

Genesis 12:1-3, 15:1-6, 17:9-14 (NRSV)

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. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I 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.”

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.” ²But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” ⁴But 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.” ⁵He 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.” ⁶And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

⁹God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

Romans 4:1–5 (NRSV)

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” ⁴Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

How will God put right all that was wrecked by humanity’s rebellion in the Garden of Eden? God’s promise is it will be fixed, that all creation will be restored and the humans’ relationship with God will be reconciled. Today we meet one man and one woman through whom God’s great rescue project begins.

Recap

We are looking at the entire biblical story as if it were a six-act play. Last week, we considered the opening chapters of Genesis which tell the story of the first two acts.

Act One *Act Two* *Act Three* *Act Four* *Act Five* *Act Six*
Creation → Fall → Israel → Jesus → The church → Renewal of creation

Act 1 is the story of creation. God creates everything there is and pronounces it all good. God also creates humans in God’s own image and gives them responsibility for all the creatures of the earth. God gives the humans, a man and a woman, a beautiful garden in which to live and work. God even comes to walk with them in the evening. There are two trees of special note in this garden. The first is the Tree of Life, from which the humans will eat and, hence, live forever. The other is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God has warned the humans that they are not to eat of that tree or they will die.

When Act 2 opens, all is good and wonderful. The humans enjoy the relationship with God that God intended for them. But soon, it all falls apart. The woman is tempted to eat the

forbidden fruit, believing that she will then know what God knows. She will be like a god herself. Sadly, she eats the fruit. The man follows suit and their relationship with God is torn apart. Rebellion against God has become their way. They hide from God and blame each other for what has happened. Tragically, they must leave the Garden and will never eat from the Tree of Life. They head off into exile and, soon, murder and other horrors also become their way.

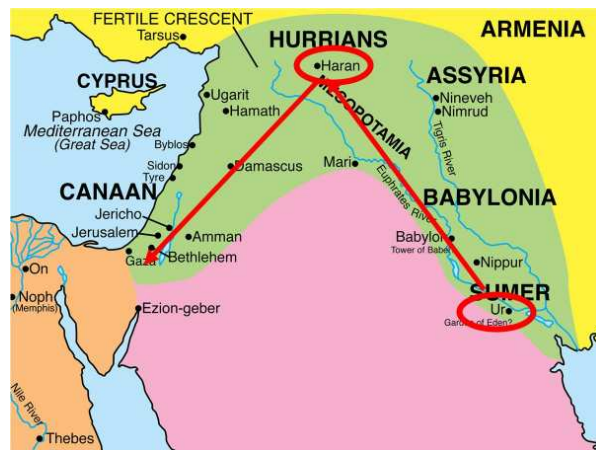
What's to be done? God "uncreates" with a flood and preserves a single family who will start over. But it goes no better. Eventually, the humans build a tower to the heavens, so that they can go where the gods go, just as the humans in the garden wanted to know what the gods know.

Thus, when the curtain falls on the second act, a deep and foreboding silence has fallen across the stage. What is to be done? More to the point, what will God do? The humans are still estranged from God and one another. All of God's creation still groans under the weight of rebellion and pride. What is the cure for the curse? Where is the repair for the rupture? How will God put things right so that love and mercy and justice are again the way of life?

Act 3 – A Fresh Start

In Acts 1 and 2 (Gen.1-11), we encountered a Tree of Life and a boat big enough to carry two of each species on the planet. We met a talking serpent and the Nephilim. We saw a cherubim standing guard over a garden and rain falling at the rate of fifteen feet per hour.

But all that changes when we come to Genesis 11:27, when we are thrust into the story of a family that can, at times, be uncomfortably like our own. When Act 3 opens we find ourselves in the world of the ancient near-east, a world and a time that can be reached by historians and archaeologists. It is nearly 4,000 years ago. Granted, a long time when measured by the time of our lives, but we know about civilizations much older. The Great Pyramid of Egypt has stood for more than 700 years by this time. It is the time of Hammurabi of Babylonia and his extensive written legal code.



In this ancient, but knowable, world we meet a man named Abram.¹ He and his family live in Haran, far to the north of Canaan,² his father having moved there from Ur.³ One day, God speaks to Abram. There is no fanfare, no burning bush, no angels or flaming swords. Just a guy and the Creator of the Cosmos.

There is nothing distinctive about Abram. God could have

chosen anyone through whom he would begin the restoration of all creation, but he chose Abram. Abram, later called Abraham, would become the father, the patriarch, of God's people.

¹Later in the book of Genesis, Abram will be given a new name by God. "Abraham" means something like "father of a multitude." The name of Abram's wife, Sarai, will be changed to Sarah. God changes Abram's name when God tells Abram that circumcision of male children is to be a sign of the covenant between God and Abram. In ancient cultures, a new name would signify a new phase in the person's life.

²Canaan is the ancient name of the land that would become the homeland of biblical Israel, given to them by God. Later, it would come to be called Palestine. The people living in this area in the time of Abraham were known as the Canaanites.

³This map was put together by Rose Maps, who offer some excellent full-color maps tracing the biblical story. Their website is www.rose-publishing.com.

Three promises

God makes three promises to Abram when he comes to him that day:

1. God will give them a land.
2. God will make Abram's family a great nation.
3. All the families of the earth will be blessed through Abram.

There does seem to be one problem with God's plan. Abram and his wife, Sarai, are old . . . really old. Sarai is far past child bearing years. But, God promises them a family and it is a family they will get.

It is the third promise that gets forgotten and overlooked; yet, I couldn't really overstate its importance. God's call of Abraham sets the stage for all that follows. Yes, Abraham will become the father of a great nation. Yes, he will go to the land given him by God. But, more importantly, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" through Abraham. In the Old Testament, blessing is a gift from God, encompassing material well-being, peace, and success in life. Blessing shapes the lives of Abraham's family and the "outsiders" they meet. Such blessing will be brought to all the people of the earth.

As Act 3 rolls on, the Israelites will often forget that Abraham was not chosen by God merely for his own sake, nor even merely for theirs, but for the sake of the whole world. Later, when God rescues the Hebrews from Egypt, it is for the sake of all humanity and every corner of creation.⁴ It was always easy for the Israelites to forget that they were to be the city on the hill to which all nations would stream (Isaiah 2:2-5; Matthew 5:14-16). It was tempting to them, as it is tempting to us, to turn inward, to build barriers, to see people as "outsiders." Jesus would remind his fellow Jews that they were to be the "light to the world." But if we are going to understand the larger biblical story, we have to keep God's larger purpose in mind: putting right what was ruined by the rebellion in the Garden of Eden.

A sign of this covenant

Yes, as odd as it seems, God's great rescue plan begins with one man and one woman, Abram and Sarai. And God gives them a sign of God's promises. All the males of this growing family are to be circumcised, including infants at birth. This practice of circumcision is to mark them out as the people of God. It is sort of like the badge of membership in God's people.⁵

It is not that the circumcision is a condition of God's promises being kept. Rather, circumcision is a sign, an outward marker, a baptism of sorts into the family through whom God is working in a special and focused way. There is no deal on the table, just God's promises. There is no Law, no Ten Commandments, no priests, no tabernacle, and no sacrifices. All that will come later in Act 3 (next week!). For now, God simply makes profound and surprising promises to Abraham.

The child and the family

Though Sarah is long past her child-bearing years, God gives them a son, Isaac. Isaac's sons are Esau and Jacob. Jacob has twelve sons who become the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.⁶ The stories of this family across the generations occupy the rest of the book of

⁴The book of Ruth is an excellent example. It tells the story of a young Moabite woman, i.e., not an Israelite and not a descendent of Abraham, through her Israelite mother-in-law, is blessed by God and incorporated into God's people. She goes on to be the great grandmother of King David, the greatest of all Israel's kings.

⁵Circumcision was such a powerful badge of membership that in Jesus' day, we know there were Jewish men who, seeking to be more acceptable in the Greco-Roman culture, underwent an operation to "undo" their circumcision cosmetically. Obviously, such a procedure was a visible means of leaving the people of the covenant.

⁶I've learned from my classes that the term "Israel" can be confusing. "Israel" was the collective name of the twelve tribes descended from Jacob, Abraham's grandson. After spending a night wrestling with a

Genesis. There is much we learn about God in these stories, but Abraham and his family certainly are not always models of faithfulness, far from it. Indeed, even betrayal and murder plague the family. Yet, through it all, God's purposes, this large rescue project, moves forward, even when we have difficulty discerning how this could be.

By the opening of the book of Exodus, the people of God are so vast a number that, though they are enslaved, Egypt's Pharaoh is frightened of them! God would choose Moses to lead his people out of slavery and back to Canaan, where God would be their king, though not for long. . . . and so the story continues for centuries. Through it all, God would relentlessly pursue his people, calling them back to the love of God and neighbor, rescuing them and always preserving a remnant of the faithful, a nucleus of his redeemed and chosen people.

A man of faith

As we go forward in Act 3 through all the stuff about the Law, the priests, and the rest, it will be easy to lose sight of the truth that God's plan will move forward on the basis of faith. It was about faith with Abraham and it is still about faith.

In the New Testament book of Hebrews, Abraham is lifted up as a man of faith and gets more space than anyone else. Abraham's story is not only foundational to all that follows in the history of God and his people, Abraham demonstrated his trust of God time after time.

- God tells Abraham to leave his home and family to go to Canaan and he goes.
- God tells Abraham that he will have numerous descendents, despite the fact that Abraham and Sarah are both approaching the century-mark. "And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).
- God tells Abraham to sacrifice the son born to himself and Sarah, the child through whom the covenant will pass. Though God stops him from this killing, Abraham offers his son to God, knowing that God could and would, figuratively, raise the boy from the dead. Abraham trusts God even in this.

When the writer of Genesis says that God reckoned Abraham's faith to him as righteousness (in 15:6), it is a way of saying that Abraham's faith enabled the restoration of God and Abraham's relationship. Notice that this pivotal statement about Abraham's faith having put him right with God comes *before* Abraham is given the sign of circumcision in Genesis 17.

Nearly two millennia after Abraham, Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Rome. He wants them to understand that with God it had always been about faith, going all the way back to the Abraham. It was faith, and faith alone, that restored Abraham to a right relationship with God, not circumcision or Sabbath-keeping or any of the other "works of the law" that would come later.

Thus, Paul uses Genesis 15:6 to demonstrate that righteousness was Abraham's by virtue of his faith, even before God taught him the rite of circumcision as a sign of the covenant. And it happens centuries before the Law was brought down from the mountain by Moses. Thus, even the Law of Moses (more next week) could not be the basis of a restored relationship with God. That happens through faith. And it is a faith available to *everyone*, to all the families of the earth, not merely those who were given the Law.

Abraham was not Jewish when God made his promises to him. He was uncircumcised and did not have the Law. He was just a guy. A guy who trusted his Lord. It was this trust that proved the wisdom of God's choice. It was always about this faith and trust. Faith would be

stranger who turns out to be God, Jacob was given the name "Israel," which in Hebrew means something like "one who strives with God." From that time on, the name "Israel" would not only designate the ancestor Jacob, but also God's people, as in the twelve tribes "of Israel." Later, it would take on national or political meaning as well. Thus, David would be King of Israel. Your reading of the Bible will be helped by keeping in mind that "Israel" sometimes refers to the people of God and at other times refers to a political entity.

the means by which God's promise to Abraham would be extended to all the families of the earth. It is our own faith in Jesus that marks us out as God's people.

Next week, we come to the story of the Exodus, the time when God saved his people from slavery in Egypt. God will give his people the Law and instruct them on building a suitable place for God to dwell with them . . . but through it all, it will be about faith.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Genesis 12 God calls Abram and makes three promises to him: a land, numerous descendants, and that *all* the families on earth would be blessed through him. It is this last promise that is often forgotten but is the key to understanding God's redeeming work and the charge given us by Jesus Christ.

Tuesday, Genesis 17 God gives Abraham a sign of God's covenant: circumcision. Note that this comes *after* God promises Abraham countless descendants and pronounces him righteous because of his faith.

Wednesday, Genesis 18:1-15 God again promises a child to Abraham and Sarah.

Thursday, Genesis 22 God commands Abraham to sacrifice his miracle child, Isaac.

Friday, Hebrews 11:8-22 The entire passage about the faith of Abraham.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In God's wisdom, he has given us a library of writings, the Bible, which is largely a collection of stories about God, about his creation, and about ourselves. They are stories that beg us to use our imagination for we can enter a story in ways that we could never get into a book of systematic theology. These stories are given to us so that, through them, we might come to know God better, to live in a right and loving relationship with him who made us. So, here are a few questions to ask yourself as you try to step within the story of Abraham and Sarah. You may want to read Genesis 12-22 first, if it's been awhile. If you are new to these stories, you might consider first reading these chapters in Peterson's *The Message*.
 - Imagine that you are Abraham and you believe that God has told you to leave everything behind to head for a foreign land. What do you think your reaction would be? How would you even know it was God calling you? How would Abraham know? After all, even hearing voices doesn't tell us everything – we medicate that! Do you think something remarkable must have happened within Abraham's heart? How hard must it have been for him to head out?
 - Even better, imagine that you are Sarah. You are in your eighties and your husband comes home announcing that he is going to have an heir – by you! You might laugh as Sarah did. You might even take things into your own hands like Sarah. How could you trust your spouse enough? How could you trust God enough? In Sarah's mind, what might this promise cost her?
2. This is a story about faithfulness: God's faithfulness to Abraham and Abraham's faithfulness to God. How would you define faithfulness? Have there been times in your life when you felt like God was being unfaithful? How did you deal with that? What does it really mean to be faithful to God? How could we go about being more faithful to God? What do you think God expects of us?
3. Here's one that will get you thinking. The language of Abraham's story is linked to the creation stories. In what ways is this story one of new creation? What are some similarities between the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 (Act 1) and the story of God's covenant with Abraham?

