

Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

A. Beginnings

3. The Patriarchs

We're continuing to focus on the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament. Today, as the last part of the Beginnings of that study, we're looking at the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Abraham, in particular, is a central figure in the Old Testament and he often figures in the teachings of Christ and his apostles in the New Testament.

God's work with Abraham (or Abram as he is called at first) marks the beginning of his special work with a particular group of people: the Hebrews, who trace their descent from Abraham through his son Isaac, grandson Jacob, and great grandsons, who became the heads of the tribes of Israel. God works intensively with Abraham's descendants to help not only them, but also the whole world realize the potential God had in mind for humanity since the very beginning of time. Abraham is held in the highest esteem as the ancestor of the Jewish people, although it should be noted that he is also held in high esteem by Muslims, who believe that the prophet Muhammad descended from Abraham through Ishmael, and also that Abraham's religion was Islam.

Abraham was born in Ur of the Chaldees but at some point after he married, left there with his wife, his father Terah, and nephew Lot to move to Canaan. They didn't make it all the way, however, getting only as far as Haran, in what today is northern Iraq, where they decided to settle down. Terah would die there. But God had another plan for Abraham.

Gen 12:1-3 *The LORD had said to Abram, "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."*

We don't know how the call to Abraham came, whether it came audibly or in another way, or whether it came once or with insistent repetition, but Abraham acted in faithful obedience to the command of the Lord. He traveled with his wife, nephew, servants, and possessions to the land of Canaan, believing that he would be blessed thereby. It was the first step in a life-long commitment to, and fellowship with the Lord.

God told Abraham that out of all the world's inhabitants, he was picking him to become the father of a special group of people, who would be a living witness to the world of the way things were supposed to work in God's world. And out of this people, as we now know, would come Christ the Redeemer, the offspring of Eve, who, it was promised right after the Fall of the human race into sin, would strike the serpent's head

As you listen to the story of what God did with Abraham and his descendants, and perhaps put yourself into their shoes, consider both the privilege and the hardship of God's call. Maybe the hardship of it impresses you more. Look what Abraham had to give up. He probably had a good life and got along just fine where he was. But God called him to leave his secure surroundings and strike out for another place. His responsibilities were undefined, but Abraham was no dummy; he knew that allegiance to the Lord was required, and that such loyalty can be costly.

On the other hand, look at the privilege that God's call represented. It was an amazing opportunity if God could be believed. Abraham was fully as privileged as Noah and his family had been to escape death in the flood. And do you know the most amazing thing of all? Abraham didn't deserve the grace of God to him. In both Ur, where Abraham had been born, and in Haran, the place from which God called him, the religion of choice was one devoted to the service of idols. The citizens there made sacrifices and offered prayers to the moon god, and Terah's family felt right at home there.

Much later, before Joshua's death in the Promised Land, he recalled for Israel the story of their origins. "Your forefathers (i.e. Abraham's family before Abraham was called), lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods" (Josh 24:2). If God had been looking for an especially righteous person, he might have gone to Melchizedek, to whom we are introduced in Gen. 14. This King of Salem (later called Jerusalem) was already in Canaan where he was living up to his name (King of Peace) and serving the Lord. The author of Hebrews says of Melchizedek that he was a priest of God Most High (7:1), and greater than Abraham. No, God did not choose Abraham because of his superior religious habits.

Nor did God's choice reflect Abraham and Sarah's physical potency. Sarah, you may remember, was barren. Abraham could never become a nation unless and until he could have a son. But that's as God wanted it; his new people would not come by natural generation, but only as He himself overcame the obstacle that Sarah's sterility represented. Objectively speaking, God's call was pure grace. Abraham had nothing to offer God; God had everything to offer Abraham.

This again is what God offered.

- "I will make you into a great nation." This is a specific promise of offspring. God would open Sarah's womb and give Abraham a son. Somehow, this son would, in the process of time, grow into a great multitude, a nation.
- "I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing." What the Lord would do for Abraham was sure to fill people with admiration. They would say, 'May God make me as blessed as Abraham.'
- "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses (disdains) you I will curse." God would take special interest in Abraham. He would actively intervene on his behalf to show favor to Abraham's supporters and disfavor to his enemies.
- "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you." The third part of the promise seemed to apply to specific people, depending on their attitudes, but this fourth part was much broader. Somehow, all people would find blessing in the person and actions of Abraham.

In this fourfold promise you can see a progressive buildup in the good that would result from obeying God's command. cf. Wenham p 275, 278

- Abraham alone is blessed (with the promise of nationhood) -->
- Abraham's name would be recognized as great, and itself used as a blessing --->
- Since Abraham was under divine protection, his blessers would be blessed --->
- Finally, all families would find blessing in Abraham.

Abraham obeyed and followed God to Canaan. His first official act in the new land was to build an altar to the Lord. He arrived at a famous landmark of the area; the great tree of Moreh at Shechem (Gen. 12:6), which may well have marked the site of a holy place.

However, Abraham did not worship the local deities, but the Lord who had appeared to him. From this time on, what he looked for in life was the fulfillment of God's promises. While others worshiped the evidences of the Divine in the heavenly bodies, and in themselves, Abraham committed himself to God's worship and staked his future upon God's existence and faithfulness. cf Expos. Bib, I 26

Abraham faced significant challenges in his life with God. One of the first was the friction that developed between his household and that of his nephew Lot—friction that was eased when Lot decided to move to the fertile land in the vicinity of Sodom. Another challenge was the absence of an heir for Abraham and Sarah; they had no children, and increasingly, no hope of children, as they were both quite old. At one point Abraham determined to make a servant, Eliezer, his heir. But God appeared to him in a vision to tell him that not Eliezer, but a flesh and blood son would be his heir. To confirm his promises, God made a covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15) in which he repeated his promises of descendants and a land for them to inherit. (We'll look in more detail at this covenant in another lecture.)

Abraham must have been reassured by this covenant ceremony. However, after some time had passed and Sarah still had not become pregnant, he agreed with Sarah's suggestion that he take her servant Hagar as a second wife. At that time the mistress of the house could lay claim to any child born of servants. So technically, the son that Hagar later bore—Ishmael—was Sarah's son. And technically, Abraham and Sarah reasoned, God's promise was fulfilled through Ishmael.

But God had another idea. He told Abraham about it when Ishmael was 13 years old. At that time God again confirmed his covenant with Abraham and informed him that not Ishmael, but a blood son of Sarah, would be his heir. Abraham didn't really believe it, but nevertheless obeyed the Lord's command for himself and all the males of his household to be circumcised as a sign of their loyalty to God.

Shortly after this, Scripture records a special meeting between Abraham and two angel messengers from the Lord. They were on their way to execute God's judgment on the wicked city of Sodom. Abraham showed hospitality to his visitors, and learning of their mission, took it upon himself to plead that the city be spared for the sake of the righteous who lived there, his nephew Lot being one of them. Far from being irritated by Abraham's persistent and ever-bolder requests for mercy, the Lord valued Abraham's concerns. Actually, they reflected his own, and demonstrated that Abraham was entering into an ever-closer communion with his covenant partner. The Lord finally agreed to save the city if only ten righteous could be found there. As it turned out, there were not even ten righteous, and Sodom and its companion cities were destroyed by God.

Isaac was born the following year to 100 year old Abraham and his almost as old, and barren wife. It was a miracle of God that Abraham and Sarah took as the guarantee that all of God's covenant promises would be fulfilled. A decade or so later, however, came the greatest challenge of Abraham's life, when the Lord told him to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering to him. We'll look at this challenge in more detail in the lecture on Sacrifice and Atonement. For now, suffice it to say that Isaac's life was spared only by God's provision of a ram to take Isaac's place on the altar of sacrifice. Afterwards, God again repeated his covenant promises to Abraham and Isaac.

One of the last things Abraham did before he died was to arrange a suitable marriage for Isaac, who then assumed his father's place as head of the covenant community. Isaac and Rebecca in turn had two sons, Esau and Jacob. The oldest and the one due to inherit the blessing, was Esau. But through the trickery of Rebecca and Jacob, the blessing went to Jacob. Although God did not approve of the way it was accomplished he did approve of the blessing going to Jacob, who, despite his many faults, highly valued God's covenant blessing; he was enthusiastic about God's plan of founding a nation by which the whole world would be blessed.

Jacob in his wanderings suffered for his sin, and through years of chastening came out a great man. His name was later changed to Israel, a prince with God (Genesis 32:28), and this became the name by which God's chosen people were called—Israelites.

Isaac and Rebecca had made the mistake of playing favorites with their two sons. And Jacob did the same thing in the favoritism he showed Joseph, which aroused jealousy in Jacob's other sons. That resulted in Joseph being sold by his jealous brothers as a slave when he was just seventeen years old. That was more than a family tragedy, for it threatened the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham's descendants. How could they become a great nation and find blessing for themselves, let alone become a blessing for the world under such conditions?

A further challenge to Abraham's descendants was the severe famine that afflicted the entire ancient world twenty-some years later. Jacob's family faced the prospect of starvation except for the intervention of a ruler of Egypt who invited them to come and live in Egypt where conditions were better. That ruler was Joseph, who after 13 years in Egyptian slavery and prison, had risen to prominence in Egypt, and had the God-given foresight and opportunity to help his adopted country prepare for the famine. As Joseph himself came to see, the whole ordeal, from the betrayal of his brothers and mistreatment by various foreign masters to his position of favor with Pharaoh, had been by the overruling providence of God. *You intended to harm me, he told his brothers, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. (Gen 50:20)*

For his confidence in God, and for his role as Savior of his whole family, Joseph is understood to be one of the most important types (or Old Testament models) of Christ. There are said to be at least 130 parallels between his life and the life of Jesus, one of the most important of which, was Joseph's unwavering commitment in every trial of his life, to serve the Lord and to give him credit for every ability and opportunity he was given. As a result, wherever Joseph landed, the people around him were blessed: first Potiphar's household, then the prison, and finally, all of Egypt. It was a preview of the final promise of blessing God had first given to Abraham: *You will be a blessing... all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*

The immigration of Joseph's family from Canaan to Egypt saved their lives and enabled them to become prosperous. In the next seventeen years *they acquired property and were fruitful and increased greatly in number (Gen 47:27)*. A great improvement, even if they could not yet legitimately be called a nation.

On the other hand, they were no longer in the land of their father Abraham, the land that God had promised to make their own. Nor at this point did they see how God would fulfill his promise to bless the nations of the earth through them. So this time in Egypt was a mixed blessing.

In his old age Jacob recalled (Gen 48:3-4): *"God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and there he blessed me and said to me, 'I am going to make you fruitful and will increase your numbers. I will make you a community of peoples, and I will give this land as an everlasting possession to your descendants after you.'* And he expressed his dying wish to Joseph (Gen 47:29-30), *Do not bury me in Egypt, but when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried."*

With that, Jacob passed on the blessings of the covenant heritage he had received from Abraham and Isaac. All of Jacob's sons were blessed to be part of the future God had planned, part of a holy nation settled in its own country and devoted to God. However, some sons were more blessed than others. Joseph got a double blessing, because both of his sons were blessed as sons of Jacob. In general the blessing that Jacob gave to each son was connected to the conduct of each one in his life.

And when Jacob died all of his sons, as requested, carried his body back to Canaan and buried him in the family burial cave along with Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac, Rebecca, and Leah. It was a testimony, not only of love for their father but also of faith in God's promises regarding the land to which their descendants would someday return.

But in a way it seems that the story of the Patriarchs ends in failure. The only ones in the Promised Land are in a burial cave. And all of the living descendants of Abraham are in Egypt. They have decent enough homes, to be sure, but they don't have a land of their own and they certainly haven't seen the fulfillment of God's promise that they will be a blessing to the world, and the envy of it. Even Joseph, as powerful and well situated as he was for the last seventy years of his life, knew that he and his people had not yet received all that God had in mind for them.

Mindful of this, just as his father Jacob had done with him, he extracted a promise from his family. He said (Gen 50:24-26), *"I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. . . and then you must carry my bones up from this place."* So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.

And that's how the book of Genesis ends - *in a coffin in Egypt*. God's plan reaches what looks like another crisis point. Now, how would God fulfill his promises to his chosen people?