



Week 3: Abraham and the Covenant

Week 3, Day 1 - Genesis 12:1-9 (God's call and promise)

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 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 the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵ Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. ⁹ And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Understanding the Passage:

In Genesis 12, we turn from the primeval (which means the "earliest ages") history to the patriarchal history of the Bible. The rest of Genesis will cover the lives of Abram (later Abraham), his son Isaac, grandson Jacob, and great-grandson Joseph. Coming from a dark time of sin, flooding, and folks being scattered, it is through this family that we see a glimmer of hope for the Israelites and for all of humanity. They will be, as theologian Peter Enns writes, "the tool God uses to restore order to the chaos of chapters 3-11." Though they're the main players, the real focus is on the covenant that God made with Abraham and renews with each of his descendants.

When we meet Abram at the beginning of Genesis 12, it is as the recipient of a command from God. God tells him to leave his country, his people, and his father's household and go to a place that God would show him. God makes promises to bless Abram and his descendants.

In these two verses, God makes three important promises:

1. I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you, and make your name great;
2. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse;
3. In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

This first promise is a surprise in light of what we read about the Tower of Babel just one chapter ago. In that story, God scattered the people because they were trying to make their own names great and to build up their nation. The difference is that they were trying to do it without God, and in this case, it is only because of God that Abram would experience this blessing.

These promises may, to our modern and monotheistic ears, seem like compelling reasons for Abram to listen and trust God... but Abram was not from a monotheistic tradition. Joshua 24:2 tells us that Abram's father and his family "served other gods."

Even though he has no history with this God, Abram has two notable responses to the promises of God. First, he immediately obeys. Genesis 12:4 tells us, "so Abram went as the Lord had told him." This is a surprising response since Hebrews 11:8 tells us that Abram went even though he did not know where he was going. We don't see any second guesses, any complaints, any pushback.

The other thing Abram does, when God tells him in verse 7 that the land on which he's standing would be given to his offspring, is to build an altar to God. Altars serve one purpose only: worship. Abram had been told nothing about this new destination or how it would come to be given to his offspring except that God would show it to him. In order for that to happen, Abram was going to have to maintain a close relationship with God. Worship is one way Abram, and we, remain close to God.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. What might have been so compelling about (this strange and new) God's promise to Abram to provoke him to follow without question?
2. If God asked you to leave your family and everything you knew behind, how do you think you would respond today? Why?
3. Read Galatians 3:6-9. How are we connected to Abram? What difference does that make for us?

Week 3, Day 2 - Genesis 12:10-17 (Abraham lies about Sarah)

¹⁰ Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land. ¹¹ When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; ¹² and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account." ¹⁴ When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵ When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁶ And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels. ¹⁷ But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.

Understanding the Passage:

How quickly we abandon our faith! Immediately before this, Abram was the picture of faithfulness - leaving the only land and family he ever knew to follow God to an unknown destination. But the prospect of famine has driven him away from the land that God promised into Egypt. It is a test designed to prove his faithfulness and he fails miserably. He pretends that Sarai is his sister so that he will be spared his life. The obvious implication of her being his sister, not his wife, is that she is available for Pharaoh and his men. The promise of God to make him a great nation (which means he'll have a great number of descendants) inherently requires that Sarai birth children with him. Presenting her as his sister tells us two things:

1. Abram doesn't trust God to take care of him when things get hard;
2. Abram doesn't trust that God really plans to make him a great nation since he's turning his back on a key person (Sarai) that must be a part of that plan.

Abram is supposed to be a blessing to everyone else, but the result of his sin and deception is that he instead brings pain to Pharaoh's household. Verse 17 tells us that because of Sarai, Pharaoh and his house were afflicted with great plagues. God has intervened to save Sarai from being added to Pharaoh's harem - essentially saving Abram from his own mistake - but it comes at the expense of others.

Abram will also pay for this costly mistake. When Abram told Sarai that he wanted her to act as his sister, it was so "it may go well with me." On the surface, it appears that it *did* go well for him as he was given livestock and slaves in exchange for Sarai, but these gifts will cause problems for him in the future. In the next chapter, Abram and Lot determine that they must separate because the land could not support them both since they had so many possessions. And later, we'll see that Abram's relationship with Hagar (a slave he likely obtained from Pharaoh) causes devastation for his family and all of the Israelites. Though it seems like he benefited in the short term, Abram could not outrun his deception.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. What should Abram have done before leaving the Promised Land for Egypt?
2. What is your instinctive response to times of trial? Do you trust God or do you try to manage the situation on your own?
3. Think back on a time when you didn't trust God. Why was that the case?

Week 3, Day 3 - Genesis 13:14-18, 15:1-21 (God's promise of descendants to Abraham)

13:14 The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; ¹⁵ for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. ¹⁶ I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. ¹⁷ Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you." ¹⁸ So Abram moved his tent, and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron; and there he built an altar to the Lord.

15:1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, 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, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."⁴ But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir."⁵ He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be."⁶ And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

7 Then he said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess."⁸ But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"⁹ He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon."¹⁰ He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.¹³ Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years;¹⁴ but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.¹⁵ As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."

Understanding the Passage:

In the ancient world, the most common kind of agreement was a vassal treaty. This is an agreement between two parties in which one party is more powerful than the other – one is usually a monarch and the other is subordinate (the vassal). In these agreements, each party makes a promise to the other: "I will protect you as your king if you worship me." God uses the agreement structure of a vassal treaty when God makes covenants with God's people. But there is a further distinction that God makes – that is to mimic a land grant treaty.

Land grant treaties were special forms of vassal treaties for vassals who had served the king in an exceptional way. In these agreements, a piece of land was given to the vassal and there is no dissolution of the agreement if the vassal does not live up to their end of the agreement. Unlike regular vassal treaties, the land grant treaties are thought of as being eternal – they cannot be taken away nor overturned.

In the same way, the covenant with Abram is eternal and will be upheld by God no matter what he or his descendants do. This is symbolized by the one-sided commitment that God

makes while Abram is asleep. Other than bringing forth the animals for the sacrifice, Abram plays no part in the covenant.

Ancient covenants were usually sealed by cutting an animal in half and then the two parties walking through the cut pieces. This symbolized the commitment each party made to the deal, for if they broke it, they would end up cut to pieces just like the animals (cf. Jeremiah 34:18). Before God and Abram can pass through the cut pieces, God causes Abram to fall asleep and then God alone passes through them. As much as God wants Abram to be faithful, God's commitment to Abram doesn't rely on anything Abram does or doesn't do.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. Why did Abram struggle to believe what God had promised?
2. Is it difficult for you to trust in God's promises? If so, why?
3. What does it mean to you to know that God always keeps God's promises?

Week 3, Day 4 - Genesis 17:1-14, 23-27 (God's covenant and circumcision)

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ² And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." ³ Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴ "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God."

⁹ God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. ¹³ Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

²³ Then Abraham took his son Ishmael and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. ²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵ And his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶ That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised; ²⁷ and all the men of his house, slaves born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

Understanding the Passage:

The name Abram means “exalted father” and the name Abraham means “father of many.” This name change sets up the covenant that God is about to establish with Abraham and foreshadows the lineage that will come through the son that Sarah has not even birthed yet! Imagine how Abraham must have felt, longing for a child with Sarah, when he was named “father of many.”

There are a couple of significant distinctions between the covenants that God makes with Abraham in chapter 15 and chapter 17. They are both tied to the promises that God makes to Abraham in chapter 12. The first covenant (in chapter 15) fulfills God’s promise to make Abraham’s name great and give him a number of descendants and land. The covenant that we read about today fulfills the second promise - to bless others through Abraham. He will be the father of a multitude of nations and kings shall come from his line.

The covenant in Genesis 15 is sealed by action on God’s part, whereas this covenant is solemnized by action on Abraham’s part: circumcision. Why circumcision? It was designed to remind Abraham and his descendants of their covenant with God. By permanently altering a part of their bodies associated with virility and fertility, they are reminded that their ability to bear fruit rests with God.

The covenant is not just for Abraham’s biological children, but for “every male among you” including all of those who were born in his house or bought with his money. This reminds us of God’s promise that “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” It’s never been about solely blessing Abraham’s blood relatives. Through this covenant, all of the people on earth are meant to experience blessing.

Notice in verse 11 that circumcision is called the “sign” of the covenant -- it is not the “requirement” of the covenant. Though Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself and everyone in his household, the covenant has not become bilateral. There are parallels to be drawn between circumcision and Christian baptism. Both are outward signs of commitment to God, but are not salvific in and of themselves.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. If God was to change your name, what might it be changed to? Why?
2. How does Abraham’s response to circumcision parallel his response to God in chapter 12? What do you think this says about the nature of our faithfulness?
3. Read Galatians 5:2-6. How does a relationship with Jesus change things in relation to this covenant?

Week 3, Day 5 - Genesis 18:16-33 (Abraham argues with God)

¹⁶ Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷ The Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹ No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” ²⁰ Then the Lord said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹ I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.”

22 So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. 23 Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" 26 And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." 27 Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. 28 Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." 29 Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." 30 Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." 31 He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." 32 Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." 33 And the Lord went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

Understanding the Passage:

It's interesting that the writer of Genesis portrays God as hearing the outcry of the people, but needing to physically go to Sodom and Gomorrah to see the reason for the outcry against them. This seems strange to us because we know that God is omniscient and omnipresent, knowing everything and being everywhere. Jeremiah 23:24 declares God's omnipresence: "Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? Do I not fill heaven and earth?"

Does God really need to go look? No, but it makes an important point about God -- God does not stay separated from humans. God is not like the watchmaker who creates the timepiece, sets it in motion and then stands back and watches it work. The earth and all of humanity are not left on our own. God is intimately involved in our lives and listens to our cries. Most importantly, God is not unaffected by our pain. As we see in Deuteronomy 26:7-9: "we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey."

We see the same thing in this exchange with Abraham: God is moved by our pleas. And that God can bear our questions and cries. Not only can God bear them, God welcomes them, because it means we are in a true relationship. Acquiescing to the pain of the world without calling on God's justice and righteousness to fix it means that we don't truly trust that God can do anything about it, or we don't trust God's character to care about it.

John Calvin, the 16th century Reform theologian, wrote, "God is pleased that Abraham grieves for his fellow man. He is not like James and John, Jesus' disciples who were quick to ask God to rain fire on a Samaritan town because the citizens were not welcoming. Nor is he like Jonah angry with God for being merciful to a heathen city. No, Abraham is more like

Christ who wept for the coming destruction of Jerusalem. And so he does what he can do. He intercedes in his bungling way, trying to reason with God who neither seeks nor needs human counsel.”

Now, it’s important to note that at some point, Abraham stops “haggling” with God and goes to his tent. He recognizes that God is God, and that God will have the final say in what happens. We are left to wonder what might have happened if Abraham had kept lowering the number. Ultimately, God cannot find even ten righteous men in the towns and destroys Sodom and Gomorrah, though God does spare the righteous: Lot and his family.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. Do you practice intercessory (praying for others) prayer? What does that look like? Have you experienced God granting your prayers?
2. What are the characteristics of God demonstrated in this passage?
3. Are your prayers grounded in the character of God or your own character? In other words, are you praying along the lines of God’s will being done or your own?

Video Questions:

1. Katie and Tom talked about why both the primeval stories (Genesis 1-11) and patriarchal stories (Genesis 12-50) are included in Genesis. Did either of their explanations resonate with you?
2. Have you ever felt God calling you to go or do something radically new?
3. What might prevent you from doing as Abram did (“so he went”) in Genesis 12:4?
4. We see Abraham go from trusting and following God without a second thought to lying to the Pharaoh because he is scared for his life – clearly demonstrating a lack of trust in God. Can you relate?
5. What is the purpose of the covenant that God makes with Abram?
6. Circumcision is no longer a part of the new covenant established through Jesus. What is the sign of the new covenant?
7. What do you make of Abraham bargaining with God over Sodom and Gomorrah?
8. Do you ever treat prayer as a negotiation?
9. Do you think that God is affected by our prayers? How does that impact the way you pray?

Prayer requests and other notes.