

Abraham: The Beginning of God's Great Promise

We now come to Genesis 12 and begin our study of Abraham. In my opinion, this is one of the most important studies we can make. Abraham is not simply another Old Testament character whose story ended long ago. The New Testament returns to Abraham again and again. The apostles continually point back to him because what God began with Abraham reaches all the way to Christ and to us.

As we move through these chapters in Genesis, we are going to notice that God's promises to Abraham are repeated several times. They are not merely repeated word for word. God gradually expands and elaborates on them. Because of that, it is helpful to keep track of what God promises in each appearance. At the same time, we will also encounter many New Testament passages that explain the significance of these promises. One of the great goals of this study is to see how closely the Old Testament and the New Testament belong together.

The Journey Begins Before Genesis 12

The closing verses of Genesis 11 tell us that Terah, Abraham's father, took Abram, Sarai, and Lot and left Ur of the Chaldeans with the intention of going to Canaan. Instead, they settled in Haran, where Terah eventually died.

Looking at a map helps make sense of the journey. Ur was located in the region of modern Iraq, while Haran was far to the north in what is now Turkey. Rather than traveling directly west across the Arabian Desert, they followed the fertile route north before eventually turning south toward Canaan.

Genesis simply tells us that Terah led the family to Haran, but Acts 7 fills in an important detail. As Stephen recounts Israel's history before his martyrdom, he says that "the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia before he lived in Haran."

That tells us something Genesis has not yet explained. God had already called Abram while he was still living in Mesopotamia. Some understand the opening verses of Genesis 12 as describing what had already happened before the journey to Haran. However we understand the sequence, Stephen makes it clear that God's call began before the family reached Haran.

Something else has changed the way I picture Abraham's early life. For years I imagined him living in a tent beside an oasis somewhere in the desert. But both Ur and Haran were large, prosperous commercial centers. They were crossroads of international trade and important cities of their day. Abram was not an isolated desert nomad at this point in his life. He lived in a thriving urban culture before God called him to leave it.

The Call of Yahweh

Genesis 12 opens with these words:

"Yahweh said to Abram, 'Go forth from your land and from your kin and from your father's house to the land I will show you.'"

Many English Bibles translate the divine name as LORD in all capital letters. That represents the covenant name Yahweh.

I personally appreciate using a Bible that prints God's name as Yahweh because, when Moses asked what he should tell Israel, God revealed His name and said that this was the name by which He wanted to be known. The Jewish people later developed a tradition of avoiding the name entirely out of concern that they might take it in vain. English translations carried much of that tradition forward by using LORD instead of Yahweh. But Scripture itself never says God's people should avoid speaking His name. Since God said, "This is my name," I prefer to think of Him by the name He gave.

Yahweh's command to Abram was straightforward. He was to leave his country, his relatives, and his father's household and go to a land that God Himself would show him.

Then God began making promises.

- He would make Abram into a great nation.
- He would bless him.
- He would make his name great.
- Abram himself would become a blessing.
- God would bless those who blessed Abram and curse the one who cursed him.
- Finally, God declared that in Abram all the families of the earth would be blessed.

As we have often said, "all" means all.

Why Abraham?

To appreciate what happened here, we need to remember the world Abram lived in.

Ur and Haran were centers of moon-god worship. Temples, sacrifices, and pagan religion surrounded him. Abram and his family were idolaters. They were not Jews because the nation of Israel did not yet exist. They certainly were not what we would call Christians.

Looking across the world at that time, nearly everything around Abram was pagan. We know that Enoch had walked with God generations earlier, and somewhere within Shem's family men had begun to call upon the name of Yahweh. But by Abraham's day the world was overwhelmingly pagan.

Then God simply appeared.

Abram was not searching for God. He was going about his daily life, probably a prosperous man with substantial wealth, living in one of the important cities of his day. Yet God came to him and said, "This is what I am going to do for you."

Why?

Because God chose to.

Scripture tells us that there is none righteous, no, not one. There is none who seeks after God. Noah had not earned God's favor by perfect righteousness either. God came to Noah, revealed His purpose, and Noah believed Him. Noah was righteous by faith. Abraham would also be counted righteous through faith, not because of his own works.

God simply declared what He intended to do.

Abraham Believed God

Abram's response was wonderfully simple.

"So Abram went forth as Yahweh had spoken to him."

He departed from Haran at seventy-five years of age, taking Sarai, Lot, all their possessions, and the people they had acquired in Haran. Together they traveled into Canaan.

After Abram entered the land, Yahweh appeared to him again. This time God added another promise.

"To your seed I will give this land."

Again, these promises are unconditional. God did not say, "If you do these things, then I will do these things." He simply declared what He Himself would accomplish.

Abram's response was to believe what God had said.

Later in Genesis we will see that God counted that faith as righteousness. Abraham was not righteous in himself, just as we are not righteous in ourselves. God counted his faith as righteousness, and He counts are the same way.

Abraham at the Beginning of the New Testament

The very first verse of the New Testament immediately reminds us how important Abraham is.

"The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, the son of Abraham."

Why identify Jesus specifically with David and Abraham? Because those are the two great covenant figures of the Old Testament.

God promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him.

God promised David that the Messiah would come through his royal line.

Matthew immediately identifies Jesus as the fulfillment of both promises.

Luke does the same thing. In Zechariah's prophecy after the birth of John the Baptist, he praises God for remembering His holy covenant and "the oath which He swore to Abraham our father." Once again David and Abraham stand together because both covenants point forward to Christ.

God's Promises and Our Faith

Abraham believed God's promises.

What promises do we believe?

Scripture expresses them in several ways.

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."

"If you confess with your mouth...and believe in your heart...you will be saved."

Jesus Himself said in John 5:24:

"He who hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life."

Notice the wording. Jesus does not merely say that the believer will someday receive eternal life. He says the believer has eternal life.

John 3:36 says: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life."

The issue is believing.

God came to Abraham and said, "This is what I am going to do."

God comes to us through His Word and says, "Whoever believes on Christ will be saved."

Our responsibility is the same as Abraham's. Believe what God has said in His promise. Believing is more than repeating words or agreeing with them intellectually. It is actually trusting what God has said.

The Promise Proclaimed After Christ

Peter preached exactly this message on the Day of Pentecost. Quoting the prophet Joel, he declared:

"It will be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Calling on the Lord flows naturally from believing His promise. We hear God's Word, believe it, and call upon Him.

Later in the same sermon Peter said:

"The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself."

Peter first addressed the Jewish people gathered in Jerusalem, but the promise reaches beyond them to all whom God calls.

In Acts 3 Peter again points back to Abraham, reminding Israel of God's covenant:

"In your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

He tells them that God first sent His Servant to them, reminding us again that the message came first to Israel before spreading throughout the world.

Christianity is not merely another religion. It is the God of heaven making promises and calling people to believe them. Just as Abraham believed what God promised him, everyone who believes God's promise concerning Christ is saved.

Sometimes we make it more complicated than it really is.

Abraham and Lot

Genesis next records Abram's return from Egypt.

A famine had driven him there, and while in Egypt he feared someone might kill him in order to take Sarai. He told Pharaoh that she was his sister rather than his wife. Pharaoh took Sarai into his household, but God intervened by sending plagues, and Pharaoh confronted Abram for deceiving him.

Later a similar event happened again with another ruler. In both cases God prevented evil from taking place.

That reminds me that God is fully capable of restraining evil whenever He chooses. As His children we pray for His protection. Sometimes He allows difficult things to happen, but He is certainly able to intervene whenever He wills.

Returning from Egypt, Abram and Lot had become so wealthy that the land could no longer support both households together. Their herdsmen began quarreling.

Abram generously gave Lot first choice. "If you go one way, I'll go the other."

Lot looked toward the Jordan Valley. Before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, it was lush and well watered, "like the garden of Yahweh." Lot chose the fertile valley and gradually moved his tents toward Sodom. Scripture immediately reminds us that the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked against Yahweh.

Another Expansion of the Promise

After Lot departed, Yahweh again spoke to Abram.

Looking north, south, east, and west, Abram heard God say that all the land he could see would belong to him and to his seed forever.

Then God expanded the promise once again.

His descendants would become as the dust of the earth.

If someone could count the dust, then they could count Abram's descendants.

God's point is obvious. They cannot be counted.

Sometimes we become discouraged and think God's work is accomplishing very little. But God has far more people than we realize. His kingdom is not failing. He will accomplish everything He intends to accomplish. He will certainly fulfill the promise He made to Abraham.

The Importance of the Seed

Before leaving this section, there is one New Testament passage that deserves special attention because it prepares us for what comes next.

In Galatians 3, Paul reminds us that even human covenants cannot simply be changed after they have been ratified.

Then he makes an observation about God's promise to Abraham.

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his "seed."

Paul points out that Scripture does not say "seeds" as though referring to many. It says "seed."

Then he identifies that Seed: "...to your seed, that is, Christ."

When God promised the land to Abraham and to his seed, Paul says the promise ultimately pointed to Christ.

Paul then adds another crucial truth.

The Law, given through Moses 430 years later, cannot invalidate the covenant God had already established with Abraham.

God made His promise. It rests upon God's own faithfulness. The Law that came centuries later cannot alter or cancel what God had already pledged.

The Promise and the Law are two different categories altogether.

That truth is so important that it deserves careful attention, and it is where we will continue our study in a couple of weeks.