

Part IV: Understanding the Old Testament

3: God's Covenant with Abraham

Though we are still at the beginning of the biblical storyline, a pattern has already developed: People sin, people face the consequences, God redeems. People sin, people face the consequences, God redeems.

As we saw in the previous session, when Adam and Eve sinned, God cursed the earth and then told Eve that her descendant would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15)—a promise that Jesus will one day destroy Satan and his works (Rom. 16:20). Only a few chapters later, we find people sinning continually, to the point that God destroyed all but eight humans by flooding the earth. But as soon as the waters subsided, God made a covenant with Noah, promising, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done” (Gen. 8:21). People sin, people face the consequences, God redeems.

Once again, in Genesis 11, the human race gathered at Babel in defiance of God in order to “make a name for themselves.” God’s response was to confuse their speech and divide them. But just when we think that humanity has no hope, God launched a plan of redemption that was global: to create a people for Himself who would embody and spread His salvation to every group of people on the planet. After cursing and scattering humanity, God made a promise to bless all of the nations. And God set this plan in motion by calling one man living in the middle of an idol-worshipping nation away from everything he once knew. And He promised to change the course of history through this man and his offspring.

God’s Promise of Redemption

God’s plan to rescue the world from sin started very quietly. God chose one man, Abraham, and said:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 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. 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. (Gen. 12:1–3)

It may not sound like much, but with these words God put into motion a plan that would lead Paul to cry out in amazement about

“the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God” (Rom. 11:33). This plan would eventually reach its climax in Jesus’s incarnation, death, and resurrection—events that took place at “the fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4). In other words, human history was working toward this moment, the central point in God’s plan of righting what went wrong with the fall.

As soon as sin entered the world, God began to reveal His plan to reverse the effects of the fall. He would restore us and the world around us to what He originally created—and more. God made a promise to Adam and Eve, then to Noah, and here God made a covenant with Abraham. At a few key points in Abraham’s life (Gen. 12:1–9; 15:1–21; 17:1–14), God spoke with Abraham and revealed more about His plan. But the basics are clear from the beginning: God promised to make Abraham into a great nation, to make his name great, and to bless him so that he would be a blessing to “every family of the earth.”

1. *Take some time to read and meditate on Genesis 12:1–9, 15:1–21, and 17:1–14. What stands out to you from reading the promises that God gave to Abraham?*

2. *What does God’s covenant with Abraham reveal to us about God?*

to Abraham was to confirm His covenant by walking in between the separated halves of dead (sacrificed) animals (Gen. 15:9–17). Around the time of Abraham, covenant agreements often took this form, where the parties involved in a covenant would walk between animals that had been sacrificed. By doing this, each person was essentially saying, “If I break my word in this covenant, may I be cursed like this dead animal.”

In the case of His covenant with Abraham, God caused Abraham to fall asleep, and then He came down in the image of a smoking firepot and flaming torch and walked through the separated halves of the sacrificed animals by Himself. This gives us a picture of God's commitment to His people. For one thing, it's incredible to think that God would come down and make an agreement with a mere man. But it's also amazing that God put Abraham to sleep while He walked through the animal pieces alone. He seems to have been showing that He was committed to keeping the covenant regardless of whether Abraham and His offspring were faithful to keep it or not. Theologians call this a unilateral covenant. God made this promise to bless Abraham and to use him to bless the world. This was God's decision, and He will uphold the covenant no matter what happens.

5. *In Genesis 15, God made it clear that His promises to Abraham were not dependent on Abraham. How should this affect the way we think about God's plan of redemption?*

Creating a People for Himself

We might have expected God to rescue the world through some loud and dramatic event. But it all started very subtly. God began to unfold His plan with a promise. But it isn't a small promise. It's a promise with huge implications. The entire plan of redemption that unfolds in the rest of the Bible is God's fulfilling His promises to Abraham. Literally, all of world history is related to the promises that God made to Abraham. God would make a great nation out of Abraham and his wife Sarah, and through that nation He would re-form creation and transform the nations.

God's covenant with Abraham signaled the introduction of what would become known as the people of Israel, the covenant people of God in the Old Testament. In Genesis 17:7–8 God began using language that gets repeated throughout the Old Testament in the phrase: "I will be your God and you will be my people." First of all, don't miss the crux of this promise. God was offering the greatest blessing He could give anyone: Himself. He promised to be their God! We often forget what an honor it is that God would offer relationship. We can get so accustomed to people begging us to follow God that we forget what a miracle it is that we are invited. In making this covenant with Abraham, God made the tremendous offer of being his God and the God of his offspring. Here God was creating a people for Himself. In a special sense, God would belong to this people, and this people would belong to Him.

When we studied creation, we noted that because we are created in the image of God, we have a responsibility to reflect God to the world around us. By the time of Abraham, humanity had generally failed in this. But through Abraham and his descendants, God was

forming a people who would embody God's intention for humanity. They would live in a close relationship with God and reflect Him to the world around them. With His promise to make a great nation for Abraham and to bless all the nations through Him, God was once again commissioning humanity to live as His representatives on earth.

6. *In your own words, explain why it is significant that God created a people for Himself. What did God want to accomplish through this "great nation" He promised to form?*

The Gospel According to Abraham

It would be difficult for us to overestimate the importance of God's covenant with Abraham. God was defining what His relationship with fallen humanity would look like and announcing His plan to bless the world. What we see in God's promise to Abraham is nothing short of the gospel itself. Paul said:

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, *preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham*, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who

are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Gal. 3:7–9)

Paul was saying that when God spoke these simple words to Abraham, “In you shall all the nations be blessed,” He was preaching the gospel. Though Abraham may not have known exactly what this blessing for all the nations would entail, He took God at His word (at least at this moment in his life) and trusted in what God would do.

From the very beginning, God called Abraham’s descendants, the people of Israel, to be a blessing to the nations. But as we will see as we study the rest of the Old Testament, they never really rose to that task. In fact, the nations were not fully blessed through Abraham until Jesus Christ, the ultimate descendant of Abraham, arrived. Jesus identified Himself as the fulfillment of this promise to Abraham: “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). With Jesus, we finally see all the nations being blessed as they are called to join the people of God.

7. *Consider God’s intentions to bless “all the nations” through His promise to Abraham. What implications does this have for the way we view the world today?*

God told Abraham, “I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2). Don’t miss this principle: God’s blessings are meant to be shared, not hoarded. In blessing Abraham, God was intentionally seeking to bless the world. This is much different from the way most Christians view their blessings. We tend to think that God blesses us so that we can be happy, comfortable, secure, etc. We live as though our blessings were meant for us alone. But God’s blessing for Abraham shows us God’s plans in blessing us. When we receive God’s blessings, we should immediately look around us to see whom we can bless.

8. *Think about the ways that God has blessed you. How should these blessings be used to benefit the people around you?*

The Faith of Abraham

The New Testament makes a big deal out of the faith of Abraham. And rightly so. In Genesis 15, Abraham stood before God and voiced his confusion over God’s promise to make him into a great nation. Abraham said to God, “You’ve made these promises [back in Genesis 12], but I have absolutely no offspring. I have only a servant in my household to be my heir.” God responded by bringing him outside and telling him to look toward the heavens and count the stars, if he was able to number them. And then God said, “So shall your offspring be.”

And what did Abraham say in response to this? Nothing. Genesis 15 doesn't record a single word from Abraham in response. It seems that he was speechless. But the Bible does tell us one important thing about Abraham's response: Abraham believed God. God made a huge promise that seemed impossible, and Abraham simply took God at His word. He believed it would happen just as God said. And then Genesis 15 adds a very significant comment: "He believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness" (v. 6). His simple belief in God's promise was "credited to him" as righteousness. He was declared to be in a right relationship with God because of his faith.

Romans 4 adds an incredible commentary on this statement and applies it to those of us who follow Jesus today:

The words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (vv. 23–25)

Paul was saying that Genesis 15:6 was written down for our sake so that we would believe in the Jesus who died to pay for our sins and the God who raised Him from the dead. Abraham lived some four thousand years before Jesus came to the earth, but he was declared righteous because he believed what God said about what He would do through Abraham's descendant, Jesus Christ. We live some two thousand years after Jesus came to the earth, but we are declared

righteous when we believe what God says about what He has done through Abraham's descendant, Jesus Christ.

Through Abraham, God set into motion His plan to redeem the world by creating a people for Himself. And ultimately He would send His Son Jesus Christ, Abraham's descendant, to set the world to rights. We will discuss Jesus much more in future sessions, but for now, it's important to see the plan as it develops with Abraham.

9. *Read Romans 4. Why do you think the New Testament makes such a big deal about Abraham's faith?*

10. *How should Abraham's faith affect the way you think about and relate to God?*

11. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to increase your faith in Him. Ask Him to make you more consistently aware of His plan of redemption and the role He wants you to play in that.



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