



STEP 11: CHOOSE THE NARROW WAY

At last, we reach the part of Abe's story we've been building up to for a while – and one with a message for us all:

Genesis 21:1-21

I wonder if you've ever been asked this question: "What do you want to believe in that for?"

If you're used to making your faith known, then you'll hear a question like that at some point. So what kind of answer would you give? An objective, cerebral, modernist one? E.g.:

- The existence and fine-tuning of the universe?
- The origin of life on earth?
- The uniqueness of the human spirit and conscience?
- The evidence for Jesus' life, death and resurrection?

Maybe. And don't get me wrong: that is vitally important. But for a lot of people these days, that won't be enough. You have to hit people where it hurts: their deepest needs.

The arrival of Isaac is a message to Abraham, Sarah, and the rest of us, that does just that.

Because it's a message of:

1) Grace. “Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as He had said.” Now this is not the first demonstration of God’s grace in Abraham and Sarah’s lives. He has been gracious all the way along, in fact – from the moment He called them out of Ur of the Chaldeans and led them to Canaan. And remember: God does this for Abraham and Sarah in *spite* of their past, in *spite* of their lies to Pharaoh and Abimelech, in *spite* of their doubts and disobedience! What’s the point? That God is good, even when we don’t deserve it! Don’t for one minute think that if we obey God more, He’ll love us more. He loves us anyway! Not because of what we’ve done, but in *spite* of it.

2) Faithfulness. “Sarah bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.” 25 years before! Some of us get impatient waiting 25 minutes, let alone years! But God keeps His promise to Abraham and Sarah – and He’ll keep His promises to us, too. Maybe not in the way we want or expect sometimes, or according to our timescale. But He will do it – because God’s promises never fail, even when we do. That’s why I bang on about reading the Bible so much. Not just out of duty, admirable though that is. It’s to remind us of what God has done, and what He’s promised to do! And the fact that, when God says something, He means it!

3) Joy. “Abraham gave the name Isaac (or *Yitzhak* – ‘laughter’) to the son Sarah bore him.” Why? Basically, because Sarah becomes a first-time mother at the age of 90! Have you ever seen a photo of a 90-year-old woman holding her new-born great, great grandchild? Probably not – because it doesn’t happen very often! Now imagine that 90-year-old woman trying to nurse her new-born child. No wonder everyone’s laughing! But it’s not just the humour in this situation – it’s the joy of being blessed by a God who loves us. And just as God wants to bring joy to Abraham and Sarah, He wants to bring joy to us. He is a joyous – and joy-giving – God.

4) Transformation. “When his son Isaac was 8 days old, Abraham circumcised him ...” Now as we’ve seen before, male circumcision is a healthy practice for a desert people. But it has to be from 8 days old, as vitamin K skyrockets on day 8, and prior to that there’s the risk of haemorrhaging (which would obviously be dangerous to a new-born). However, circumcision is more than just a medical procedure – it’s a picture of a new beginning, of God removing that which is bad or unhelpful to us – the old us – and making us into the people He wants us to be. And we all need it! We all have stuff about us that needs to be dealt with. And God can do it!

5) Significance. Beautiful though this story is, blessed though Abraham and Sarah are, this is about more than just them. They are serving a far greater purpose here. Because God’s original promise is not just the blessing of Abraham and Sarah through this child, but the blessing of the whole world – *every nation* – through this child! Their story, Isaac’s story, Jacob’s story after him, the story of the children of Jacob or Israel, are all a part of a far bigger story. The story of the redemption and restoration of the whole world. A story that we are a part of, too. And just as God uses Abraham and Sarah to change the world for the better, He wants to use you and me.

And One More ...

But there's another part of this story – and one more statement from God – that involves a certain incident a couple of years later. And it centres on Abraham's first son, Ishmael – the son of Abraham's disobedience – and a very difficult decision that Abraham has to make.

What happens? Isaac is weaned at 2-3 years old. His parents throw a party. Hagar and Ishmael (who is now about 15) find something amusing about the whole thing. And Sarah flips, mother-bear kicks in, and she comes up with a solution: "Hagar and Ishmael have to go!" Which is pretty harsh, right? Abraham thinks so, too. In fact, we're told: "The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son." And yet, God tells him to go with it. Yes, He promises to look after Ishmael (and He does), but He tells Abraham to do as Sarah asks.

Now you might be thinking, "How could God approve of this?" (I hope you are!). And ordinarily, I don't think God would. But the reason God commands Abraham to do this incredibly difficult thing is because He wants to make one more statement – to us. Because while God promises to look after Ishmael, the promise of salvation for the world comes through? Isaac. And in Galatians 4:22-29 Paul uses this story to make a point: that there is only one way in which this world can be saved. And it's not through our efforts, our rituals, this religious practice or that.

It is through Isaac. Or specifically, through Jesus.

You see, this story isn't really about Isaac at all - it's about the One Isaac was paving the way for. Because it's only in Jesus that we can experience the grace, faithfulness, joy, transformation and significance that God wants to give us.

Look anywhere else, you'll be disappointed.

Hence these very famous words – from John 14:6:

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through Me."

So next time someone asks you, "What do you want to believe in that for?" you can throw 5 words at them at least!

And if you're asking that question yourself, now you know.