

“Then Jesus answered and said to them,... ‘You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life;

And These Are They Which Testify of Me

Sermons on Genesis
The Abrahamic Covenant
Genesis 12-14

With Study Questions

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Genesis 12-14

Preview

The series of events that take place in chapters twelve through fourteen include: our first look at the Abrahamic Covenant; Abram's wanderings through the middle east; Abram's trip to Egypt where he lies about Sarai being his wife; the separation of Abram and Lot because of the dissension among their herdsmen; Lot being captured and Abram rescuing him; and finally an encounter Abram has with, arguably, the most mysterious person in the whole Bible, Melchizedek.

Since there are no great difficulties in the following three chapters, we will immediately examine the points of emphasis.

I. Points of Emphasis

Abrahamic Covenant

“Now the LORD had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, From your family And from your father’s house, To a land that I will show you.² I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing.³ I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).

A Covenant

It might behoove us to quickly examine what a covenant is. A covenant is a binding agreement or compact or contract. Although the word can be used in a strictly legal sense, we generally see it used in a more intimate sense. As in a covenant of marriage. When God makes a covenant, though, it is a bit different than when men make covenants. See the comment in Vines expository Dictionary.

“The word “covenant” in its sense of an agreement on the part of each of two contracting parties cannot apply to a covenant between God and man. His covenant is essentially a matter of grace on His part...”¹

¹ Vine, W. E., *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. revell)1981.

So when we talk about the covenant people of God, we are not so much talking about people who have made a deal with God, i.e., if we do such and such, God will do such and such. We are talking more accurately about a group of people who are enjoying the grace of God.² The unilateral (top-down, like the tearing of the veil at the crucifixion) nature of God's covenant with man is brought to the surface as we notice the words of the covenant in verse one through three—the “I wills” of the covenant. God is the subject, man is the object. God blesses, mankind is blessed. This is by the grace of God, not the efforts of men.

Nation

In this covenant we see a few categories: God will make Abram a great nation. This may have a more immediate, or proximate, reference to the nation of Israel. But reflect upon the words of Peter, in his writings to the church.

“But 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” (1 Peter 2:9—Italics mine).

The nation (Israel) which would proceed from Abram, was primarily designed to foreshadow the nation, or kingdom, that would come to be known as the church. People may get excited about putting together a church building, in an immediate sense, but the design or ultimate purpose of the church—to bring glory to God—should, and, to a certain extent, always does, pound in the heart of the faithful.

Great Name

In contrast to Babel, who sought to make a name for themselves, God promises to make Abram's name great. This shouldn't be thought as the mere ascension of some single historical figure, but the ascension of an historical figure that he might be a blessing to others. Abram is both an example and cause of blessing. This does not happen as a result of Abram being some sort of super-hero. Nor did he come from a line of faithful people (Joshua 24:2). As John J. Davis observes.

² This is not to say that there is no conditional aspect of man's relationship with God. Clearly, in a temporal sense, there are consequences for sin. Also, those who by grace, have been granted faith, will evidence that faith by works. But for those under God's grace, that grace is sufficient, apart from the efforts of men, to present sinful men righteous before God.

“God’s covenant with Abraham, like a thin thread drawn taut, often appears about to be snapped by the impropriety of Abraham or the pressures of the people around him.”³

Bless—Curse

The success attributed to Abram and his seed, actually works itself out by God blessing them, blessing those who bless them and cursing those who curse them. This is similar to treaties made by heads of state to share friends and share enemies. God will pit Himself against the enemies of His people.

By the way, I think it is a monstrous miss-interpretation to apply this promise of protection to the physical nation of Israel after the “vanishing away” (Hebrews 8:13) of the old covenant. The application must be to the kingdom of God. In the old covenant it was the nation of Israel. Since then it is the church. Those who resist and defy the body of Christ, will ultimately (though perhaps not immediately) fail. This is not because the church is full of super-heroes. It is because of the promise of God.

All the Families

Finally, we see the extent of the covenant. In Abraham, all the families of the earth will be blessed. Herein lies an early argument for postmillennialism.⁴ For whatever “all the families of the earth” actually means, it certainly doesn’t mean that Christianity will be insignificant as a world changing force.

Abram’s Journeys

“So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵ Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan. So they came to the land of Canaan. ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem, as far as the terebinth tree of Moreh. And the Canaanites were then in the land. ⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” And there he built an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. ⁸ And he moved from there to the mountain east of Bethel,

³ John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison* (Baker Book House, 1975), p. 155.

⁴ In short, postmillennialism is an eschatological (last days) position which, among other things, believes the gospel will have a positive effect upon the entire world in every way. The modern popular *Left Behind* series of books and upcoming movie, which suggests a dismal failure of the cultural effects of Christianity, seems quite inconsistent with the tenor of God’s promise.

and he pitched his tent *with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; there he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.* ⁹ So Abram journeyed, going on still toward the South” (Genesis 12:4-9).

Land

Here we read of the beginning of Abram’s journeys. Moses points out that Canaanites (enemies of God’s people) were in the land. There is also a promise to Abram that his descendants will have that land. This is a promise that God kept (Joshua 21:43-45), although later we would see the idea of the land coming to mean much more than mere real estate in the middle east (Hebrews 11:13-16), but the city of God. Nonetheless, the land would play a significant role in God’s preservation of the nation of Israel for the sake of God’s keeping His covenant promise.

Tents and Altars

It may also be worth noting that Abram continually builds altars and pitches tents. The altars would be permanent, visible evidences of faith. Tents are quite temporary in nature. It seemed more important to Abram to give evidence of God’s presence than his own. Perhaps churches should be driven more by establishing a spiritual and theological legacy, than by meeting the felt needs of those who saunter in their doors. Perhaps if the first was a priority, the second would happen more efficiently (Matthew 6:33).

Of course we no longer build altars, since they are designed for sacrifices. But the Apostle Paul gives us a new covenant application in Romans 12 where he admonishes us to present our very bodies, that is our entire existence, as a living sacrifice. Calvin writing of the altars of Abram observes,

“...because he endeavoured, as much as in him lay, to dedicate to God, every part of the land to which he had access, and perfumed it with the odour of his faith.”⁵

Sister Sarai

“Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land. ¹¹ And it came to pass, when he was close to entering Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, “Indeed I know that you *are* a woman of beautiful countenance. ¹² “Therefore it will happen, when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, ‘This *is* his wife’; and they

⁵ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, Vol. I* (Baker Book House, reprint 1993), p. 357.

will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³ “Please say you *are* my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you.” ¹⁴ So it was, when Abram came into Egypt, that the Egyptians saw the woman, that she was very beautiful. ¹⁵ The princes of Pharaoh also saw her and commended her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken to Pharaoh’s house. ¹⁶ He treated Abram well for her sake. He had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys, and camels. ¹⁷ But the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife. ¹⁸ And Pharaoh called Abram and said, “What *is* this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹ “Why did you say, ‘She *is* my sister’? I might have taken her as my wife. Now therefore, here is your wife; take *her* and go your way.” ²⁰ So Pharaoh commanded *his* men concerning him; and they sent him away, with his wife and all that he had” (Genesis 12:10-20).

Expelled From the Promised Land?

There was probably nothing wrong with Abram traveling to Egypt for food. But at least two things are worth noting here: First, through a famine he was expelled out of the very land he was promised. He could have easily complained, as we are tempted often to do, that God had not given what He promised. As some versions indicate, however, Abram was merely sojourning and not taking up permanent residence in Egypt. Abram’s faith here was great. He did not view this delay as faithlessness on God’s part.

Beautiful Sarai

Second, we see an act that is not so faithful. Promoting the half-truth (Genesis 20:12) that Sarai was actually his sister rather than his wife was pretty low. I guess Sarai must have been pretty good looking though quite elderly. Abram was afraid that the Egyptians will most certainly kill him to get to her. If we didn’t yet believe that God’s covenant promise is based upon His own faithfulness over and above the successful efforts of man, we are immediately introduced to it here.

This Pharaoh seems kind of nice. He gave Abram all sorts of livestock and servants. There is no indication that he mistreated Sarai. Nonetheless we see God supernaturally protecting His covenant people. Plagues come into the house of Pharaoh. Obviously he somehow figures out the true nature of the relationship between Abram and Sarai, and instead of taking vengeance, he lets them go.⁶ But not without giving Abram an earful. As Davis says, “**As**

⁶ Of course, he may have feared further plagues.

incredible as it sounds, the ‘father of the faithful’ was rebuked by a pagan king.”⁷ It seems that God protects His church, even when it is not behaving quite as well as it should. At the same time we shouldn’t assume this Pharaoh to be a blameless man.

Abram and Lot Separate

“Then Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the South. ² Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. ³ And he went on his journey from the South as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, ⁴ to the place of the altar which he had made there at first. And there Abram called on the name of the LORD. ⁵ Lot also, who went with Abram, had flocks and herds and tents. ⁶ Now the land was not able to support them, that they might dwell together, for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together. ⁷ And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock. The Canaanites and the Perizzites then dwelt in the land. ⁸ So Abram said to Lot, “Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we *are* brethren. ⁹ “*Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, then I will go to the left.*” ¹⁰ And Lot lifted his eyes and saw all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere (before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah) like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt as you go toward Zoar. ¹¹ Then Lot chose for himself all the plain of Jordan, and Lot journeyed east. And they separated from each other. ¹² Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the cities of the plain and pitched *his* tent even as far as Sodom. ¹³ But the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the LORD” (Genesis 13:1-12).

Lot’s Bad Choice

God apparently blessed both Abraham and his nephew Lot with great riches. So much so that their herdsman couldn’t get along as they sought to handle all the responsibility. Here we see the gracious nature of Abram. He gives Lot first choice of any portion of the land he desired. He chose the plain of

⁷ Davis, p. 177.

Jordan, to the east. Lot pitched his tent as far as Sodom. 2 Peter 2:7 indicates that Lot was a righteous man. But this decision would torment him greatly.

Sometimes things look beautiful. These beautiful looking things might even appear to be profitable for your livestock (or whatever your business might be). But Lot didn't seem too concerned with how much evil there was in the land. Certain social situations, or having access to the internet or cable may be absolutely necessary for the success of your business or household. But maybe at the end of the day you'll come to realize the calamity it creates isn't worth it.

“And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him: “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. ¹⁶ “And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, *then* your descendants also could be numbered. ¹⁷ “Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you.” ¹⁸ Then Abram moved *his* tent, and went and dwelt by the terebinth trees of Mamre, which *are* in Hebron, and built an altar there to the LORD” (Genesis 13:14-18).

Numerous as Dust

Even though Abram gave the, apparently, choice land to Lot, God's promise to Abram would include all, and more, than Abram could see or imagine. After all, who could begin to count dust? It's been said that a thousand mile journey begins with the first step. God tells Abram to walk throughout the land. In seed form God's promise could be seen in the establishment of Abram's own family and the land they would possess. Then it could be seen in the physical nation that would proceed from Abram. Of course, it would only become as numerous as dust when it would begin to extend to all the families of the earth. But there was a problem, and a big one. As far as the seed is concerned, Abram and Sarai couldn't even take the first step. More on that later.

Problems in the Middle East

“And it came to pass in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of nations, ² *that* they made war with Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). ³ All these joined together in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea). ⁴ Twelve years they served Chedorlaomer, and in the thirteenth year they

rebelled. ⁵ In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings that were with him came and attacked the Rephaim in Ashteroth Karnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh Kiriathaim, ⁶ and the Horites in their mountain of Seir, as far as El Paran, which *is* by the wilderness. ⁷ Then they turned back and came to En Mishpat (that *is*, Kadesh), and attacked all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites who dwelt in Hazezon Tamar. ⁸ And the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboim, and the king of Bela (that *is*, Zoar) went out and joined together in battle in the Valley of Siddim ⁹ against Chedorlaomer king of Elam, Tidal king of nations, Amraphel king of Shinar, and Arioch king of Ellasar—four kings against five. ¹⁰ Now the Valley of Siddim *was full of asphalt pits*; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled; *some* fell there, and the remainder fled to the mountains. ¹¹ Then they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way. ¹² They also took Lot, Abram's brother's son who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods, and departed. ¹³ Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, for he dwelt by the terebinth trees of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner; and they were allies with Abram. ¹⁴ Now when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his three hundred and eighteen trained *servants* who were born in his own house, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. ¹⁵ He divided his forces against them by night, and he and his servants attacked them and pursued them as far as Hobah, which *is* north of Damascus. ¹⁶ So he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his brother Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the people" (Genesis 14:1-16).

Abram's Victory

As Vizzini from the *Princes Bride* warns us, never get involved in a land war in Asia. What is this passage all about? Four kingdoms, seemingly headed by Chedorlaomer, defeated five other kingdom and were served by them for twelve years. Finally there was a revolution. The revolution was quelled, and the loot that went to the victor included Lot and his goods. Abram is apprised of the situation, arms 318 men (along with some allies), and brings back, not only Lot and his goods, but all the goods. Then a very interesting thing happens that has been quite perplexing to theologians for years.

Melchizedek

“And the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King’s Valley), after his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him. ¹⁸ Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. ¹⁹ And he blessed him and said: “Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; ²⁰ And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.” And he gave him a tithe of all. ²¹ Now the king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give me the persons, and take the goods for yourself.” ²² But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth, ²³ “that I *will take* nothing, from a thread to a sandal strap, and that I will not take anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich’— ²⁴ “except only what the young men have eaten, and the portion of the men who went with me: Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre; let them take their portion” (Genesis 14:17-24).

Dirty Money

At the get-go we observe that Abram had an appointed task in mind, which was to rescue Lot. The fact that with that victory came more loot wasn’t something to which Abram wanted to be attached. The king of Sodom, seeming to be appreciative and gracious, was willing to simply receive the people who were taken and give the goods to Abram. Abram wouldn’t have it. Not a thread to a sandal strap. He only took expenses. Perhaps he realized that the gifts of the ungodly are often attached to deadly strings.⁸ Or maybe he didn’t want to be accused of having hidden motives, when his only design was to rescue Lot. The church ought to keep these things in mind when the government offers them subsidies or when pagan heavy hitters offer large gifts.

Mysterious Melchizedek

But prior to his encounter with the king of Sodom, Abram has a meeting with, arguably, the most mysterious person in all of Scripture, Melchizedek. Melchizedek is the king of Salem (peace). He brings out bread and wine, so that narrows down his denominational ties. Even before the priesthood is established we learn that Melchizedek is a priest (remember a priest is one who represent people before God—as opposed to a prophet who represent God before the people). He blessed Abram. He blesses God and makes it quite clear

⁸ Davis, p. 183.

as to why Abram succeeded. **“Blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand” (Genesis 14:20).** Then Abram gives him a tithe of all.

Some believe Melchizedek is a preincarnate Christ, others believe he was a person who typified Christ, others believe he was a Canaanite priest, some actually believe he was Shem! That’s interesting! In all likelihood, he was probably a person who typified Christ.

II. Primary

Melchizedek is only mentioned here, Psalm 110, which is a Messianic Psalm alluding to Christ, and the entire seventh chapter of Hebrews. Remembering our theme verse for our study through Genesis, **“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39)**, let us finish our study with a quick examination of how the author of Hebrews finds Jesus in this Old Testament story.

Everlasting Priest

In the first three verses Melchizedek is compared to Jesus as a priest who abideth continually. In verses four through ten, using tithing as an example, the author of Hebrews show how superior Jesus is the human priests. For if Melchizedek received tithes from Abraham, it is as if the Levites (who were then in the loins of Abraham) were actually the ones paying, rather than receiving the tithes. What does all this prove? For one thing, it proves that there is no longer a need for a human priesthood. For we have a priest who comes according to the power of an endless life, who ever lives to make intercession for us. It is through this priest that we draw near to God.

Feeling Distant?

Sometimes we feel distant from God. We’ll often go to a more mature Christian, or a pastor or elder (which is not necessarily inappropriate) because we feel they have a more direct line to God. This is not an entirely invalid intuition. What is invalid is thinking someone has more direct access to God than you. The reason you and I can go before God and be confident that He will receive our audience is because we have a Priest, who is Christ the Lord. He comes before the Father on our behalf, not with the blood of bulls and goats, but His own blood.

The Inferiority of Abraham

So we begin to see Jesus in all of this. We know that whatever the actual nature of this man might have been, he was at least a foreshadow of Jesus. And that Abraham, the father of the faithful and the selected individual through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed, considered himself inferior to Jesus. So we learn that the premiere, and perhaps most significant personality of the Old Testament bowed before the person of Jesus Christ. Perhaps this will give us increased appreciation for the words of Jesus in the gospel of John,

“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

A Priesthood to Adore

Perhaps veiled, and therefore to a lesser degree, when Abraham saw Melchizedek, he was no doubt reminded of the promise of God to bring forth a Messiah—a deliver who would save people from their sins. This caused Abraham to give a tithe—which was a sign of reverence. The author of Hebrews pleads with his readers to learn to appreciate the superiority of the priesthood of Christ. Whether we find ourselves in the midst of victory or defeat, as we sojourn through the land, let us, like Abraham, pause and enjoy the refreshment of Christ.

Questions for Study

1. Define covenant.
2. How is a covenant God makes different than covenants men make?
3. How are we to understand a great nation coming from Abram?
4. Contrast Abram obtaining a great name versus the incident at Babel.
5. In what respect should expect God to curse and bless in relation to the church?
6. To what extent will the Abrahamic Covenant have an effect on the world?
7. How important is the land promise? Did God keep this promise? Is there more?
8. What is the significance of tents and altars in these chapters?
9. What was Abram's response to be expelled from the promised land?
10. Discuss the incident with Abram and his wife/sister Sarai.
11. What was Lot's bad choice and why do you think he made it?
12. Why wouldn't Abram keep any of the loot he won in his battle?
13. Discuss the character and the nature of Melchizedek. How do you see Jesus in this story?