



The Story Of Salvation

NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010

Andrew Klynsmith and Hank Schoemaker

7. Abraham's Promised Family

Genesis 18 picks up from the confirming of the covenant (17:2) with the promise of a child from Sarah to be the promised heir for Abraham. In an episode laden with mystery, three men come to Abraham at Mamre, but this event is introduced by saying the LORD appeared to him. These men / the LORD announce that Sarah will bear a child within the year (18:9-10). Abraham previously had laughed at the idea (17:17), and in this chapter Sarah laughs (18:12). The possibility is an impossibility. As Romans 4:18 shows this did not mean a lack of faith on their part, but actually shows the nature of their faith:

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." (Rom. 4:18-22)

When we read about Abraham that he was "...fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised" then we see that it is God Himself in faithfulness to His promise and word who drives the course of salvation history. The coming of this child is essential to the flow of salvation history, and without the action of God, no child can possibly be born. The same faith in God that Abraham has is seen when he is called to offer the son finally born, Isaac, to God in sacrifice (Gen. 22). As the writer to the Hebrews tells us:

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death." (Heb. 11:17-19)

What happens in the year between this event at Mamre and the promised child's birth? Firstly Sodom and Gomorrah is destroyed and Lot and his family is rescued (Gen. 18-19), and then Abraham lives in the Negev where he again pretends that Sarah is his sister rather than his wife (Gen. 20). In both events we are given indication of Abraham's intercessory ministry. In the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham is taken into the counsel of God (18:17-19) because of the covenant that God has made with him. The destiny of nations is linked to Abraham and so the LORD chooses to involve him in these events. Abraham's involvement is primarily to pray boldly, almost it seems against God. His prayer is that God will not be unjust in the destruction of the righteous with the unrighteous. He presses into the deep truth of God in this prayer, the truth of righteousness and mercy.

The birth of Isaac (Gen. 21) happens according to the promise of God. “Who would have said this would happen?” asks Sarah in her joy, and we all know that in fact God Himself said so. As he grew, rivalry grew in the heart of Ishmael, who was finally sent away with his mother. The nations that came from him are listed in Gen. 25:12-18.

Sarah’s death is recorded (Gen. 23), and in the account we learn of Abraham acquiring a parcel of land to be her burial site. This will be the only land that Abraham actually possesses at the time of his death—so the promise of the land to Abraham and his descendants is left hanging at that time. Before his own death, Abraham takes measures to ensure that Isaac is married within the family (Gen. 24). He puts his chief servant (Eliezer of Damascus?) under a vow that he will see to this. Abraham is clear: Isaac is not to leave the land, as it is the land of promise (24:6ff); the woman is to be brought back to him. Eliezer’s journey is conducted in faith and prayer (24:12ff, 26-27), which he has learned from his master (24:40ff). He is led by the Lord and has success, bringing beloved Rebekah back to Isaac.

Rebekah is now afflicted with barrenness (25:21). God’s unusual choices are again seen, and again His faithfulness in bringing His plans to fruition. Isaac prays for her, and the Lord opens her womb, doubly so! Twins are born, struggling and vying with one another in the womb as they will in life. We are told that Rebekah went to inquire of the LORD about what her difficult pregnancy meant. His word comes to her: there are two nations in her womb, and they will separate. The older of the two will serve the younger. (This is against all cultural expectation and propriety.)

Esau the elder twin and his younger brother Jacob are quite different. The difference of real significance is their relation to the promises of God. Esau is a profane, or godless, person (Heb. 12:15-17): that is, he lived for the here and now, with no reference to or interest in the promises and intentions of God for eternity.

Whatever we make of Jacob’s conniving—and there was a lot of that, perhaps instilled by his mother—we must see that he was one who coveted the birthright and the blessing, i.e. who had an eye on the purposes of God. Perhaps this had come from the prophetic word that had been given to his mother.

Isaac and his family are threatened by famine (Gen. 26) and, the word of the Lord comes to them:

The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws.” So Isaac stayed in Gerar. (Gen. 26:2-6)

This brings the Abrahamic promise directly to Isaac; a similar encounter comes in 26:24. Isaac’s days are in the hands of the LORD who has bound Himself to this family for the sake of the whole world. Isaac’s response is to worship. Just as the Abrahamic promises were given to Isaac, so then they become the inheritance of Jacob (Gen. 27; 28:1 ff; 32:22ff) and when the reality of it breaks in on him, so he too sacrificially worships.

Esau married outside the Abrahamic family, to Hittite women—descendants of Canaan and so of Ham. Rebekah does not want this for her favourite Jacob (27:46). He finally, through complicated situations, marries sisters Leah and Rachel, and is given by them, and their servant girls, twelve sons who become the fathers of the tribes of Israel (Gen. 29-31). This takes place outside the land, but through the same complicated circumstances, Jacob is sent back to the land. There what awaits him is the terrible prospect of furious Esau. The LORD shows him that all things are in His hands, and that the future is with Him, and that blessing comes from belonging to Him.

Esau's descendants are traced in Genesis 36. From Genesis 37, up to the end of the book, the focus of the story shifts to Joseph and his brothers, the sons of Jacob, now called Israel. Joseph is given a prophetic dream about his place in his family's part in salvation history. Jealousy and rage—think back to Cain—are there in this family, in large doses! Joseph's sale into slavery is however part of the providence of God, as are all the twists and turns and seeming disasters that seem to plague him. As he says to his brothers much later, "You meant this for evil, but God meant this for good." Again his suffering is what seems to prepare him to be God's person in the situation of need that comes on his whole family.

A right perspective of salvation history, as the sovereign LORD in faithfulness working out His saving plan according to His promise, enables a person to live by faith, and so in the midst of the most difficult circumstances to face God and rather than complain or sulk, to ask "What is it Lord that you are doing here, and how is it that I am to serve you here?"

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the unexpected ways of God's salvation history encourage you? How have you experienced the sovereign hand of God working in saving ways that are unexpected and seemingly impossible?
2. Abraham and his sons participate in God's saving plan through intercessory prayer. In what ways have God's dealings with you in life been the school by which He has taught you to pray for others?
3. Joseph could be gracious to his murderous brothers, when he had opportunity in fact to be brutal and vengeful, because of his certainty that God was working out His saving plan in all things. How can this knowledge encourage you in the situations that you face?

Pray for one another about the things that you have been sharing.