



The Essentials Series

Week 4 – Abraham Gen 12-18

St. George's Episcopal Church

Spring 2015

Introduction to Abraham

- Most scholars break down the book of Genesis into three major parts (or some version of this):
 - the primeval narrative (Gen. 1-11)
 - the patriarchal narrative (Gen. 12-36)
 - the Joseph narrative (Gen. 37-50)
- Chapter 12 begins the patriarchal narrative, which will tell the story of the great patriarchs of Israel's story, notably Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
 - The connection between chapter 12 and the chapters before it is that Terah, the father of Abram, is the descendent of Shem, the son of Noah. His family and travels are spoken of at the end of chapter 11.
 - Beginning with Abram, God begins to show himself more fully to humankind. With each passing covenant (Noah → Abraham → Sinai → David → New Covenant), humans will learn more about the nature of God, the world, and how we are to live in relation to God.
- God has spoken to his creation and to people from the beginning of Genesis, but with Abram we see God converse and interact in a much more personal way.
 - Sometimes God speaks with Abram through a vision, sometimes through The Angel of the Lord.
 - But often we are simply not told how God's communication occurs, that is the mechanism.
- Abraham's story actually falls inside the sixth toledoth, the account of Terah.

Gen. 12:1-6 – God's Covenant Offer to Abram

- Chapter 12 begins rather abruptly with "Yahweh had said to Abram..."
 - Note: Abram and Sarai were the original names of the patriarch and matriarch of Israel. Later in the story, God will change their names in accordance with his promises for them.
 - In the first few verses of chapter 12, we are told the content of the agreement God establishes between himself and Abram.
- Abram must do four things: (1) leave his country, (2) leave his people, (3) leave his father's household (most likely indicating his inheritance and the ancestral gods that go along with that), and (4) go to a land that God will show to him.
 - These are not small requests! Abram is being asked to give up *everything* that makes him who he is as a man in his time period. And, why? Because a deity promises to make it worth his while.
 - Notice that God is sending him to "a land." This is beginning to reverse the pattern after Babel, when the people were scattered. Though wandering has characterized the first several chapters of Genesis, now God is going to settle his people in a land.
 - Note also that God does not initially specify where he will send Abram, instead the Lord states Abram must 'go to a land I will show you.' The crux of the matter here, as it will continue to be for Abram, and for us, is that he must trust God (see below, notes on Hebrews 11:8-10).
- In return for Abram's radical trust, God promises to do six things: (1) make Abram into a great nation, (2) bless Abram, (3) make his name great, (4) make him into a blessing, (5)

bless those who bless him and curse those who curse him, (6) bless all peoples on the earth through Abram.

- The blessing spoken of here has to do with being in favor with God and under his protection and care. The cursing indicates that someone who invokes curses upon Abram's seed will be removed from God's protection and care.
- Compare God's promises of blessing to Abram with Babel. The Babel-ites sought to make a great city and a great name for themselves – here God gives it to Abram.
- There is a headship also in view: how one relates to Abram carries a direct impact on one's relationship with God. Those who bless Abram will be blessed by God, those who curse Abram will be cursed. Will Abram listen to God's voice, unlike Adam?
- Sarai – we are told at the end of chapter 11 that Sarai was barren.
 - This introduces a tension in the redemptive story, because up to this point the lineage of the Promised Seed has been preserved and mapped from Eve through Seth, to Noah, Shem, Peleg, and through Terah to Abram. But now with Sarai's barrenness that line's preservation and propagation is in jeopardy.
 - What will God do? He promises that Abram will be made into a great nation – not just a big family!
 - However, despite God's promises Abram and Sarai will make mistakes. They try to solve the barrenness problem and fulfill the promise for themselves, and Sarai offers Abraham her servant girl Hagar to be a surrogate (see Gen 16:1-15).
- Abram the sojourner
 - When Abram gets to Canaan, God promises to give this land to his descendants (Gen 12:7), it will be their inheritance based on a promise.
 - But Abram does not settle there, he does not build a city. So although God has called him to Canaan, it is not permanent.
 - In Hebrews 11:8-10 we are told that it was in fact by faith that Abraham went to the Promised Land, not knowing where he was going. And when he got there he did not settle. Why? Because, "he was looking forward to the city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God".
 - Compare with Revelation 21:1-4, where the new heaven and new earth of focused around a city, the New Jerusalem. Thus the apostles in the NT are connecting the faith of Abraham (and the obedience to God engendered by that faith) with the final realization of the kingdom of God.
- Abraham the Man of Faith Gen 15:1-6
 - Abram brings to God the question of his childlessness in 15:1, and God responds that it shall not be a relative who inherits the estate and the covenant promise, but a son. And not only that, but Abram's descendants will outnumber the stars!
 - Gen 15:6, one of the most important verses in the Bible: Abram believed (trusted) God, and the Lord reckoned that faith to him as righteousness. A right relationship with God, a just standing before Him, depends on faith, that is, faith in God's promises.
 - St. Paul declares later in Romans 3:21-4:25 and Galatians 3:1-29 that a sinner is declared righteous before God based on faith in Christ, who is the fulfillment of all God's promises. Paul's point is that God's plan on justifying sinners has *always* been based on faith, not on the law. In other words, Paul's teaching on justification is nothing new, but rather the application of God's pattern of reckoning in the OT to Christ.

Next Week: The Sacrifice of Isaac, Genesis 21-22

Additional Resources

Goldsworthy, Graeme. *According to Plan: An Introduction to Biblical Theology*. Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1991.