

The Promise & Abraham



Creation, Fall, Sin & Judgment

After he created the first humans, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (1:31). However, the first humans rebelled against God, resulting in a "falling away" from God (3:1-24). The relationship was broken, resulting in shame, guilt, fear, corruption, deterioration and death. Harmony with God became hostility toward God, deserving of God's judgment.

Genesis 4-11 records a cycle of human rebellion against God, and the resulting judgments of God.¹ In these chapters, the human situation is not getting any better! But God has a plan. That plan emerges in Genesis 12 in the form of a promise made by God to a man named Abram.

God's Promise

God's promise to Abram (Abraham)² is first recorded in Genesis 12:1-3.³

1. Read Genesis 12:1-3. In these verses, what does God promise Abraham?

- God will make him into a _____ (12:2a; 18:18), and God will bless him.
- God will make his name great,⁴ so that he will be a _____ (12:2b). God will bless those who bless Abraham, and curse those who curse him (12:3a).
- _____⁵ on earth will be blessed through Abraham (12:3b).

God told Abraham and his family to go to the land of Canaan (see *Land of Abraham*). When they came to the land of Canaan, the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7). However, at that time, Abraham had no offspring (children).

Elements of the Promise

The essential elements of God's promise are:

- Seed (multiplied offspring, many descendants) (13:16; 15:5; 22:17).
- Land (12:7; 13:15, 17; 15:7-8, 18; 17:8).
- Blessing to Abraham (12:2; 22:17; 26:3; 28:3) and to all peoples (or nations) on earth (12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14).

¹ God's grace is not absent in these chapters, but his plan of redemption does not emerge until Genesis 12.


² The name 'Abram' probably means 'the father is exalted.' Later, Abram's name is changed to 'Abraham,' which means 'father of a multitude' of nations (Genesis 17:5).

³ The promise is repeated (in some form) on at least four other occasions (Genesis 13:14-17; 15:4-5, 18-21; 17:2-8, 15-16; 18:18-19; 22:17-18). The promise is also repeated to Abraham's son Isaac (26:4-5) and grandson Jacob (28:13-15; 35:11-12). The promise is also expressed in the form of a 'covenant,' which can be defined as 'an agreement between two parties that defines a relationship in which obligations or mutual responsibilities may be enacted.'

⁴ 'Unlike the builders of Babel, who sought a name by constructing a colossal building, Abram's name will be made great by God's building him into a great nation that will bless the nations that have just been enumerated (Gen. 10)' (Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003], 76)

⁵ 'peoples' ('families, clans'). Elsewhere, the promise is that all 'nations' will be blessed (18:18; 22:18; 26:4).

How will God accomplish the blessing of all peoples and nations?⁶

 *The LORD said to Abraham, "I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me." (Genesis 22:17-18, NIV)*


"[The LORD's] gracious promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are the very platform of the history of redemption."⁷ Thus this study series follows the unfolding of God's promise to Abraham, which we are calling "God's Promise for the Nations."

The Faith of Abraham

Genesis 12-25 (the record concerning Abraham) is primarily about God, including his promise and his "providence" (i.e., his guidance of events to fulfill his promise). But Abraham's response is also very important. Abraham is considered to be one of the great examples of faith.⁸

Discussion Questions

1. How would you define "faith?"⁹

 "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."
(Hebrews 11:1, NIV)

2. Based on the following passages (copied on the next two pages), what did Abraham do that demonstrated his faith?

- Hebrews 11:8-10.
- Hebrews 11:11-12.
- Hebrews 11:17-19.

⁶ In general, God will accomplish the blessing of all peoples or nations through Abraham's offspring. The ultimate fulfillment of this promise is revealed in the New Testament (*Galatians 3:16, 8-9, 26-29*).

⁷ Willem Vangermeren, *The Progress of Redemption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1988), 122.

⁸ In general, Abraham continued to have a strong faith. But he also had times of doubt (*Genesis 15:2-3; 16:1-2; 17:17*).

⁹ The word 'faith' is not frequently used in the Old Testament. Other words (especially 'trust') are used to convey the same idea. In the New Testament, the word 'faith' (*pistis*) is frequently used. The word 'believe' (*pisteuō*) comes from *pistis*. Biblical 'faith' is confident belief and trust in God. It is *not* 'blind faith.' It is a faith based on sufficient evidence to be firmly persuaded, even if the things believed are future or unseen. Also, this faith is not based on human intellect alone, but is enabled by God's grace. The ultimate object of biblical faith is God himself. Abraham's faith is a great example of confident trust in the faithfulness of God. Abraham firmly believed that God would do what he promised.

The Faith of Abraham

Hebrews 11:8-19 provides a concise summary of Abraham's faith. Read the following passages from Hebrews 11 along with the background passages in Genesis.

Concerning God's Call

Genesis 12:1: "The LORD had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.'" (NIV) (Abraham left when he was 75 years old.)



Hebrews 11:8-10: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to a city with foundations,¹⁰ whose architect and builder is God." (NIV)

Concerning God's Promise of Many Descendants

Genesis 17:19, 21: (God had promised Abraham many descendants, but at least 24 years after his call, Abraham still had no children through his wife Sarah. When Abraham was 99 years old, and Sarah was 89 years old, God told Abraham...), "...your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him... Sarah will bear [Isaac] to you by this time next year" (NIV).¹¹

Hebrews 11:11-12: "By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father because he considered himself faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore." (NIV)¹²

As God promised, Sarah conceived and bore a son, and Abraham named him Isaac (21:1-3).

Concerning God's Test

Genesis 22:1-2: [Years later] "God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he replied. Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering¹³ on a mountain I will show you.'" (NIV)

¹⁰ 'city with foundations' – a firmly founded, permanent dwelling place, in contrast to tents; 'the heavenly Jerusalem' (Hebrews 12:22); 'the unshakable kingdom' (12:28) – the everlasting kingdom of God.

¹¹ God said this after Abraham expressed confusion and doubt in response to God's statement that Sarah would bear a son in her old age (17:15-18). However, Abraham generally believed God would fulfill his promise (15:6).


¹² The apostle Paul wrote, 'Without weakening in his faith, [Abraham] 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.' (Romans 4:19-21, NIV).

¹³ It seems strange that God would instruct Abraham to sacrifice his child! The Law (later given by God) strongly prohibited child sacrifice (Leviticus 18:21; Deuteronomy 12:31). However, God had no intention that Abraham should actually go through with the sacrifice. It was simply a test of Abraham's faith (Genesis 22:12). As he had planned, God intervened and stopped Abraham, and provided a substitute (a ram) for the offering (22:6-14).

Hebrews 11:17-19: "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son,¹⁴ even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death." (NIV)¹⁵



3. What helped motivate Abraham to persevere (keep going) in faith?¹⁶ What should motivate and encourage Christians today, even when things look difficult or impossible? How can we stay motivated and encouraged?

 "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." (Hebrews 11:1, NIV)¹⁷

4. What was the basis (foundation) of Abraham's faith? What is the basis of the Christian's faith today, and why is this important to understand?¹⁸

Reflection & Application

- Biblical faith is based on God's word. Whatever your level of belief, continue to listen to God through his Word and respond appropriately. Seek to understand what we've discussed in this study – the Good Creation, the Fall, and the Promise. Seek answers to your questions.
- Reflecting on Abraham's faith, ask yourself the following questions:
 - ? Do I believe the promises of God given in the Bible? Why or why not? (The promise to Abraham has application to us today!) Have I responded in faith? If not, why not?
 - ? Am I willing to obey God even if it means giving up comfort and so-called security?
 - ? Do I really trust God to be faithful to his promises even when things look impossible?
 - ? Am I willing to give up anything that God commands me to give up?
 - ? Am I willing to do whatever God directs me to do in order to serve in his program to bring blessing to the world?
- Ask God to change your heart and increase your faith, and be truly willing to respond.

¹⁴ Many see typology in this story, pointing to Jesus Christ – 'the lamb of God.' As Michael Card sang, 'What Abraham was asked to do, He's done. He's offered His only Son.' (Michael Card, "God Will Provide a Lamb." Lyrics. Legacy. Benson Records, 1994).

¹⁵ Abraham was willing to offer his only son as a sacrifice because he believed God was faithful to his promise. Isaac *could not* die before he fathered children. Abraham believed both he and Isaac would return from the altar. Even if Isaac died, Abraham reasoned that God would raise him from the dead. As they traveled to the altar, Abraham said, 'We (i.e., I and the boy) will worship and then we will come back to you' (*Genesis 22:5*).

¹⁶ Abraham was motivated by his strong hope which was based on the promise of God (*see Hebrews 11:10, 14-16*).

¹⁷ Hebrews 11:1 provides one description of faith. Though the Old Testament heroes of faith understood that the fulfillment of the promises was future, they acted as if the realization was already present, because they were so convinced that God could, and would, fulfill what He had promised.

¹⁸ The basis of Abraham's faith was God and His revealed promise. Likewise the basis of our faith today is God and His word. God has spoken to us through His written word (the Bible) and He is faithful to His promises. However, as the song goes, 'You can't stand on promises if you don't know what they are.' Thus we must 'get into God's Word.'