

Study 2 — God's Covenant with Abraham

Nothing can be more important than to know how God is relating to the world, and to ourselves personally. We have seen that God's covenant announced to Noah is valid for all humanity. The flooding of the world tells us that God is not content to let the world run on without him, but the rainbow tells us that God has vowed, even in a violent and ambitious world, to maintain seasons and the opportunity for us to raise crops and understand that Someone is looking after this world, Someone whom we should seek and know.

Now, God speaks to Abraham, promises great things to him (Gen. 12:1-3), and seals his promise with a covenant (Gen. 15:7-21). Every Christian receives or inherits the blessing promised to Abraham (Gal. 3:14, 29) and the blessing they receive is for the blessing of the world, so it is important for us to know its content and live in its certainty.

God is unseen and not subject to our rules of evidence. This seems to be reason enough for most moderns to jettison all thought of him, let alone the idea that we could know him. How God brought this man to live by faith is important to know. The truth, in the first instance, is conveyed to us, not as a proposition but as a narrative.

The God of glory appeared to Abraham (Acts 7:2). The way this happened is not mentioned but we have to take note of the effect it produced—for every effect there is a cause. Here is the command and the promise he gave.

'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you' (Genesis 12:1-3).

We note, first, that the promise relates to 'all peoples on earth'. God is choosing one person but with a view to others being blessed. Second, Abraham is a worshipper of idols, like all of his contemporaries (Josh. 24:14); there is no reason we can see why God should speak to him. Third, the promise is to establish a new people or nation whose life is characterized by God's blessing. This word signifies God's personal favour enabling a person or nation to do what God has given them to do. It is clearly the way all people are meant to live (Gen. 1:22). In the midst of a self-sufficient kingdom building at Babel, recorded in the previous chapter, God begins to reveal to us, through Abraham, that his blessing comes to those who trust him.

A promise enables a relationship of trust to grow—as in a marriage. The story (Genesis 12—14) shows him leaving behind all the usual securities of his life and we are able to see the truth of God reflected in what happens to and in this man. Like Paul, many years later, he may have despaired of life itself but this was to make him rely on God who raises the dead (2 Cor. 1:8-9). His walk of faith is supported by God renewing his promise when Abraham arrives in the promised land (Gen. 12:7) and after his return from Egypt (Gen. 13:14-18), adding that he will be the father of countless children.

God speaks to Abraham again.

'After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great." Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Since you have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." Then he believed in the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness' (Gen. 15:1-6).

We note first, that God has already made him a blessing in the earth (chapter 14) but his confidence is not (Gen. 14:21-24), and *must* not be in his success but in God: 'Fear not. I am a

shield to you'—alluding to the *deliverance* (the same root word) mentioned in Melchizedek's blessing (Gen. 14:20). Second, these gracious words cause the helplessness of his situation to surface. The whole reason for his setting out in the first place was to be a blessing in the earth. Success and power cannot fulfill what is essentially a spiritual mission. And he still has no son by whom this mission will be fulfilled.

God repeats his promise and points him to the innumerable stars. Something happens in Abraham. He believes what God has said—about having a son and many descendants (Gen. 15:1-6). And God conveys to Abraham that he is regarded as a righteous man. We are not told how this happens but it must have sealed something between them. We could say that if the thing God most wants from us is our trust, then it is also true that the thing we need most from God is his justification. Since Adam, we have lived with personal and corporate failure. If we are to know God, it must be on the basis that he is willing to accept us as appropriate company. We need to be forgiven and justified in his presence—and Abraham is so blessed.

Paul says the blessing that came to Abraham—being justified by faith—comes to all who believe in God like Abraham did (Gal. 3:6-9; Rom. 4:19—5:1). No relationship can be true and deep and life changing while God holds something against us. Abraham, by this covenant, and we, through the fulfillment of this covenant by Jesus Christ, can live in freedom and enjoyment of God's favour.

Abraham needs to be sure about the land his family will inherit. Faith can't survive on uncertainty and he still doesn't have a son. Confirmation comes in a solemn covenant making ceremony. In ancient lore, solemn promises weren't signed, they were 'cut'—slaughtered animals were cut in two and the parties stood between them signifying that this is what would happen to them if they broke their bond (Jer. 34:18-19).

He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it?" So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon." Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates" (Genesis 15:7-18).

We note, first, that Abraham is disabled—by a deep sleep (as for Adam in Genesis 2:21) and by terror and darkness. He knows that God is present, and that he can do nothing. He has provided the animals, protected the carcasses until the sun went down but has no further active part to play. Those who want assurance that God relates to them, justifies them and will fulfill his promise cannot have this assurance on the basis of what they do themselves. It must come from God—unaided, unsolicited—a free act. Clearly, a covenant with God is a 'top down' relationship.

Second, God's promise has to do with many generations and with his judgement of the world. The time is not yet ripe for God to give Abraham what he has promised because the time is not yet right for the judgement of the people they will displace. Again, the certainty of God's covenant with us assures us that nothing has been left out of his calculations. We may well look with uncertainty at the troubles of our times but can be assured that nothing will prevent God from fulfilling his purpose for us as his people (cf. Rom. 8:31-39). Being in a covenant relationship with God not only assures us that our future is planned but that God is implicating us in all that he is about in the world. We may not understand how this is so but can be assured that it is so.

Third, only God, as represented by fire and smoke (suggested by later imagery of God being present in Israel), passes between the pieces. It is a remarkable experience for Abraham. God is taking upon himself any penalties associated with the failure of his covenant with Abraham. This anticipates the way Christ suffered the results of our broken covenant with God. We need to see how deeply God engages with us as sinners and to hear him declare that he will remain faithful to us, or we will always be uncertain about our relationship with God and our place in his plan for the world.

Fourth, in addition to Abraham fathering a nation by whom blessing will spread to the world, he will have his own personal history under God's blessing. We can never be disinterested in what happens to us in particular. God's covenant assures Abraham that he is personally cared for and his future planned. We may compare the kind of assurance Jesus gives to his disciples when they wonder about what they will receive (Matt. 19:27-30).

From the time of the first promise being given (Gen. 12:4), Abraham waits over 25 years for the promised son. Thirteen of these are after God specifically promises that Sarah will be the mother (Gen. 16:16; 21:5). God wants to know that Abraham trusts him. Faith is critical (Heb. 11:17; 1 Pet. 1:7).

At this point, God visits Abraham again, calling him to walk in his presence and be blameless. God *will* establish his covenant. The covenant he already has with Abraham is unilateral, not dependent on anything Abraham will do.

Now 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. "I will establish my covenant between me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly." Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying, "As for me, behold, my covenant is with you, and you will be the father of a multitude of nations. "No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations. "I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you. "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. "I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." God said further to Abraham, "Now as for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. "This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised (Gen. 17 1-10).

We note first, that the covenant of chapter 15 is not retracted: God will suffer the penalties of any breach. But Abraham is called to be faithful and it is right for God to fulfill his covenant through Abraham because he is faithful. This covenant is not 'cut' like the one in chapter 15; it is 'given' (v. 4) or 'confirmed' (vv. 2, 7). It cannot stand alone but builds on what is already 'cut'.

Second, Abraham's covenant faithfulness is to be expressed by circumcising all their males. While this is an outward sign, it signifies something about personal life as well—he must command his family to keep God's commandments, and God links his fulfilling of the covenant to Abraham's faithfulness (Gen. 18:19).

When God promises to make us his covenant partners, he can also secure our faithfulness to his covenant. This is clear with Abraham because, from one point of view, he has already failed. He has taken another wife and had a son called Ishmael. In the story that follows, Abraham still hopes Ishmael will be the chosen son to inherit the blessings. But God simply bypasses this and says that Sarah will still have a child, though this is now physically impossible.

Christians also, in their battle with the powers of this world are called 'chosen and faithful' (Rev. 17:14; also 14:4) and God regards it as right to reward them for their labours. The blood of the covenant covers not only the wrong of our bad works but also the sin that remains in our good works!

God demonstrates the rightness of his confidence in Abraham when, later, he asks him to sacrifice this promised son Isaac in a sacrifice. Without delay, Abraham obeys. His confidence in the God who has made a covenant with him is now complete. He proceeds to the point of raising the knife to kill his son when he is stopped. Now God says,

‘By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice’ (Gen. 22:16-18).

This story shows us a number of things. First, God wants to know that Abraham trusts him and obeys him (Gen. 22:1, 12). Obedience will never be the basis of God’s covenant with us, but it will always accompany it (cf. Jer. 31:31-34). Second, God did not want a human sacrifice; he provided a substitute (Gen. 22:13-14), which anticipates what God would do when he sent his own Son as a substitute for us. Third, Abraham, now convinced that Isaac is the chosen son, must have believed that, in the event of his killing his son, God would raise him from the dead (cf. Heb. 11:17-19). God’s covenant with this man, and through him, with all believers, is a covenant anticipating a resurrection. God has assured us, in the covenant he has made through his Son, that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, not even death (Rom. 8:38-39).

God’s covenant with this man has made him ‘the friend of God’ (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; Jas. 2:23), someone who can have intimate conversation with God and to whom God can reveal his secrets (Gen. 18:17-19; cf. John 15:15).

God is happy to be known as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exod. 3:16; Acts 3:13), not because of the faithfulness of these men but because he had made promises to them (Exod. 6:3) and would fulfill them. In fact it is specifically noted that Jacob was chosen before he had done anything good or bad so that it may be clear that the covenant depends on God’s choosing and not on human merit (Gen. 25:23; Rom. 9:11).

Through Israel’s prophets, the nation learned that the inheritance could not be fully received until the ‘seed’ of Abraham arrived—whom we know as Jesus Christ. Paul notes that God’s promise to Abraham uses a singular noun (Gen. 22:17-18) and shows that Christ, not Isaac, was always intended as the one through whom blessing would come to the world (Gal. 3:16).

Jesus came ‘to *do* the mercy’ (literal translation) promised to the fathers (Luke 1:72-74) so that his people would serve him without fear. The point of God’s covenant is that he chooses to be God to us and for us to be his people—to live before him in love and trust. (Jer. 24:7; 31:33).

In this God-forgetting world, we can be assured of the blessing of God and live by faith in God’s promise—not limited by what is only seen. Because of the son given to Abraham, that is, Jesus Christ, we can see that God has taken upon himself the problem of our heady pride and lawlessness and that we have been brought into a remarkable relationship of trust in which God regards us as righteous. Because of this immediate blessing, we know we are also involved in God’s plan for the blessing of all the nations. Like Abraham, we look for a city whose builder and maker is God—not the temporary kingdoms of earthly security (Heb. 11:8-16).