

THE GOSPEL PROJECT - CHRONOLOGICAL

THE STORY BEGINS

GOD THE COVENANT MAKER

God's Covenant with Abraham

About 1,900 years after the creation of the world, and about 2,150 years before the birth of Christ, we find God shifting His focus from the entire human race to one specific family bloodline. The bloodline of Jesus the Redeemer first promised to Eve, would be born through the bloodline of Shem one of Noah's three sons. After the flood, we read Noah's words in **Genesis 9:26 (ESV)** ... "*Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem....* Noah was giving glory to God for what He would do through the descendents of Shem. We studied last week how immediately after the people's rebellion against God at the tower of Babel families were instantly divided linguistically according to their family lines. Language barriers destroyed the people's unity and compelled them to spread out over the earth.

The Bible immediately begins to focus on one specific descendent of Shem – a man named Abram. God will later change Abram's name to Abraham so I am just going to refer to him as Abraham throughout the lesson. The original home of Abraham was a place called Ur located about 220 miles southeast of modern-day Baghdad, Iraq. Ur was a prosperous center of religion and industry where many gods were worshipped but the moon god appears to be the most significant.

Abraham had a "family history" of worshipping idols. **Joshua 24:2 (ESV)** ² *And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. When we consider Abraham's upbringing in an idolatrous country and even within an idolatrous family, we are reminded how each individual is given the opportunity to serve or not serve the living God. When we take into account, Abraham's roots and then realize what a tremendous man of faith in the Living God he became, his faithfulness stands as a reminder that no matter what our background, we can choose to serve the LORD.*

Abraham had two brothers, one named Haran who died in Ur and another brother named Nahor. Nahor would be the family connection from which Abraham would years later seek a wife for his own long-awaited son, Isaac.

A choice was made for the family to leave Ur. We are told in **Genesis 11:31 (ESV)** ³¹ *Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there.* Today, Haran is a village in southeastern Turkey. If this were the only scripture available, we might conclude that it was originally Abraham's father's idea to move to Canaan. However, let's read what Stephen, the first Christian martyr in the New Testament said in the sermon he gave to the Sanhedrin (just before they stoned him).

Read Acts 7:2-4 (ESV) ² And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory **appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,** ³ and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ ⁴ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.

Stephen made it clear that God’s original call went out to Abraham not his father. The culture in Abraham’s time was a patriarchal society. So, Terah as the father ruled and his sons and extended family obeyed him. Apparently, it was Terah who wanted to stay in Haran and that is what they did. After Terah’s passing, God initiated a new relationship with human beings.

Read Genesis 12:1-4 (ESV) ¹ 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. ² 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. ³ 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.” ⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

This passage is known as the Abrahamic covenant. This covenant was an unconditional agreement that God made with Abraham – God the Creator was the only one who was required to act. There are three parts to this covenant.

- (1) The promise of the land. As followers of Christ, we need to remember that God the Father gave a specific portion of land to the descendents of Abraham. According to **Genesis 15:18** and **Joshua 1:4**, God gave all of the land modern Israel currently possesses, plus all of the land of the Palestinians (the West Bank and Gaza), plus some of Egypt and Syria, plus all of Jordan, plus some of Saudi Arabia and Iraq to the descendents of Abraham. Israel currently possesses only a fraction of the land God has promised. So often on the news today we hear commentators and politicians speaking of the Israelites’ occupation of the land of Israel. Israel does not just occupy the land. God in His sovereign power promised a specific portion of land to Abraham and his kindred and it belongs to them. Warren Wiersbe explains, “This land is a battleground today and always will be until the Lord returns to reign. But as far as God’s covenant is concerned, the land belongs to Israel. The Jews’ *ownership* of the land depends solely on God’s gracious covenant with Abraham: God gave them the land. But their *possession* and *enjoyment* of the land depends on their faithfulness to obey the Lord.”
- (2) The promise of descendents. Notice that Abraham was 75 when he left Haran – the time when the original promise of descendents was made. Then we read in **Genesis 21:5 (ESV)** ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Abraham waited 25 years for God to even begin to fulfill His promise. We know that Abraham had moments of weaknesses in his faith during that time. Abraham’s story encourages us to count on the truth that God keeps His promises! We read of Abraham in **Hebrews 11:12 (ESV)** ¹² Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead,

were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

- (3) *The promise of blessing and redemption.* In **Genesis 3** God made what we call the Adamic Covenant with Adam and Eve. The Adamic Covenant promised death but also promised grace through a coming Redeemer. God next promised in the Abrahamic Covenant that through Abraham *all the families of the earth shall be blessed.* The bloodline of the people resulting from that covenant would eventually lead to the Redeemer from which salvation from sin would be offered to the entire world.

How God appeared to Abraham, we are not told. But, the biblical record reflects that God confirmed the three-fold promise to Abraham's son, Isaac, and to his grandson, Jacob. If we remember anything about the life of Abraham, we should remember that Abraham learned in his personal walk of faith that God keeps His promises. We can learn the same by trusting in God the Covenant Maker.

I mentioned that Abraham experienced moments of weakness over his lifetime. Let's read about one of them. God commands us to trust that He will keep His promise.

Read Genesis 15:1-6 (ESV) ¹ *After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."* ² *But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"* ³ *And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir."* ⁴ *And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir."* ⁵ *And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."* ⁶ *And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*

Just prior to chapter 15, Abraham's nephew Lot had been captured from Sodom by some invading kings. Abraham and his allies made a surprise attack on four kings and won a complete victory. After the battle was won, Abraham felt afraid. Frequently, like Abraham, we are able to remain strong in the moment of adversity. However, after the battle is done we allow our fears to overtake us with "what ifs." Abraham undoubtedly was worried that the enemies might return! "What about next time? This time we are told that the LORD came to Abraham in a vision. God's remedy for Abraham's fear was to remind him of who He was! *I am your shield.* This is one reason why we need to know God's Word – it takes away our fears. For example, the words of Jesus in **Matthew 10:31 (ESV)** ³¹ *Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

In Abraham's conversation with God we see an example of how our fears about one thing can cause fears about something else to come to the surface – here we find Abraham "opening up" with God about "what really was bothering him!" Even though God had already promised Abraham that he would become a great nation, one tiny detail was still missing. Abraham did not yet have his own blood heir. Abraham and Sarah were still childless; so if Abraham died, the only heir he would have would be the son of a servant.

According to the law of the day, the Code of Hammurabi, Eliezer, his steward, his head servant, who had an offspring, would in time inherit if Abraham did not have a child.

God reaffirms His original promise: *Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.*” Then he said to him, *“So shall your offspring be.”* When our fears and worries “get the best of us,” it is time to go back to God’s promises. There will be moments when God reveals a scripture promise to us. Even after the passage of time, we can go back to that original promise and draw renewed strength from it. For example:

When you are discouraged, cling to: *Psalm 138:7 (ESV)* ⁷ *Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me.*

When you are lonely, remember: *1 Peter 5:7 (ESV)* ⁷ *casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.*

When you doubt God, know this: *Isaiah 59:1 (ESV)* ¹ *Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear.*

Time still continued to pass for Abraham and Sarah and no child was born. Then, Sarah began to do her scheming. She chose to cut herself out of the promise and encouraged Abraham to have a child by her handmaid. Abraham did but in doing so he skewed God’s plan because God’s plan included Sarah – not a relationship with another woman. God desires for His people to be set apart for His glory.

Read Genesis 17:1-14 (ESV) ¹ *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, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” ³ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ⁴ “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ 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... ⁷ 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. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you... all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.” ⁹ ... “As for you, you shall keep my covenant... throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant... Every male among you shall be circumcised.... it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised... So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ 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.”*

Abraham's part was to obey God and mark each male in his house with the sign of the covenant. Circumcision was not new. Other nations practiced it in Abraham's time. However, in this covenant relationship, God gave it a special meaning. Circumcision itself did not convey spiritual blessing since it was meaningless to an eight-day old child; however, it did signify the obedience of the child’s parents. Obedience is what the Covenant Maker has been seeking from His children since the beginning.

Unfortunately, the Jewish people eventually declared this ritual a means of salvation. To them, circumcision became a guarantee that a person was accepted by God just like some people today place false confidence in religious rites such as baptism, communion, or even church attendance.

With the arrival of the long-awaited son came the first ‘star’ in God’s promise to make of Abraham a great nation. **Genesis 21:2 (ESV)**² *And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.*

As we think of God the Covenant Maker, I want to remind you of the New Covenant or Covenant of Grace that God has provided through the seed of Abraham – Jesus. Jesus said in **John 14:6 (ESV)**⁶ ... *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* Our Covenant Maker prepared the Perfect Way for us to receive eternal life. Jesus explained on the night before His death in **Luke 22:20 (ESV)**²⁰ ... *This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.* Accept the New Covenant – take cover in the blood of Christ!