant which arose at other times (see also 15:5ff). However, the message goes further than anything we have heard so far and projects prophetically into the future with the words 'they will capture the gates of their enemies' (22:17)!

As we look at what the angel said (22:15-18) we must surely realise that this is God's own sworn interpretation (see 22:16) and explanation of what happened on Mount Moriah. These verses contain a revelation of God's plans for the blessing not just of His own people through Abraham, but in verse 18 we read about how all the nations of the world will 'find blessing ... because you have obeyed my voice.' There can be no other conclusion than that this places the events on Mount Moriah at the very heart of our understanding of God's Covenant blessings for the whole world. Therefore, however many books and academic theses have been written about Genesis 22 over the ages, it is these words which give us our explanation of what happened from God's point of view. Just as a congregation should remember the preacher's message above its illustration, we should remember God's Word about what happened on Mount Moriah more than the illustration itself. It is possible that the sheer emotional power of the story has sometimes clouded our eyes to the power of the message. For when Abraham took Isaac to sacrifice him, he did so in obedience to the command of God, given so that we might know that faith and obedience will bring a victory of love to the world, instead of death

This famous incident (22:1-14) is not just an example of blind obedience, but of living faith. Abraham was obedient with all his heart; he bore the struggle of God's tough demands, he acted in love, and he listened to his Lord in the midst of all circumstances. To sum it up, he obediently put his faith into action, and this is why the Lord was able to respond as He did and confirm the Covenant blessings. He promised that Abraham's descendants would be numerous beyond his imagination, adding that they would be like the 'sand on the seashore' (22:17). He prophesied that Abraham's descendants would 'capture the city gates of their enemies' which was a way of saying that they would defeat evil; and he also re-affirmed that through his descendants all the world would be blessed (22:18). He then added that this would all happen because of the faith and obedience by which Abraham had acted ('because you have obeyed my voice' - 22:18). In this one brief passage, you can therefore find God's own stated plan of action for the salvation of the world. He was going to defeat evil through the faith of Abraham's descendants and thereby make His blessings available to the whole world!

We who can read all the history of God's people in the Bible know that this plan was executed through the faithful work and ministry of God's own son Jesus, and that our faith today rests in what Jesus has done for us; but the plan revealed by God in this passage has never changed. It is remarkable that the Lord declared this plan so early in scripture, and it is there to help us understand everything else that happens in the Bible.

## Going Deeper

Going deeper, we will look at what it means for God to speak to Abraham through an angel and by means of an oath; about how faith and obedience are interconnected within Abraham's response to God's Covenant, and how this passage is the first in scripture which speaks of God's victory over the powers of evil. Looking at scripture as a whole, this means that our passage has much to say about the nature of salvation.

### ***The angel and the oath***

Some people wonder why it is that the Lord spoke to Abraham through an angel, when on so many occasion in Genesis, the communication between them appears to have been 'face to face'. The answer may be that from this point onwards, Abraham's faith had reached maturity. God had confidence that Abraham would hear him without having to speak to him in a manner more direct than angelic intervention. Beyond this point in Genesis, we hear no more of God speaking to Abraham, and the stories move swiftly on from chapter 24 onwards to tell us about Isaac, rather than Abraham. In the rest of the Old Testament, God speaks mainly through people, and chiefly through the words of His prophets. It is in this sense that Abraham is regarded as one of the first of the 'prophets' (as we have already found out in Gen 20:7)

The words of the Lord spoken to Abraham in verse 16 declare an oath spoken by God on the authority of his own name (22:16). In Old Testament times, an oath was spoken by invoking the name of the highest power or authority capable of guaranteeing the oath, so when scripture tells us that the Lord swears an oath on His own name; it is telling us that what is said is of supreme importance. God is utterly committed to what He is about to say, and what is said cannot and will never be taken away or withdrawn. The whole oath prophetically re-affirmed the Covenant, which was the basis of His relationship with Abraham and his descendants, forever; and this means that it is for us.

### ***Faith and obedience are a part of the Covenant***

Before this moment, the Covenant had been revealed as God's initiative alone. It was totally one-sided, with humanity having nothing to do except receive it as a gift. Noah (Gen 9:8ff) was a 'good' man, and received God's promise that He would sustain the world and not destroy it (Gen 9:15); Noah had been obedient in one great deed, but the Bible does not give us any hint of a relationship between Noah and God which goes deeper than obedience and servitude. Abraham received a more complex promise of God, stating that he would be made into a great nation, live in a 'promised' land and that through him the nations of the world would be blessed (12:2,3; 15:6ff etc); but he was asked not just to be obedient but to trust God. The gifts of God were all unqualified, but the choice of Abraham was not simply the choice of any representative individual, but someone who had to respond to God by showing this great combination of faith and obedience in every area of his life. The whole story of Abraham in Genesis is about his battling with personal faith and obedience to God, and like so many individuals, he had to overcome a great deal of personal self interest and prejudice. In the end, he had to trust God and overcome all his personal feelings in the incident with Isaac on Mount Moriah, which is why it is the climax of the whole story of Abraham. Since then, the extraordinary nature of Abraham's obedience and faith has become the example of human response to God's covenant blessings, and the Lord has progressively built on this a plan for the salvation of the world.

### ***God's love, and victory over evil***

God's love and care for humanity is shown throughout Abraham's journey of obedience and faith. His love for His own people has always been unconditional, and can never fail, for it is an expression of His character and is not dependent upon sinful people. In our passage, however, God reveals for the first time the key which unlocks His purposes and plans for the future, and this is the combination of His unconditional love and the faithful obedience of Abraham. It is the beginning of what we might call a relationship between God and humanity, a relationship which had been broken after the 'fall' of Adam and Eve. The Covenant is therefore God's answer to the problem of sin and evil in the world, and He promises to use this for the good of all; 'because you have done this ... I will most certainly bless' (22:16,17) says the Lord. Then, as if to emphasise the importance of the Covenant, He adds to Abraham's blessing by saying that his descendants will be like 'sand on the seashore!' This phrase adds to the famous occasion in Genesis 15 when Abraham believed God when asked to look at the 'stars in the sky', and the two together become an expression of the superabundance of God's blessings, repeated in different ways in a number of Old Testament texts (Josh. 11:4; 1 Kings 4:29 etc.)

In our passage today there is also a prophetic word which speaks of God's defeat of evil when the angel says 'and they will capture the city gates of their enemies' (22:17). The significance of this cannot be overestimated. The idea that a Covenant relationship between God and His people will enable them to 'capture Satan's strongholds' is remarkable. The expression 'they will capture the city gates' sounds strange to our ears, but this is because it is the language of ancient warfare. In past times, those who controlled the city gates controlled the city, and this prophetic statement indicated God's intention to take control of human destiny, and the way the Lord intended to do this was to break Satan's strongholds by establishing His own new relationship with people, thus breaking the power of evil to separate God from humanity. Abraham's faith and obedience would one day enable a new city, a new 'Kingdom' of God, to take hold and flourish; a city of salvation whose gates would stand against all evil.

### ***Abraham returns home***

Having heard what the angel had said, Abraham and Isaac and his servant returned home. It is barely possible for us to imagine what they must have felt like or shared on a journey such as this. What had

happened was unprecedented and unique, and the meaning of it, even with the explanation given by the angel, would have been almost too big for them to understand. It is hard enough for us to get our minds around it all today! When Abraham arrived home, he continued to stay near Beersheba (22:19), where he had settled since the birth of Isaac. It was no longer right for Abraham to travel, and this part of Canaan became his home for the rest of his life.

With so much blessing being vested in Isaac and his descendants, the writer of Genesis compares this powerful and spiritual blessing with the standard measure of blessing used in ancient times, which was large numbers of children. Abraham's brother Nahor had produced a large family, as expected of a 'great' man. He had eight sons by his wife Milcah; and four more by his concubine Reumah. Of the names mentioned here, Bethuel is important, because he became the father of Rebekah, who in time would become the wife of Isaac. Some think that this list is placed in scripture simply to tell us this, and it is indeed important for us to know this; but there is more as well!

If we count all the names, then Abraham's brother had twelve sons, but Abraham himself had only just one son, Isaac. On the surface, it would not have seemed obvious to anyone else that Nahor was the one most blessed by God with many descendants! Abraham's single child Isaac was not a good earthly standard for blessing, but this did not matter to Abraham or to God, because Isaac was the child of Covenant! Faith would certainly have been required for Abraham to believe at that his descendants would be more numerous than those of his brother Nahor! Scripture, with a hint of humour, is prophetically pointing us to the time when Abraham's grandson Jacob would have the twelve sons who would make God's Covenant people into a nation and fulfil the promises Abraham received. Abraham had to live the whole of his life in faith that God would fulfil his promises, for he never saw the enlargement of his own family.

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## Discipleship

### Application

It is only rarely that scripture gives us a relatively clear picture of the planned saving work of God. Much of the Old Testament is full of stories explaining various parts of the history of God's people, and it can be hard to see within some of these stories exactly what God is doing. Here in this passage, though, everything is clearly stated. The Covenant relationship we have with God is built upon two things. Firstly, God's unconditional love for His people expressed through his blessing, and secondly, the faith Abraham showed in his mature obedience to God. The combination is God's chosen means to defeat evil in the world and bring blessing to the whole of His created world. Here is God's mission statement!

Many churches try hard to find their purpose through mission statements and strategies they feel will relate the Gospel to the world in which they live. Yet, is it really possible to do better than use some of the models that are provided for us in the Bible? There is a great need for Christian people of all ages to hear again about the faith of Abraham, and how God used it as the basis for His mission to bring salvation into the world, and we need to learn from the way that faith and obedience are interconnected in the life of Abraham. Abraham's faith grew through trials and difficulties, and as it grew, God shaped his character and enabled him to do impossible things, and in the end he was able to hear the voice of God standing out clearly above all the noise of evil in this world and telling him to withhold his knife from killing Isaac. In our modern world, we are tempted to explore all manner of things as if it will lead to a better expression of Christianity or of 'being church'. The starting point for our faith should not be what is happening in the world, but what God has already done through Abraham. Through Abraham's faith, the enemy is defeated and the work of God is done.

### Questions for groups

1. Look carefully at the prophetic speech of the angel, and discuss all the different things that are said in your group. Make sure you understand each one.
2. Discuss what you think Abraham and Isaac must have thought as they journeyed home.
3. What does the New Testament teach us about faith which tells us more than what we learn here (if anything)?

### Discipleship challenges

- *Do you think of yourself as having a covenant relationship with God? If so, what does this mean to you, and if not, explore what it could mean for you? The church today sometimes forgets the great treasure store of the 'Covenant' and what it means.*
  - *Today's story is one which concludes a great story and causes us to think. Your thoughts about Abraham may be quite different. What does it make you think?*
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## **Final Prayer**

Within the pressures of everyday life, help me, heavenly Father, to rise triumphant in my faith over every adversity and give You the glory for every defeat of the evil one which I achieve or witness. May I be so victorious over the enemy that I have no fear of him! AMEN

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