

Father Abraham

Genesis 12:1-9

Up to this point in Genesis, the universal history of mankind has been our subject. Now, the account narrows down to the history of the Kingdom of God. And the history of the Kingdom of God is the history of one nation. From this point forward, God's dealing with mankind is focused on that one nation, a nation which would be responsible for carrying God's revelation to all other men, and a nation through whom the Redeemer would finally come into the world to accomplish God's plan of salvation. It is the nation of Israel.

The rest of the book of Genesis, and the the rest of the OT, is the history of the nation of Israel, which is the nation of God's people, those whom he has chosen from all the other nations of the world. It is a nation that begins with Abraham.

But as we begin to study Abraham, let me say at the outset, that we are studying the father of our faith! We are the children of Abraham, and therefore we are studying the history and formation of our nation, which is the holy nation of all those in Christ's church. In the NT, that great theme of the one nation of God is no longer focused on Israel as a literal nationality, but upon the church of Jesus Christ, which is called the Israel of God.

Therefore, everything we read and study today applies directly to us! The promise of God made to Abraham applies to us today. And Abraham's response to that promise applies to us also, namely faith and obedience.

Let's look first at the promise.

I. ABRAHAM RECEIVES GOD'S PROMISE TO HIS CHOSEN PEOPLE.

Ultimately, it is the promise of a great nation. Abraham would be the father of a great nation, the nation of God's chosen people. That is so specifically spelled out here in,
v.2

This is the promise of the covenant, the covenant of grace. This is a fuller and more explicit explanation of the same covenant that God established with mankind after the fall. The very first expression of this covenant of grace was the promise in, Gen. 3:15 "And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel."

That was the promise of ultimate victory by the Redeemer. Then we studied an additional statement of this covenant promise in God's dealing with Noah, a promise of faithful protection and life,

Gen.9:9 "And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you, 10 and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth. 11 Thus I establish My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

And now this third expression of the covenant of grace. The promised nation of Abraham. Abraham himself will actually come to represent that whole nation, and he is appropriately called 'Father Abraham.' It is his descendants who actually receive or inherit this promise. So what we see here is that,

A. God promises great blessing to the descendants of Abraham.

Notice that the promise is for his offspring, his seed.

v.7

We find a repeated emphasis of the promise being given to Abraham's descendants.

Gen. 13:14 And the LORD said to Abram...“Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are—northward, southward, eastward, and westward; 15 for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever.”

Gen. 15:18 “On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying:

“To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates.”

Gen. 17:7 “And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. 8 Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

Deut. 34:4 Then the LORD said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to give Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have caused you to see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.”

But one descendant of Abraham in particular will inherit this promise. One descendant in particular receives this covenant promise of the blessing of a great nation. That one descendant of Abraham would be the king of that great nation. He would be the head of that great nation. He would also be the son of God, for this promise to Abraham ultimately looks forward to Christ,

Gal. 3:6 “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as of many, but as of one, “And to your Seed,” who is Christ.”

So everything here points to Christ. Everything here is fulfilled in Christ. The nation of Abraham is the nation of Christ. Everything here applies to the nation of Christ, the holy nation of God's people today, which is the church, and if you take away that focus on Christ, then this promise is worthless. In other words, this is not a promise to the Jewish nation of today which denies Jesus Christ!

The promise is the nation of Christ, the kingdom of Christ. And as it is defined here, the promised blessing is, first of all, the land.

v.1

The focus of God's blessing was to give his people land. The promised land. And let me say this again just as plainly and as clearly as I possibly can. The fulfillment of that promised land is not the small geographical area east of the Mediterranean sea which we still today call “Israel.” This promise does not find its fulfillment in the stones and dirt on the earth in this age. This promise in Genesis 12 has nothing to do with the war that is going on today between Israel and the Palestinians. Nor is it a blank check for Israel to conquer land, or be given land, in the name of God's promise. The modern nation of Israel is a democratic ally of the United States, worthy of our political and international support, especially the battle against terrorism, but all of that has nothing to do with the promise of God in the book of Genesis.

The promised land does not refer to any land in this world. And Abraham even understood that then, as we read in,

Hebr. 11:9 “By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”

As it is more fully explained,

Hebr. 12:22 “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24 to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.”

And also,

Hebr. 13:14 “For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come.”

That city to come is not an earthly city to be reestablished in a future millennium either, but it is the New Jerusalem of the New Heavens and New Earth. The eternal city. The enduring city. We read about that great city, that great nation of God’s people in,

Rev. 21:1 “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. 2 Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. 4 And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” 5 Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” And He said to me, “Write, for these words are true and faithful.”

So this promise in Genesis 12 looks forward all the way to the end of the Bible, all the way into eternity future. It describes what we commonly call, heaven. In Christ, that is the land that is ours.

For eternity. The nation is ours also.

v.2a

And that nation would be protected.

v.3

Then Abraham himself will be blessed, as the head of that nation,

v.2b “I will make your name great.”

The greatness of the name of Abraham is that he is identified as the father of all true believers! Never is that made clearer than in,

Gal. 3:6 “...just as Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” 7 Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.”

“Those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.” You are children of Abraham. You are citizens of the nation of God’s people, the Israel of God. In the words of the Apostle Peter,

1Pet. 2:9 “You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

And one more thing about this great blessing to the descendants of Abraham--as I have already emphasized, we see clearly that,

B. God extends the blessing of Abraham to all the nations of the world.

Indeed, the gospel of Jesus Christ was announced in advance to Abraham--the gospel which, in the words of Romans 1, "is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."

Don't miss this proclamation of the gospel right here in Genesis. Don't think that you have to turn to the pages of the NT to find the clear message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here it is, right here. The promise of God's blessing, the blessing of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

This covenant with Abraham, which we'll be studying in detail in the weeks to come, is the covenant of salvation. It is the same covenant through which we are saved. The covenant promise and great blessings given to Abraham are given to us as well, to all the nations of the world.

Therefore, if you want to understand your salvation, and if you want to be able to communicate with others, telling them about salvation, then learn well these verses in Genesis 12. This is one of the most important promises in all of Scripture.

But then, let's look at how Abraham responded to this promise. I don't want to remain merely in a study of doctrine, as edifying as this doctrine of salvation is. Doctrine must be applied to life.

Abraham's response to God's promise is what earns him such a high standing among the faithful. Now, all of this is of grace, every part of Abraham's response to God is itself a working of

God's grace. I don't want to ignore that nor forget it. But I don't want to miss the obvious emphasis here. Abraham obeyed God!

II. ABRAHAM DEMONSTRATES THAT THE ONLY APPROPRIATE RESPONSE TO GOD'S PROMISE IS TO OBEY HIS COMMANDS.

Interesting, isn't it. When God promises, he also commands. We've studied his promise. But look at how he began speaking to Abraham,

v.1

And in the plain, ordinary, historical reading of this text, what did Abraham do when God said, "Get out of your country"? He left.

v.4

And it is made clear exactly what that involved.

v.1,5

A. Obedience requires that we forsake the things of this world.

He was to leave his country. Actually, as we discover in Acts 7, he was actually called to leave while still in Ur of the Chaldeans, his hometown.

Acts 7:2 "And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, 3 and said to him, Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you."

Abraham left.

Acts 7:4 "Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell."

The point is that Abraham was called upon to forsake his own home, he was called to forsake even the comfort and security of his own country. He was called to forsake his own people. He would live as a stranger and an alien, without a country, wandering about waiting upon the Lord. He was to leave his family, his father's household, and though he tarried for awhile at Haran, until his father died, having honored his father's authority, he still continued on in obedience after Terah died.

v.5

Abraham obeyed, forsaking the things of this world.

Don't miss this! Don't miss the extent of the sacrifice to which Abraham was called. And don't miss his obedience. His example is such a worthy one for us to follow, for we to are called by God to forsake the things of this world, even our own lives.

We read of Jesus giving a similar exhortation in,

Matt. 8:21 "Then another of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."

22 But Jesus said to him, "Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

Also,

Matt. 16:24 "Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. 25 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26 For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Can the demand of the gospel be stated any more forcefully? Jesus makes this demand so intensely personal,

Matt. 10:37 "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. 38 And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. 39 He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it."

That's the obedience to which we are called. And there is obvious evidence in our country in our day, that many, if not most, who use the name Christian, have no idea at all what these words mean! God must come first. He must come before all the things of this world. And even the good things of this world must not become the object of our love.

1John 2:15 "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. 17 And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever."

Obedience requires that we forsake the things of this world, and each one of us must come to terms with that demand, even as Abraham did.

v.1

That pattern is to be the pattern of our whole life. Not just the big events and big decisions, but daily life. Luke's gospel adds a very significant word from Jesus in giving this command, found in,

Luke 9:23 "Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."

The additional word is daily. This is to be a daily commitment. Daily, we are to sense God's calling to forsake the things of this world, to deny ourselves, and to take up our cross. Now, that

phrase “take up his cross” does not refer to afflictions or tribulations that may come upon you. Rather, it refers to the active decision of your will to lay down your life for the sake of Christ. To take up your cross daily is to commit everything in your life to the Lord every day. It is to forsake the things of this world in order to advance the kingdom of Christ and glorify our father in heaven.

We are called to such obedience, and that obedience is inseparably connected to faith. It is the obedience of faith. And Abraham is the preeminent example in Scripture of the truth that,

B. Obedience requires that we walk by faith.

You can’t do the things I have just described unless you are walking by faith. You cannot forsake the things of this world, or deny yourself, or take up your cross, unless you have learned to walk by faith and not by sight.

Abraham gave up what was sure and certain, for what was entirely unsure and uncertain. He gave up what was known and seen for what was unknown and unseen. Specifically, he gave up his own homeland, in order to inherit what? “The land God would show him.”

v.1

When Abraham left Ur, and when he left Haran, and even when he first entered Canaan, he didn’t know precisely which land it was that he would inherit. He walked by faith, believing God’s promise.

v.5-9

He became a nomad, a wanderer, a pilgrim. He knew where he was going, at least the general direction. But he did not know where he would settle in particular. He was forced to live by faith.

Now, bear in mind, he had been a rather wealthy man. He had lots of possessions and lots of servants.

v.5

Instead of finding his security and his happiness in those things, he walked by faith. He trusted God, and is, therefore, for us, the greatest example in Scripture of faith. And what is faith?

Hebr. 11:1 “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. 2 For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.”

Faith is believing something because God said it, even if you can’t see it! Faith is claiming something which God has promised, even if you don’t yet possess it! And so we read in that great chapter about Abraham,

Hebr. 11:8 “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”

We read further that,

Hebr. 11:13 “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. 15 And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.”

How sad it is when people today try to make faith and obedience contradictory ideas! How terrible it is when people claim faith in God and even faith in Jesus Christ, but won't live in obedience to his commands. People of God, obedience is in its fullest sense, obedience of faith. Obedience, true obedience, grows out of faith. And obedience can only be sustained by faith. Obedience requires that we walk by faith.

And faith really means that you are willing to live according to God's commands, that you are willing to follow his will for your life and not your own. Faith really means that you give up your own life, and follow Jesus completely.

And there is one final aspect to this obedience of faith, one final example of Abraham which should shine out like a bright light as we read this passage. One final way in which we should at all times strive to imitate our father in the faith, Father Abraham. And that is worship.

III. ABRAHAM REVEALS THE PRIORITY OF WORSHIP.

Notice what Abraham did when the Lord appeared to him.

v.7

"And there he built an altar to the Lord."

And notice what Abraham did as he travelled from place to place, walking by faith in obedience to God's call,

v.8 "...there he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD."

Dear friends, this man lived by faith, in obedience to God's calling and commands. And his chief priority is to be our chief priority. That is, to worship the Lord our God with acceptable sacrifices. And ultimately, that sacrifice is to be the sacrifice of

your whole life.

Rom. 12:1 "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service."

As you attempt to live by faith and not by sight, as you seek to demonstrate the obedience of faith in your own life, make it your greatest ambition in life to be a worshiper. Wherever you find yourself as you walk by faith, stop often, build an altar, and worship.

Of course, we don't have literal wood or stone altars anymore upon which to sacrifice animals to God. But in your hearts, build an altar, and call on the name of the Lord. Worship him along with our father Abraham.