

The Rescue Begins

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a six-week series

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Genesis 12:1–4 (NIV)

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

² “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.

³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.

Genesis 15:1–6 (NIV)

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.
I am your shield,
your very great reward.”

² But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” ⁵ He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Genesis 21:1–7 (NIV)

Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. ² Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. ⁴ When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

⁶ Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” ⁷ And she added, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

Genesis 24:62–67 (NIV)

⁶² Now Isaac had come from Beer Lahai Roi, for he was living in the Negev. ⁶³ He went out to the field one evening to meditate, and as he looked up, he saw camels approaching. ⁶⁴ Rebekah also looked up and saw Isaac. She got down from her camel ⁶⁵ and asked the servant, “Who is that man in the field coming to meet us?”

“He is my master,” the servant answered. So she took her veil and covered herself.

⁶⁶ Then the servant told Isaac all he had done. ⁶⁷ Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.

Genesis 25:21–26 (NIV)

²¹ Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. ²² The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, “Why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the LORD.

²³ The LORD said to her,

“Two nations are in your womb,

and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger.”

²⁴ When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. ²⁵ The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. ²⁶ After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.

The true story

And so, we learn God’s next step in God’s rescuing of humanity and God’s creation. God chooses one elderly married couple, Abraham and Sarah, through whom the project will go forward. An odd choice it seems, until we see Abraham’s faith in action. This family will be the ones through whom “all the families of the earth” will be blessed. They are, like us, fragile people who don’t always make good choices. But they have been chosen for this and so their family, to be more numerous than the stars, is begun. Abraham & Sarah to Isaac & Rebekah and then to Jacob . . . and Rachel.

Through them the line of the promise, the promise of rescue, is traced.

After the darkness of Act II, in which human rebellion against God fractures and distorts all of creation, in Genesis 12, God sets out on a new rescue project. Starting over with Noah and his family proved to be insufficient. So now God will create a family through whom the world will be saved. He will be their God and they will be his people. It is the story of Israel.

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

A recap

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 city and a tower to the heavens, for they do not want to do as God taught them and instructed..

Thus, when the curtain falls on the second act, a deep and foreboding silence has fallen across the stage. What will God do now? 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 been standing for more than 700 years. 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.

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 more numerous than the stars.
3. All the families of the earth will be blessed through Abram.

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.

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.

However, 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.

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. For now, God simply makes profound and surprising promises to Abraham.

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 descendants, 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. (see Genesis 22)

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.

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 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.

A child of the promise

If there is to be a family for Abram and Sarai, they must have children and given her age, Sarai sends a servant girl, Hagar, to Abram so she can bear an heir for Abram. Let's just say . . . it doesn't work out well. Hagar and the boy, Ishmael, move on with God's blessing (Genesis 16 and 21:8-21). For it now becomes clear that the promises made by God will pass to a son of both Abram and Sarai -- their first-born, Isaac (Genesis 21).

Years pass and after Sarah's death, Abraham knows that the time has come for Isaac to marry, as the covenant must be passed from generation to generation. After all, Isaac is forty! Abraham wants Isaac to marry from among Abraham's people, his extended family. So he sends a trusted servant northward to Haran to find a suitable wife. When the servant arrives, he prays that God will give him a sign that he has found the right girl.

At a well, the servant meets a young woman. She is Rebekah, who is kind, generous, and hard working. Rebekah takes the servant to meet her family, who quickly concludes that it is God's wish that Rebekah return to marry Isaac. The servant is ready to leave immediately, but the family asks for ten days to say their good-byes. Then comes the surprising part, at least to me. The family asks Rebekah if she is willing to go to a new land and marry a stranger. She is. Rebekah will continue the faithful response of Abraham by leaving her home and heading out. When the servant and Rebekah arrive, we are told, Isaac made her his wife and loved her, finding in Rebekah comfort for the loss of his mother. (Genesis 24 tells this story.)

Asking

The story of Rebekah tells us something important about the cultivation of our relationships with those we love. Simply put, it is important to ask. In a patriarchal culture quite foreign to our own, the family respects and loves Rebekah enough to ask her whether she wants to go. They even believe that this is all God's doing. But still, they ask. No demands. No assumptions. Given that Rebekah is unmarried, it is very

likely that she is quite young, a teenager. Yet they ask her. They would not take her for granted.

One would think this is how we would treat all those we love. But sadly, we too often treat those we love in ways that we would never treat a casual acquaintance. We take our spouses for granted. We assume we know what our teenagers or parents want and care about. Mack Brown, the former football coach at UT, said that things began to turn around for him at Texas when he decided “to spend more time asking kids about kids.” Who’d guess so much could come from just asking.

Loving

Their story also reminds us that love is something we do, not just something we feel. Rebekah is delivered to Isaac and he marries her. No romance. No courtship. He marries her and he loves her. Scripture doesn’t give us many insights into their marriage. We know that it took twenty years for Rebekah to conceive, twenty years of waiting for an heir to the covenant. We know that Isaac stayed with Rebekah even after she conspired with Jacob to steal the blessing that Isaac intended for Esau.

The story reminds us that our loving relationships cannot be measured only by feelings. Even if we don’t feel about our spouse the way we once did or the way we’d like to, will we still care for and about our spouse? Will we still forgive? Will we still ask, rather than demand? One of the things I think I’ve figured out about marriage and other important relationships is this. Doing the things I’d do if I felt the way I want to feel often leads to the feelings I seek. Yes . . . we can learn and re-learn love.

The next generation

Isaac was the son of the promise, the one through whom the covenant with the LORD God must pass. But there was a problem, Isaac and Rebekah had trouble conceiving. A lot of trouble. Nineteen years passed and no baby, no child to whom the covenant would pass.

Isaac needed an heir, so he prayed and he prayed hard. And finally, God granted Isaac’s request. Rebekah conceived. She might have been childless before, but she would soon find out that she was overflowing with blessings.

To Rebekah, the pregnancy mustn’t have felt much like a blessing. It was hard and troubled. She got no peace. Her womb seemed at war with her body. So she too went to God, to find out what was going on inside her.

God revealed to Rebekah that she wasn’t carrying one child but two. Indeed, not just two children but two nations. They would be more than sibling rivals, the twins would be the ancestors of two great but rival nations. Further, God told her that the younger child would have power over the older, for even twins are not born in the same instant.

They named the older twin Esau, for he was covered in red hair. The second-born twin they named Jacob.⁶ Esau grew up to be a man’s man, the outdoors type, rough and ready, a skilled hunter; the joy of his father, Isaac. Jacob on the other hand was the quiet, contemplative type, who enjoyed hanging around the tents.

Isaac loved Esau because he seemed to be everything a real man was supposed to be, a skilled hunter and the rest. We’re not told why Rebekah loved Jacob. Perhaps she likes the stay-at-home type. Perhaps it is because of what God told her about the twins. We are never told that she revealed to Isaac God’s message about the twins.

But already, just in these few sentences, we see the beginnings of family divisions that will soon come to full flower.

⁶The name “Jacob” doesn’t mean “heel” per se, but it sounds like Hebrew for “heel.” Even on the way out of the womb, Jacob was grasping Esau by the heel.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Paul's Letters to the Next Generation: 1 & Timothy and Titus.*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: John's Gospel

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." 0

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

This week: We just began the nine-month journey through the Bible, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for that week.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.