

# Forgiveness and Father's Day

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**Genesis 18:1-15** (KJV) And the Lord appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground,

And said, My Lord, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant: Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree: And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant. And they said, So do, as thou hast said.

<sup>6</sup>And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth. And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetcht a calf tender and good, and gave it unto a young man; and he hasted to dress it. And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat.

<sup>9</sup>And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent. And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? And the Lord said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is any thing too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son. Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh.

**Genesis 22:1-2** (KJV) And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

Father's Day is a time of the year that I often dread, because like many men and women who do not have children I feel like a second class person on days when we celebrate mothers and fathers. I used to keep a very low profile in church on Father's Day. I would quietly try to get away from people when the flowers were given out. One Father's Day, I saw the ladies with the flowers headed my direction, so I quickly beat it across the church sanctuary to avoid the embarrassment. I almost made it to the room where I taught a Sunday School class to hear the loud voice of a friend booming across the sanctuary, "Look what I got that you can't have!"

While Father's Day has some negative experiences tied to it, I can share in the celebration of people who have different identities, different accomplishments, different occupations and different roles, even when it is not possible for me to be or do those things. In the body of Christ, we can celebrate the roles and the sacrifices of parents, without making the worth of people depend on raising children.

Today, on Father's Day, we are celebrating the roles of fathers. But we are celebrating a little more than fathers. We are celebrating the roles of people who identify as men, including uncles, brothers and sons, including all who might someday be a father and including all who have done stereotypical dad jobs.

The story of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac is complex, weaving itself through a few chapters of Genesis. We get some of the story of Abraham and his sons in the passage we just heard, but there is more to the story. I will give a thumb's nail view of the most important elements of the narrative, without attempting to keep everything in exact chronological order.

- Sarah is unable to have children, so she suggests that Abraham have children with her servant Hagar.<sup>1</sup>
- Hagar becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son Ishmael.
- Sarah was "despised by Hagar."<sup>2</sup> In one part of the narrative, the Bible describes Hagar as "mocking" Sarah.<sup>3</sup>
- The Lord visits Abraham and Sarah.<sup>4</sup>
- Abraham is told that God will make him the father of nations.<sup>5</sup>
- Sarah has a promised son.
- Eventually, Abraham and Sarah end up kicking out Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham and Hagar's son.
- Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son to God.
- God stops Abraham from killing his son as a sacrifice.

The story of Abraham and Sarah and their son Isaac is rich in shades of meaning, which can be important on Father's Day. From the story of Abraham and Sarah, we understand the need to not treat people who do not have children like they are second class citizens. The value of each person, from a Christian perspective, is based on being a creation of God and being redeemed by God. We also understand that the fathers and mothers of the faithful make mistakes and we get a sense of the need to forgive parental figures in our lives and to forgive ourselves when we make parenting mistakes.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 16:1-4.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 16:4.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 21:9-15.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 18:1.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 17:6.

The liturgical cycle is about the promise and the birth of Isaac. Abraham and Sarah were not young people. The King James translation paints a vivid picture of Abraham and Sarah, when it describes Sarah as being "well stricken in age".<sup>6</sup> As a person who has low levels of chronic pain, and, at times has mobility challenges, I find the phrase "stricken in age" powerfully descriptive. The thought of being a parent when you are stricken with age can be funny, as Sarah seems to have found it, and it can be a little sobering and frightening.

The Genesis text in the liturgical cycle struck me as odd. Talking about Abraham and the birth of Isaac on Father's Day struck me for an odd and challenging reason. People may have reason to question if Abraham was a good father. He set out to offer his son as a sacrifice to God. Some people would question his fitness as a father for doing that, especially given the fact that the Torah strongly condemns offering children as a sacrifice to the god Molech.<sup>7</sup> And Abraham is not the only parenting figure in the Abraham and Sarah narrative who makes mistakes. Hagar appears to have considered Sarah to be a second class person, because Hagar had a son before Sarah did. Both Abraham and Sarah made a mistake when they kicked out Hagar and Abraham's son Ishmael.<sup>8</sup> There is plenty of less than ideal parenting in this story.

I struggle with Abraham taking his son, Isaac, and offering Isaac as a sacrifice to God. Rabbi Harvey Fields, author of *A Torah Commentary for our Times*, states that some people believe Abraham had questions and doubts about what he believed God commanded him to do.<sup>9</sup> To our 21st Century ears, the story may strike us as a combination of child abuse and spiritual abuse. Because, in the ancient world, human sacrifices appear to have been offered to some gods, the ancients might not have found the story so shocking. For example, the Philistines seem to have offered human sacrifices to the god Molech.<sup>10</sup> According to the Biblical narrative, God did not allow Abraham to take the life of his own son. God does not want us to sacrifice our children to appease an angry, demanding understanding of God.

My next point is important at any time of the year, and is even more important when we are celebrating Father's Day during our Pride Festival. Some devout parents, who had good intentions, who thought they were being faithful to God's command, sacrificed the well-being of their children on an altar to God, when they harshly attacked their children's sexual orientation, gender expression or gender identity and when they kicked their children out of home. In a few cases, parents have sent their children to forms of counselling that attempt to change the sexual orientation of their children. These forms of therapy can be emotionally very damaging to children.

Points to ponder as children.

- When you were first born your father and mother knew almost infinitely more than you knew and they were almost all powerful compared to you. In reality, they might have been terrified of the task of parenting you and there was a lot they did not know.

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 18:11.

<sup>7</sup> Leviticus 18:21.

<sup>8</sup> The story can be found in Genesis 21:8-21.

<sup>9</sup> Harvey J. Fields. *A Torah Commentary for Our Times. Vol. 1: Genesis.* (New York: UAHC Press, 1990), 51.

<sup>10</sup> J. Vernon McGee. *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee.* (Pasadena, California: Thru the Bible Radio, 1998), ebook.

- Forgiving people, by refusing to carry the burden of their issues for the rest of your life, is better done when a parent is alive than at a funeral home or a cemetery.

A few points about parenting.

- You are never an expert. No matter how many children you have, you are not an expert, because every child is different and needs slightly different parenting.
- Babies are not born with a user's manual. There is no series of You Tube videos on how to parent each child. As parents and as people who hold a few quasi parenting roles, we do the best we can and we hope and pray for the very best.
- Rarely do parents set out to make mistakes. Most fathers are really decent people who mean well.
- We cannot easily give what we did not receive. A senior citizen once commented that it was difficult for him to show love and to give love, because he never received love when he was a kid. Many fathers make mistakes, not because they want to make mistakes, but because they had few good role models of how to be a loving dad.
- I am not sure if a person is ever ready to be a good parent. I doubt that there would be many children born, if everybody waited to have children until they were ready financially and emotionally to raise children.
- The closer the nature of the relationship, the more potential there is for deep hurt. Because parenting relationships are both close relationships and are relationships with a person providing care, the potential for mistakes that are very painful is much more significant.
- Hindsight is not 20/20. All hindsight tells us is what did not work and what was a mistake. Sadly, hindsight does not tell us what would have worked and what we should have done.
- Congratulations, you are human. Nobody is perfect. Let God be perfect, because trying to be perfect is too demanding for us.

We can forgive our parents for the mistakes they made. When we forgive our parents, we no longer carry the burden of constantly reliving the pain and the anger that stemmed from their mistakes. We can let God, not our parents, be perfect.

Even though Abraham and Sarah may have made some serious mistakes as parents, they are viewed as the father and mother of the faithful. God chooses to treat humanity as though we are faithful and as though we have not made mistakes, some of which deeply hurt people. God calls us to be faithful, not to be perfect, not to never make mistakes. So for God's sake forgive your parents and for God's sake forgive yourself.