

Abraham: God's Covenant of Love
Genesis 12:1-3
Tim Becker – June 23, 2019

1. Introduction

Adam and Eve disobeyed their good and generous creator. They sinned by eating the fruit of a tree that God had forbidden for them. They believed that they could choose what is good for them better than God could. This is the essence of sin: distrusting and dishonoring God and trusting and honoring ourselves in his place. We want to decide for ourselves what is good and right. We want to be God.

Sin started out with the eating of a forbidden fruit. What did sin look like next? Cain wanted to worship God in his own way. And when God rejected Cain's worship, rather than changing his worship, Cain became "very angry." Rather than responding humbly to God's correction, he angrily resented God. This opened the door to more sin in his life. What sin? Next, Cain murders his own brother and then lies to God about it.

From there, sin continued to rule in every person born. And this rule was so complete that by the time of Noah, the Bible says that "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." So, the Lord determined to blot out the people and animals whom he created. God was sorry that he created them. Is this the end of creation? No, because one man, Noah, found favor in the eyes of the Lord. Gen 6:9 says that Noah was a righteous man who walked with God, meaning that he trusted, honored, and obeyed God. God wiped out mankind with a flood. But he provided a way of salvation for Noah and his family.

After the flood, Noah and his family began to repopulate the earth. At this point, we might expect that since all the sinners were gone, that all the sin was gone. This is not what happened. Noah and his family found favor with God, but they still had a sin nature like Adam. The flood brought God's justice, deserved justice, to sinners. But the flood did not take care of man's sin problem. Noah was not sinless. And so, mankind after the flood still disobeyed God, still distrusted and dishonored God, still trusted and honored themselves more than God. This is the point of the Tower of Babel in Gen 11. Sin still reigned in the hearts of mankind after the flood.

At this point in Genesis, the trajectory of mankind is a cycle of sin and judgment. We have no reason to expect that people can fix themselves, that they can cure their sin nature. If a cure, if salvation, is to be found for people, it must come from God.

Right after the telling of the Tower of Babel story, the lineage of one family comes into view. And by the beginning of the next chapter, the focus is on God's interaction with one man. In this part of the story, we see the beginnings of the path of escape from the cycle of sin and judgment. We see the promise of redemption for mankind.

Before we go any further, let's pray for God's help.

* Pray

2. Abraham: Gen 12:1-3

Please turn in your bibles to Gen 12 (p. xyz in the bibles under the chairs in front of you). The focus here is on a man named Abram. God later changed his name to Abraham. The end of ch. 11 tells of the family Abram. His father is Terah. His nephew is Lot. His wife is Sarai. God changed her name also, to Sarah. Sarai was barren. She and Abram had no children. They all lived in the land of Ur of the Chaldeans.

Follow along as I read v. 1-3.

Ge 12:1-3 : ¹ 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. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

At this point in history, there were no Jewish people. And what we think of as the land of Israel was known as the land of Canaan. In addition, there were no Scriptures, no 10 commandments, no tabernacle or temple. Moses had not yet come to give God's instruction about sacrifices to God and love to neighbors. The last recorded time that God spoke to a man was Noah, centuries before.

Notice first that the LORD initiates this interaction with Abram. God is about to intervene in the life of one man. God asks Abram to leave the security and comfort of his own country and his own kindred, that is, his family and his people. Abram had no earthly reason to think this move would be good for him. But God asked him to do it. God calls Abram to trust him.

God made Abram some promises. First, God will make from Abram a great nation. Second, God will bless him. And third, God will make his name great. How will a great nation come from Abram since he has no children? And what are his prospects for children? Abram is 75 years old and Sarai is 65. Every indicator is that Sarai is barren (Gen 11:30). God is asking Abram to trust him with no earthly evidence to support the trust. God often does this.

But why would God make these promises? Look with me at v. 2: "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." God has a purpose for blessing Abram: so that Abram will be a blessing to others. The end of v. 3 tells us that these others who will be blessed are "all the families of the earth." God intends to bless Abram so that Abram will be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

God explains further what he means by “all the families of the earth” when he says in Gen 18:18 that “all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him.” And then God expands it a bit more when he says in Gen 22:18 that “in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” So, God is promising to bless Abram, not just so that God’s blessing would stop with Abram, but so that God would extend the blessing to Abram’s offspring and to all the nations of the earth. God wants to bless all the nations and he wants to do it through Abram and his offspring.

God is making a covenant with Abram. God uses this word with Abram in chs. 15 and 17. This covenant is an agreement, initiated by God to bless all the nations through Abram and his offspring.

3. Abraham’s promised blessing comes through Jesus

At this point, we have some more questions to ask. What is this blessing from God to the nations? And how will the blessing get to the nations?

Let’s start with this second question. Turn in your Bible with me to Galatians 3 (page xyz in the church Bible). I want to start by showing you why this passage is relevant to our questions. Look at v. 14, “so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” The word translated “Gentiles” here could also be translated “nations.” How will the blessing of Abraham get to the nations? The answer from this verse is: in Christ Jesus.

Now for the first question: what is the blessing of Abraham, the blessing from God, to the nations? Look back to v. 10, “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’” The law refers to the law of God given by Moses to his people the Israelites. The law of God includes the Ten Commandments and more. If a person obeys God’s law, they are blessed by God. But if a person disobeys, they are cursed, meaning that they will be judged by God.

Think with me. Who disobeys the law of God? Remember, since Adam, all people have a sin nature. All sin. Therefore, all disobey. This is the curse of the law. No one has ever been justified before God by the law. If you think you will get to heaven by obeying the Ten Commandments, you greatly underestimate the offense of your sins and the purity of God’s justice. Because of the curse of the law, the cycle of sin and judgment go on and on. How can the cycle be broken?

The answer is found in Gal 3:13, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us ...” There is a curse for disobeying the law. That curse is God’s judgment. Christ became a curse for us. Christ absorbed God’s judgment on behalf of others. He did this by dying on a cross for the sins of people. God redirected the curse for

sinner to Jesus on the cross. The blessing of Abraham to the nations is that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

Is Jesus really the one who would be the answer to God's promise to bless the nations through Abraham and his offspring? Yes. This is why the book of Matthew starts with this sentence, (Mt 1:1) "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." All good Jews, who knew their Scriptures, knew that the foretold Messiah would have to be a son of Abraham. Matthew knew his Scriptures. And he wanted us to understand them too. Jesus is the carrier of God's blessing to the nations.

* Summary

Where are we? The world was lost in a cycle of sin and judgment. God took the initiative to break this cycle by calling Abram to follow him. God promised that he would bless Abraham and his offspring so that through them God would bless the nations. Jesus' dying on a cross to redeem us from the curse is that blessing.

God's covenant with Abraham is a covenant of love for a sinful mankind, to rescue sinners from all nations, through the cross of Jesus Christ, the son of Abraham.

4. Abraham's response to God's call and promises

Please turn your Bibles back to Gen 12. God's covenant required a response from Abraham. God called him to go from his country and kindred to a land God would show him. How did Abraham respond? Look with me at Gen 12:4. It says, "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. ..." This action was vital. If Abraham didn't go, he would have broken the covenant with God. Then God would not have fulfilled his promises to Abraham and his offspring. The nations would not have received the blessing.

This is Abraham's first response to God's call and promises. But it is not his last. Abraham built altars to worship God by offering a sacrifice. Abraham called upon God's name, which means that his soul looked to God for his greatest help and hope. Abraham circumcised all the males of his household as a God-stipulated sign of the covenant.

Don't suppose that trusting God was easy for Abraham. Please turn in your Bibles to Gen 15. Some years have gone by and Abraham still is childless. Follow along as I read v. 1-6.

Ge 15:1-6 : ¹ After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ² But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." ⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." ⁵ 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.”⁶ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Put yourself in the place of Abraham. God has promised 3 times over some years now that you will have children. You still have none. Without offspring, the promised blessing won't come to pass. It doesn't seem that God is blessing you. If you were Abraham, how easy would it be for you to continue to believe the LORD's promises?

God promises Abraham that his offspring will innumerable, like the stars. It is remarkable that Abraham believed the LORD. His faith in God carried his heart and mind to trust God even when every earthly indication pointed to the promises never coming through. When God saw Abraham's trust, God counted Abraham's trust as righteousness before God. Abraham was not sinless. He had a sin nature, like Adam. But because he believed God, God counted Abraham righteous, just. Now that's a blessing greater than a baby.

It's one thing to think we believe something is true, it's another to act on that belief. So, how genuine was Abraham's faith in God? God, who knows the hearts of all men, knew that Abraham's faith was genuine. If not, God would not have counted him righteous.

But do we have any way of seeing the genuineness of Abraham's faith? Yes. This is the point of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. Turn with me to Gen 22. Follow along as I start reading in v. 1.

Ge 22:1–18 : ¹ After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ² He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.” ⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. ⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” ⁸ Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven

and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ¹² He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

¹⁵ And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

God was testing Abraham. God was putting Abraham’s faith through a trial. In the end, Isaac didn’t die. But Abraham’s faith in God was so trusting that he did not withhold his son, the son he waited 25 years for, the son through whom God promised to bless all the nations.

Faith thinks. What was Abraham thinking? Heb 11:19 tells us. “He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.”

By seeing Abraham’s faith in action, we learn that Abraham’s faith in God was real, not just words. Abraham’s response to God’s promises was not a once-and-done kind of response. Over and over, Abraham lived in a way that showed he was trusting God.

5. Abraham’s faith in God is a model for us

What does Abraham’s response to God mean for us?

Abraham was blessed by God as he believed God and his promises. If Abraham had stopped believing, he would have broken the covenant and God’s promises to him would have ended. The same thing was true for Abraham’s offspring: his son Isaac, and later his grandson Jacob, and on down the generations that followed. God’s promise to Abraham was for him and his offspring. But each one was required to have faith in God in order to inherit the promise.

We see the need for faith portrayed in the stories in Genesis and the rest of the OT. And we see this explicitly stated in the NT, after Jesus came. Gal 3:7 says it like this, “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.” And verse 9 in the same

chapter says, “So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”

What is this blessing that comes to those of faith? Remember, I said earlier that the blessing is Jesus dying on a cross to redeem us from the curse. Now we are in a position to define who is included in the “us” who Jesus died to redeem. The blessing of Abraham comes to those who have the faith of Abraham. Jesus’ redemption of sinners comes not to all sinners, but to sinners who have the faith of Abraham.

* Summary

Where are we? God’s covenant with Abraham is a covenant of love for a sinful mankind, to rescue sinners from all nations, through the cross of Jesus Christ, the son of Abraham. The blessing of Abraham is the rescue. It’s God’s justifying the ungodly. And it comes only to those sinners who have the faith of Abraham.

6. Do you have the faith of Abraham?

Do you have the faith of Abraham? Do you have saving faith? First, saving faith is not salvation based on works. Genesis did not say that Abraham worked for God and it was counted to him as righteousness. It said that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. God will pardon none of us from his judgment because we do enough good things to counter balance our bad things. We all do far more bad things than good. And even the good we do is not good at all, unless done from a heart of faith in God (Rom 14:23). None of us will be declared worthy of heaven because we obeyed God’s law.

In contrast, saving faith believes God. Saving faith believes God when he says that you are a sinner and always have been. Saving faith believes God when he says that his judgment is what you deserve from him. Saving faith believes God when he says that he made a covenant of love, to rescue sinners like you, from his judgment, through the cross of Jesus Christ. Saving faith believes God when he says that the only way to escape judgment in hell, the only way to eternal life with God is through Jesus. Do you believe these things?

Saving faith involves what you believe and saving faith shows what you believe by what you do. Not that the doing earns your salvation, but the doing shows that your faith is real. James ch. 2 says that genuine faith is accompanied by works. James 2:22 says that your works complete your faith, such that faith apart from works is dead, not saving. Some of us mistakenly think we can earn our way out of God’s judgment by doing good works. The Bible says this is not true. But others of us mistakenly think that mere mental agreement of some facts is the same as saving faith. The Bible says that this too is not true.

Abraham's faith showed itself by obeying God's call to leave his country and kindred even when that seemed to have no advantage to him. Has your faith obeyed God's call even when that seemed to have no advantage to you?

Abraham's faith showed itself by being willing to sacrifice his only son whom he loved. Has your faith showed itself by being willing to sacrifice things you love much? Or do you expect God to be all about you, him fulfilling your agenda, him keeping your loves safe?

Friends, God's covenant of love is Christ rescuing sinners. Join me in asking God to give us the faith of Abraham, to give us saving faith. Let's believe God. Let's live like it. Let's smile because God took the initiative to bring his covenant of love for the nations to Abraham and his offspring so long ago.

* Benediction