

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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SUMMARY OF ABRAHAM

The promises of the Covenant

Before we actually examine the promises that God made to Abraham, we first have to get our hermeneutical bearings. It's easy for us to miss vitally important aspects of what was really going on here, 4000 years after the event. We need to check with our authorities, who alone had the necessary inside information (i.e., revelation from God) on the true nature of this transaction. But we aren't going to read a New Testament concept back into an Old Testament story in which it doesn't belong; it's a matter of removing the veil so that we can see what Abraham saw.

Paul tells us in Galatians that *God gave the Gospel to Abraham* when he made this Covenant with him.

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the Gospel beforehand to Abraham. (Galatians 3:8)

We all know what Paul meant by the Gospel; so this is a particularly strong statement to make about the content of an Old Testament story.¹ But this alerts us to the fact that, not only was there more going on in this story than we would otherwise pick up on, but also that God told Abraham the root idea of the Gospel of Christ. This is significant because this event took place at the beginning of the Hebrew race, the nation of Israel, and defines the history of God's people as they are set apart and led in a path different from the rest of the world. It's the Gospel, according to Paul, that made them different.

Another New Testament passage alerts us to a second reality going on in Abraham's story.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. (Hebrews 11:8)

We will see in the next section the nature of true faith, as Abraham learned it. But for now we must realize that faith opened up an insight into God's spiritual world that Abraham would not have otherwise had. He saw something that was real. It wasn't a general feeling such as "I'm not sure what's going on, but I hope this turns out all right." It was a spiritual perception of something specific. Hebrews gets very specific about what Abraham saw.

For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:10)

Now this is plain English; there is only one way to understand this verse and be fair to the text. Faith gave him the spiritual ability to see a spiritual reality behind the physical promises. What exactly he saw isn't for us to say; he was the eyewitness. But that means that Abraham was not so naïve as to think that the modest fulfillment he himself received

¹ There are some who would claim that the next phrase – "the Gospel, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed'" – was all that God told Abraham about the Gospel. We will address that shortly.

of these promises was the last word on the subject.² He could see what was coming thousands of years later; we know that from the statement in Hebrews. So the fact that Abraham had a supernatural faith now opens up the possibility of him knowing the Gospel that we know about – as Paul claims. Anything short of this is cheating Abraham and his descendants out of the Covenant, and treating them like children compared with us. Our only “claim to fame” here is that we live after the event of Jesus, and have had the whole thing explained to us in the Bible; faith, on the other hand, did the same thing for saints who lived before Jesus.

Now on to the promises. The story of God dealing with Abraham extends from Genesis 12 to Genesis 25; but we can collate all the elements of the Covenant story into four promises.

- **A Son (Genesis 15:4)** – When God first called Abraham and told him to move from his native Ur in Chaldee to Canaan, the man was already 75 years old. He and his wife Sarah had no children. Since Abraham was prosperous – he had extensive holdings in the form of livestock – he was concerned that his chief servant would have to become his heir.

But that was not to be. The Lord promised Abraham that he would give him a natural-born son through his wife Sarah. This was no small matter, because it would involve a miracle to change Sarah from barren to pregnant. And that’s exactly what God did (in due time, after a lapse of faith on Abraham’s part when he had Ishmael by Sarah’s handmaid Hagar). The “miracle baby” was named Isaac, and he became the legal heir of Abraham’s estate.

- **The Land (Genesis 15:7)** – When Abraham arrived in Canaan, he was a wanderer and an alien and couldn’t just pick a place and settle down; the locals wouldn’t let him do that. God promised him, however, that this entire area of Palestine would someday belong to his descendants – a promise that no doubt caused even greater tension between him and the Canaanites. Again this required the hand of God; the Canaanites weren’t going to give up their property to an alien without a fight.

So instead of fighting them, Abraham stayed on the move, wandering around Canaan and twice going down to Egypt. But he received a “first taste” of the promise that the entire land would eventually belong to him and his family. When Sarah died, he had no place of his own to bury her. So he approached the Hittites and contracted to buy the cave and field of Machpelah to bury her. That burial site stayed in the family for the next 500-plus years until the Israelites came back from Egypt and claimed the rest of the Promised Land. The deed was an initial payment of the promise that the Lord gave Abraham.

- **A Nation (Genesis 12:2)** – Most everyone needs a family, and some want large families. But God promised Abraham something extraordinary: he

² Abraham was a stranger in the land that God was giving him, and conditions there were far from a blessing for him. Witness the necessity of his trip to Egypt at one point to escape famine – Genesis 12:10.

intended to turn Abraham's descendants into a nation. In those days when one's survival was almost always threatened by disease, plagues, drought, roving marauders and raiding bandits, this again would require a miracle to accomplish. Single couples simply don't turn into nations over time.

There was a problem right away, however. Building a family involves getting a wife for his son. But Abraham had no intention of letting his son Isaac marry one of the local Canaanite girls – they would surely lead him into idolatry. So he decided to find a wife for his son from his family back home. He sent his servant back to Haran to visit the family and see if he could talk one of the girls into coming to Canaan and marrying Isaac. The servant, being a realist, knew that no decent girl would willingly leave home and family (and never see them again!), travel hundreds of miles to a strange land, and marry someone she had never seen. So he put the matter in God's hands. God led him to exactly the right girl, she agreed to go (a miracle in itself!) and Isaac received his wife.

- **The Blessing (Genesis 12:3)** – At one point God decided to test Abraham's faith. This is significant, because true faith is not simply a vague hope that things will turn out well in the end; it's an *assurance*, a *certainty* (as Hebrews 11 tells us) based on what we see in God's spiritual world. Since God was teaching Abraham what true faith is, one would expect to see a test as part of the training process; we are not allowed a false faith – there's too much at stake here. (God always tests the genuineness of faith – see 1 Peter 1:6-7.)

So God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. On the surface this just flies in the face of every promise that he had made to Abraham; losing his son meant losing the whole Covenant. But because he had true faith, he willingly laid Isaac on the altar and prepared to cut his throat. At that point the Lord intervened and provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac's life.

There is no need to conjecture about what was going through Abraham's mind at this point – the New Testament tells us. "He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead." (Hebrews 11:19) In other words, he could see the deeper spiritual principles of redemption, sacrifice and resurrection overturning the curse of death.

What God was doing with Abraham in these initial fulfillments was giving him physical answers to immediate problems. But the Project that God started here with Abraham was much larger than his personal situation. God was laying the groundwork for the entire Family of Abraham to inherit a more powerful version of the Covenant promises.

- The promise of the **Son** would insure that there would always be an Heir through which the rest of the Family of Abraham would receive the Covenant blessings.

- The promise of the **Land** gave Abraham's extended Family a secure home of their own, political stability, prosperity, and the Kingdom which would secure the Covenant blessings.
- The promise of the **Nation** created the Chosen People, the Family who shared the rights and privileges of being Abraham's heirs. It provided the genealogical guidelines that would guarantee Covenant blessings to the Family members only.
- The promise of the **Blessing** opened the door to overturning the great curse of mankind – death – and giving God's people open access to the throne of God himself, and experiencing true life in God.

We will explore these ideas in more depth as they unfold in the rest of the Old Testament.

Faith

Paul talks about Abraham's faith in his letter to the Romans.

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered³ in this matter? (Romans 4:1; NIV)

In fact, the subject of faith is first explained to us in the story of Abraham. Faith is not what most people think it is – simply a trust that things will work out well in the end, or an intellectual belief of some sort about God. The reason this faith of Abraham is unique is that true faith, as God requires, has attached to it the concept of *righteousness*.

God promised Abraham some amazing things that would not have occurred without the hand of God, and Abraham (the story tells us) believed God would do them.

And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." And he believed⁴ the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:5-6)

The concept of "righteousness" (from the Hebrew word צדק, *tsadak*) means "to be right, just, normal." In God's eyes, in other words, here is a man who meets all the necessary standards; there is nothing wrong in him, there is no reason to be alienated from him. So God gives full access to the throne of God. There are only two ways a person can achieve this kind of standing with God. One is clearly stated in Deuteronomy, the Law of God.

³ I prefer the NIV's rendering of this verse, because the original word here - εὕρισκω - means primarily "to find, discover, encounter." That fits better with the training that Abraham went through in his walk of faith.

⁴ The Hebrew word for "believe" is אמן (*aman*), which is the basis for our word "Amen." One form of the verb can be used of someone who is "reliable, faithful, steady." Here in Abraham's case, he was "convinced" that God was reliable and faithful in what he said, and he "trusted" in God's Word to him.

And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us. (Deuteronomy 6:25)

If anybody keeps all the Law of God, without exception, as God requires it (and we will see later what this really entails – it's more complex than we can possibly imagine!) then he will be righteous in God's eyes. It's very simple to determine whether someone is righteous in this way: God puts their entire lives, their thoughts, their hearts up against the full Law and sees if there's any deviation between the two. If only one law has been broken, the person is not a righteous man (see James 2:10-11).

The other route to righteousness is through the kind of faith that Abraham learned, as this passage in Genesis shows us. His simple faith in God's promises earned him the verdict of being counted a righteous man in God's eyes.

Paul makes a point of this transaction in his letter to the Romans. He sees the two ways to righteousness also, and the fact that Abraham took the first way shows that it has priority over the second way. Anybody who has the faith of Abraham will be seen as a righteous person in God's eyes, whether they measure up to the Law or not.

For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. ... The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Romans 4:9-12)

Most people believe in a god of some sort, and in spiritual realities – even if it's simply to vehemently deny it out of a guilty conscience. So we have to focus on the particular kind of faith that Abraham had that distinguishes his faith from other kinds. Abraham learned the process as he followed God in Canaan.

- **First, faith is based on God's direct Word.** "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" (Genesis 12:1) Up to this point Abraham had believed in the gods that his culture taught him; but this was a word from the true God, from outside of the world, apart from man's philosophies and imaginations. What most men dream of, what some men claim falsely, actually happened to Abraham – he met the living God and spoke with him.

This is critical for what is about to happen. We can't participate in the kind of religion that God is calling us to unless we get a clear call from God to follow him. True knowledge of God, and a true understanding of God's will for us, is based not on our own desires or opinions (see what happened in the Garden of Eden when Adam and his wife took that approach) but rather on what God tells us. Truth is what the Logos gives us, not what comes from darkness. Abraham believed what God said to him, and that was the basis of their relationship.

- **Second** *faith is the revelation of things to come.* God promised things to Abraham that were clearly not part of his retirement plan! At this point Abraham was 75 years old, a wealthy property owner (possibly a land owner as well), and probably beginning to settle down to the idea of spending the rest of his days in Ur. But God called him to a completely new life, in a remote setting hundreds of miles away, with a startling new future as the progenitor of a new nation.

And (as we've seen already) God revealed a new spiritual world to Abraham that expanded the scope of the promises and gave Abraham a sense of the destiny of himself and his Family as it would affect the entire world, all through history. In other words he was lifted up above his local circumstances and enabled to see the world of God and the great affairs of God's Kingdom as God moves and arranges men and nations to do his bidding.

These are the things that drew Abraham to follow God. Just a change in scenery or labors would not have been enough to justify such a change of life, nor form the foundation for this supremely great work in history.

- **Third**, *faith desires what God promises.* Perhaps we overlook this aspect of faith in Abraham's life too easily; remember that he was quite prosperous and probably settled where he was in Ur. What he saw in God's promises, however, captured his heart and drew him to follow God in this new venture. He wanted what God promised.

That desire is what overcomes the hardships that inevitably come up along the way as we follow God through this world. What God has for his people is *remedial*, so we have to see the value in them and be willing to give up what is spiritually killing us – our sin. God's treasures are *eternal* and worth far more than the transitory baubles of this world. God is leading us into a *relationship with him*, not just a Heavenly vacation Paradise where we can enjoy physical pleasures without the pain.

So the hope of better things, Heavenly things, and spiritual treasures strengthened and encouraged Abraham to spend the rest of his life in wandering, alienation and trouble. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, there was a certainty behind what Abraham saw and heard from God, a vision of the reality and excellence of these promises, that motivated him to turn his back on the world and put his hope in them – motivating to reach beyond the promises that he himself received.

- **Fourth**, *faith sees that God must do this thing that is promised.* It's impossible for us to carry it off. All four promises that God made to Abraham weren't things that Abraham could do on his own. Sarah was too old to have a son at her age; the Canaanites weren't going to give up any of their property to a stranger and alien, let alone the entire land. Rebekah could hardly be expected to move hundreds of miles away and marry someone she had never met; and the death sentence on Isaac was certain. In

each of these situations Abraham faced the impossibility of the outcome, even though he had God's promise concerning them.

But faith sees the certainty in spite of the impossibility. In fact, true faith reasons that God can do the impossible – he doesn't avoid the failure, he simply goes through the failure to success on the other side. Once again, Paul tells us exactly what was going through Abraham's mind about this.

He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. (Romans 4:19-21)

Hebrews even tells us that Abraham "considered that God was able even to raise [*Isaac*] from the dead." (Hebrews 11:19) So he believed in a miracle-working God.

- **Fifth, *faith must wait on God.*** At this point Abraham faltered in his faith. After over twenty years of waiting for a son, he finally gave in to his wife's pressure and had a son by his wife's handmaid Hagar – a natural birth. (Genesis 16) This mistake has had repercussions for the rest of history. But the immediate problem was that it was not the fulfillment of God's promise. After Ishmael had been born, God told Abraham:

Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. (Genesis 17:19)

Abraham waited for a total of twenty-five years for the fulfillment of this promise – he was an old man of 100 before God finally fulfilled it for him. The point here is significant: if what God promised is impossible, then we have no other option but to wait for it. Any move on our part to shorten the time or find another alternative is not the fulfillment of the promise; and if we wait until the thing is done, that proves that we truly believe that only God can do it for us and that it's worth the wait.⁵

So Abraham, over the period of his experiences following the Lord, learned the essential elements of true faith in God. This faith puts us in the perfect position to be sons of God, the heirs of God – hence the name "the free gift of righteousness." (Romans 5:7) These same elements are characteristic of every child of Abraham who has the faith of his/her father. Abraham's brand of faith reflects the nature of God, his plans, and how he works with his children. In other words, it glorifies *him*.

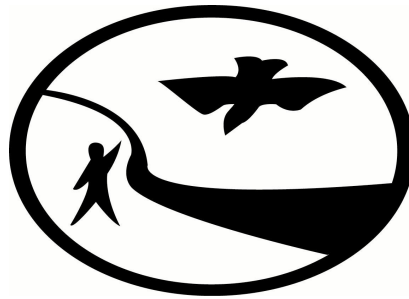
⁵ This is in fact the importance of learning the Works of the Lord (Psalm 111:2) – we find out what only God can do, and learn the difference between his works and our works, for important reasons. See my book *The Works of the Lord* (Ravenbrook Publishers: 1997) for an extended discussion on this topic.

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ISBN



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