

Session 4: The Patriarchs and the Covenants

Faith, Hope, and Love: Rediscovering the Essentials of Christianity

Joshua Hawkins – www.joshuahawkins.com

Review

In the beginning, God created everything and called it *very good*. He created mankind as the pinnacle of all He had made. He breathed the breath of life into the man and he became a living soul (Genesis 2:7). Adam was created in the *image of God*. His relationship to God was that of a father to a son, and his relationship to creation was that of a servant-king.

Adam was placed in a garden-sanctuary in Eden to *serve and keep* it as a priest, ministering to God. By the serpent's deception and because of a prideful heart, man ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, transgressing God's command.

As judgment for their sin, God cursed humanity and the ground. The most important and most severe consequence of sin was *death*. But in the midst of the curse, God promised that a *seed* would come from the woman who would "crush the head of the serpent", effectively paving a way to *reverse the curse* and *restore* all that was lost because of sin.

The early chapters of Genesis present two main themes that are important for understanding the story of the Bible:

1. The seed
2. The dwelling place of God

Genealogies are developed to mark out two lines – a righteous line (the sons of God, in the *image of God* – from Adam to Seth down to Noah) and an unrighteous line (Cain and his descendants in the land of Nod).

The wickedness of man grows in the earth and God determines to make an end of all flesh by means of a flood. Noah walked with God, thus he and his family are spared. The flood parallels the original creation account in many ways and Noah is seen as a *new Adam*, being given Adam's original mandates.

The central question Genesis 4-11 puts before us is *who will be the seed of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent?*

The Tower of Babel and the Call of Abram

1. After the flood, the earth's population began to grow again and people began to migrate eastward. Settling in the plain of Shinar (later called *Babylon*), man endeavored to build a counterfeit city and mountain-temple with themselves as the object of worship:

**And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them."
(Genesis 11:3–6 ESV)**

2. These events are significant on many levels, but in our context the most important thing to note is that even after all of the unrighteous had been wiped out in the flood, the human heart was still prone to pride and evil. Instead of extolling the greatness of God, the inhabitants of the earth rallied around self-assertion and sought their own fame and honor.
3. Noah may have been blameless before God, but the underlying issue in man had not been dealt with at the flood. Humanity was once again walking in rebellion before God.
4. At Babel, every person spoke the same language because they had common ancestors – *Noah and his family*. This is an overlooked fact because of the significance it has for the story thus far. Again as an act of mercy and judgment, God *came down* and confused their language. Those who spoke the same language would naturally have gathered together as *families* and dispersed over the earth, forming what we would call *the nations*.

**"And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech."
So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was**

called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.”

(Genesis 11:5–9 ESV)

5. With wickedness flourishing once again in the hearts of men, would there be anyone to carry on the promise of *the seed*? Who would it be? From the area of the rebellion in Shinar, God finds a man named Abram, living in Ur of the Chaldeans and extends His hand of covenantal love and loyalty to him.

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. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

(Genesis 12:1–3 ESV)

6. Abram, from the line of Shem, is chosen as the one in whom all the *families* of the earth will be *blessed*. In context to the *curse* of Genesis 3:15 and the promise of the *seed*, *blessing* would come forth – one of Abram’s descendants would be the promised seed who would crush the head of the serpent. The promise of the seed was still alive.

God’s Covenant with Abraham

1. Once again, after Adam and Noah, God brings forth a “new beginning” of sorts with Abram. In addition to Genesis 12:1-3, God’s promise to Abram is expounded upon in four other passages: **Genesis 13:14-17; Genesis 15:1-21; Genesis 17:1-22; Genesis 22:16-19**

“The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.””

(Genesis 13:14–17 ESV)

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and

may multiply you greatly.” Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”
(Genesis 17:1–8 ESV)

“and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”
(Genesis 22:16–18 ESV)

2. God had again narrowed down and clarified the lineage of the coming seed. Just like Seth, Noah, and Shem, Abraham was chosen (or *elected*) as the one from whom the seed would come. However, it is important to recognize that the covenant God made with Abraham included the promise of the seed as *well as personal promises to Abraham*, thus it is not strictly synonymous with the progression of Genesis 3:15.
3. The promises given to Abraham as an *individual* include:
 - a. Blessing (Genesis 12:2)
 - b. A great name (Genesis 12:2)

Yahweh will make Abram’s name “great,” which is more than a promise of renown or acclaim. Rather, in contrast to the tower-builders at Babel, who pathetically strove for permanence themselves by building a name in their own strength (11:4), to have a great name given to one by God in the Hebrew Scriptures is to be viewed as a royal figure (2 Sam. 7:9).¹

¹ Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.132.

- c. Inheritance of the land (Genesis 13:15)
 - d. Abraham would be a blessing (Genesis 12:2)
 - e. Father of many nations (Genesis 17:4)
 - f. Kings would come from his line (Genesis 17:6)
4. God also made *corporate* promises to Abraham:
- a. Perpetual inheritance of the land (Genesis 17:8)
 - b. Victory over enemies (Genesis 22:17)
 - c. Multiplied like the dust of the earth and the stars of the sky (Genesis 13:16)
 - d. All the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham's seed (Genesis 22:18)
5. The promises God made to Abraham lay an extremely important foundation for the rest of the Bible. As the years would pass, this covenant would provide the basis for *five* very important beliefs intrinsic to Jewish expectation:
- a. The resurrection from the dead – Though the land was promised to Abraham's descendants, it was also promised to him directly (Genesis 13:14, 15:7-8) and therefore was used throughout Jewish history as one of the primary arguments for the resurrection from the dead.
 - b. A Jewish kingdom – Though it took many years to develop in God's plan, the promises God made to Abraham would show that a line of Jewish kings would come forth and rule the land that was promised to him. Ultimately contained in the Abrahamic covenant is the foundation for the *kingdom* (developed in the New Testament as *the kingdom of God*), where his family would dwell in the land forever and have dominion over their enemies.
 - c. Global prominence – Abraham was to be the father of many nations, bless all the families of the earth, and have kings come from his line. Though perhaps not obvious at a first glance, this implied that the kingdom of Abraham's seed would have the role of prominence in global government and would be the vehicle of God's purposes to the entire earth. This becomes clearer with the context of Genesis 3:15 in mind.

**“For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.”
(Romans 4:13 ESV)**

- d. Relationship with God – Not only did the Abrahamic covenant involve circumstantial and governmental promises, but also relational promises. The LORD promised that He would be the God of Abraham’s descendants (Genesis 17:8).
- e. Blessing – developed in the next section.

The Promise of Blessing

1. From email salutations (“Rich blessings, Josh”) to sneezing (“bless you!”) to an adjective used as a synonym for “favored” or “happy”, the word “blessing” has become ubiquitous in Western Christian culture. While the modern usage of “blessing” may be appropriate for certain situations, it is far too generic to say that “blessing” for Abraham was simply another way to say that he was “favored by God”.
2. Though often trivialized, misunderstood, or seen out of context, the *blessing* promised to and through Abraham and his seed must be seen in direct contrast to the *curse* that came after the fall. In Abraham’s context, *blessing* refers to the condition (“blessedness”) of *life without death, an untainted creation* not subject to God’s curse, and *unhindered communion with God*. Thus the final (and perhaps most significant) theme in the Abrahamic covenant is the explicit reiteration of the promise of complete *restoration* for everything that was lost at the fall because of God’s *curse*.
3. God promised that in Abraham’s seed all the nations would be *blessed* (Genesis 22:18). It is in this context that we can better understand the purpose of *circumcision*, a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham:

And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations... Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised... So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not

circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”
(Genesis 17:9–14 ESV)

4. Circumcision was a rite and *physical sign* for every single one of Abraham’s male descendants that indicated their membership in Abraham’s family and thus participation in eternal life, the restoration of all things, the kingdom, and the other promises God made. But why circumcision? Circumcision was to show that the seed would come from Abraham’s family and not from another. God is very purposely saying “*you are the physical means by which a descendant will come to restore, just like I’ve promised.*” Also, just as the rainbow reminds of God’s promise to preserve creation from another judgment of water, so circumcision reminds of His promise to preserve a family and bring forth the seed in the face of the curses of *difficulty in childbearing and death.*

Isaac, Jacob, and Judah

1. After Abraham lies with his servant Hagar and she bears Ishmael, Abraham and his wife Sarah bear a son in their old age, according to the promise God gave when He and a couple of angels had lunch with the couple (Genesis 18:1-15).

“The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.”
(Genesis 21:1–5 ESV)

2. God tested Abraham, asking him to sacrifice his only son (Genesis 22:1-14). The basic parallels with Jesus have been largely understood by many in the church, however we do well to approach this scene from Abraham’s perspective. *God was asking Abraham to kill his seed* and effectively prevent the promises God made (including Genesis 3:15) from coming to pass. The long-hoped-for descendant had arrived, and Abraham was asked to take him and kill him at the very site where he had received the promises of blessing. Would Abraham maintain his faith in God?
3. Abraham did not waver in his belief. Isaac was not killed, and God declared that it would be in him that the promises would be carried on.

**“By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”
(Genesis 22:16–18 ESV)**

4. Isaac would marry Rebekah, and they would go on to have twins – Jacob and Esau. While Esau would be the firstborn, Jacob tricks Isaac into blessing him instead of Esau (Genesis 27:1-29).

**And Isaac smelled the smell of his garments and blessed him and said, “See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed! May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!”
As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob...
(Genesis 27:27–30 ESV)**

5. Fleeing from Esau’s wrath, Jacob leaves Canaan and rests his head upon a stone in a field. There he has a very significant dream that has grand implications for the larger story of the *seed* and God’s *dwelling place*.

**And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”
(Genesis 28:12, 16–17 ESV)**

6. Thousands of years had passed since the tragedy in Eden’s garden. God’s image-bearers had wandered so far astray that their original condition of fellowship and communion with God was nearly beyond recognition. But even as the memory faded into obscurity in man’s mind, it burned with unwavering zeal in the LORD’s heart. It was on this night in that field that the LORD disclosed again what He longed for again: a *dwelling place*.
7. At the same time, the LORD revealed that the covenant God had made with Abraham had not yet been enacted as it pertained to his seed. Just as Isaac

(and not Ishmael) had been elected, the LORD declared that Jacob (and not Esau) was now the one chosen.

“And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”
(Genesis 28:13–14 ESV)

8. Jacob would be the father of twelve sons. Because the promises were not fulfilled in Isaac or Jacob, the question remains - which descendant would be the one to continue the promise of *the seed* and all of the other promises made to Abraham?

“The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob’s firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. The sons of Bilhah, Rachel’s servant: Dan and Naphtali. The sons of Zilpah, Leah’s servant: Gad and Asher.”
(Genesis 35:23–26 ESV)

9. Though the question was answered definitively with Isaac (Genesis 28) and Jacob (Genesis 32), a delineation is not made with Jacob’s sons. For a long while, the answer to the question of who would carry on the promise of the seed would be “all twelve tribes”. Jacob was the elect seed and all of his sons were waiting patiently to inherit the promises made to Abraham and his seed.
10. However, a current still flowed in what seemed like a stagnant river. At the close of his life, Jacob gathers his sons to him and pronounces a prophetic blessing upon each one. Everyone’s first guess probably would have been that the promise would have been carried on through *Joseph*. However, *Judah* was chosen, not Joseph.
11. While differing from Isaac and Jacob in that the Abrahamic Covenant was not directly confirmed upon Judah, the import of this prophetic promise is dynamic.

“Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father’s sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion’s cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s

staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk."

(Genesis 49:8–12 ESV)

12. Though all twelve of Jacob's sons and their descendants gained a national identity before the LORD, the promise made about Judah continues the progressive unfolding of the promise of the seed *after* Jacob. Within the corporate reality, the individual current continued to flow. God had consecrated a people to Himself, but the promised head-crusher had not yet come.
13. Beyond just identifying the lineage through which the fulfillment of the seed would come, Jacob's utterance offers the most detailed description of the One who was to come up until this point in history. Building upon the pledge of a kingly lineage given to Abraham, the promise is narrowed to a continuing line of rulers in Judah. Through this the Davidic Covenant is anticipated approximately seven-hundred years before it was initiated by the Lord.
14. While set forth in the Abrahamic Covenant, the governmental significance of the Seed is elaborated. This Man who will rise from the tribe of Judah will be as a mighty lion who will claim the obedience of all peoples. Yet His name would be Shiloh, meaning *peace* or *rest*. In addition to describing the nature of His kingdom, once again there is an intersection of the two currents – the *seed* and *the dwelling place of God*.