

# *The Rescue is Launched*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1<sup>st</sup> in a four-part series

July 6, 2014

©2014 Scott L. Engle

*Genesis 12:1-3, 15:1-6, 17:9-14 (NIV)*

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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” <sup>2</sup>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?” <sup>3</sup>And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” <sup>4</sup>But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” <sup>5</sup>He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” <sup>6</sup>And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

<sup>9</sup>God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. <sup>10</sup>This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup>You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.”

*Romans 4:1–5 (NIV)*

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? <sup>2</sup>If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. <sup>3</sup>What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

<sup>4</sup>Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation.

<sup>5</sup>However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

*It is here, in a meeting between God and Abram, that the story of God’s rescue begins.*

The summer seems to be a time when our sermon series tend toward stories, really good and important stories, often from the Old Testament. I’ve learned over the years that Christians often have a pretty decent awareness of the individual stories, but many are unable to connect any dots, to see how these stories work together to reveal to us the nature of God and his work to rescue from the darkness not only humanity, but God’s good creation. I wrote my book, *Restart*, for that very reason. Indeed, portions of this study and others in this series will be drawn from *Restart*. The first part of the book is devoted to a presentation of the larger biblical story in six acts, which is summarized in the page four text box of this study. Here it is in a nutshell:

Act 1: God **creates** everything, including humans in God’s image.

Act 2: The humans **rebel** against God, separating themselves from God and one another.

Act 3: God chooses and saves a people, **Israel**, through whom God will restore all humanity, indeed, all of creation.

Act 4: When Israel, God’s people, proves unable to be faithful, God provides one faithful Israelite, **Jesus**, through whom God’s restoration is achieved.

Act 5: God’s renewal project continues as the Spirit of God empowers **the church** to build for the kingdom of God.

Act 6: Jesus returns and God’s **restoration and renewal** is fully consummated in the arrival of the new heavens and earth.

In the coming weeks we are going to be in Act 3 of the larger biblical story. We'll begin with Abraham, and then move on to Moses, Joshua, and Samuel. We will finish the summer with a five-week series on David.

First though, let's see what precedes God's choosing of Abraham.

### *The rescue begins*

In the first two acts of the six-act play, one encounters a Tree of Life and a chest big enough to float two creatures from each species on the planet. There is a talking serpent and the Nephilim. A cherubim stands guard over a garden and rain falls at the rate of fifteen feet per hour.

But all that changes when we come to Genesis 11:27, when we are thrust into the story of a family that can, at times, be uncomfortably like our own. When Act 3 opens we find ourselves in the world of the ancient Near East, a world and a time that can be reached by historians and archaeologists. It is nearly 4,000 years ago. Granted, a long time when measured by the span of our lives, but we know about civilizations much older. The Great Pyramid of Egypt had stood for more than 700 years by this time. It is the time of Hammurabi of Babylonia and his extensive written legal code.

In this ancient, but knowable, world we meet a man named Abram.<sup>1</sup> He and his family live in Haran, far to the north of Canaan,<sup>2</sup> his father having moved there from Ur. One day, God speaks to Abram. There is no fanfare, no burning bush, no angels or flaming swords. Just a guy and the Creator of the Cosmos.

There is nothing distinctive about Abram. God could have chosen anyone through whom to begin the restoration of all creation. But he chose Abram. Abram, later called Abraham, would become the father, the patriarch, of God's people and as his story unfolds we learn a lot about why God chose this man and his wife, Sarai.

### *Three promises*

God makes three promises to Abram when he comes to him that day and later:

- God will give him a land.
- God will make Abram's family a great nation, more numerous than the stars.
- All the families of the earth will be blessed through Abram's family.

There does seem to be one problem with God's plan. Abram and his wife, Sarai, are old, really old. Sarai is far past child-bearing years. But, God promises them a family and it is a family they will get. All is possible with God.

People usually focus on the first two promises, perhaps because they are so dramatic, so much so that the third promise gets forgotten and overlooked. Yet, I can't overstate its importance. God's call of Abraham sets the stage for all that follows. Yes, Abraham will become the father of a great nation. Yes, he will go to the land given him by God. But, more importantly, "all the families of the earth will be blessed" through Abraham. In the Old Testament, blessing is a gift from God, encompassing material well-being, peace, and success in life. Blessing shapes the lives of Abraham's family and the "outsiders" they meet. Such blessing will be brought to all the people of the earth. The accomplishment of this blessing is God's larger purpose in the biblical story. To look ahead, this promise made to Abraham is fulfilled in Jesus.

As Act 3 rolls on, the Israelites will often forget that God did not choose Abraham merely for his own sake, nor even merely for theirs, but for the sake of the whole world. Later, when God rescues the Hebrews from Egypt, it is for the sake of all humanity and every

---

<sup>1</sup>Later in the book of Genesis, Abram will be given a new name by God. "Abraham" means something like "father of a multitude." The name of Abram's wife, Sarai, will be changed to Sarah. God changes Abram's name when God tells Abram that circumcision of male children is to be a sign of the covenant between God and Abram. In ancient cultures, a new name would signify a new phase in the person's life.

<sup>2</sup>Canaan is the ancient name of the land that would become the homeland of biblical Israel, given to them by God. Later, it would come to be called Palestine. The people living in this area in the time of Abraham were known as the Canaanites.

corner of creation.<sup>3</sup> It will always be easy for the Israelites to forget that they were to build, even to be, the city on the hill to which all nations would stream (Isaiah 2:2-5; Matthew 5:14-16). It was tempting to them, as it is tempting to us, to turn inward, to build barriers, to see people as “outsiders.” Jesus would remind his fellow Jews that they were to be the “light to the world.” Jesus arrival was the demonstration that God’s promise to Abraham had been fulfilled in Jesus. If we are going to understand the larger biblical story, we have to keep God’s larger purpose in mind— namely, putting right what was ruined by the rebellion in the Garden of Eden.

#### *A sign of this covenant*

So, as odd as it seems, God’s great rescue plan begins with one man and one woman, Abram and Sarai. And God gives them a sign of God’s three promises. All the males of this growing family are to be circumcised, including infants at birth. This practice of circumcision is to mark them as the people of God. It functions like a badge of membership among God’s people.<sup>4</sup>

It is not that the circumcision is a condition for God to keep his promises. Rather, circumcision is an outward sign, a baptism of sorts into the family through whom God is working in a special and focused way. There is no deal on the table, just God’s promises. There is no Law, no Ten Commandments, no priests, no tabernacle, and no sacrifices. All that will come later in Act 3. For now, God simply makes profound and surprising promises to Abraham.

#### *The child and the family*

Though Sarah is long past her child-bearing years, God gives them a son, Isaac. Isaac’s sons are Esau and Jacob. Jacob has twelve sons who become the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.<sup>5</sup> The stories of this family across the generations occupy the rest of the book of Genesis. There is much we learn about God in these stories, but Abraham and his family certainly are not always models of faithfulness. Far from it. Indeed, even betrayal and murder plague the family. Yet, through it all, God’s purpose, this larger rescue project, moves forward even when we have difficulty discerning how this could be.

At the end of Genesis, the Israelites are living in Egypt, driven there by famine. By the opening of the book of Exodus, the people of God are so vast a number that, although they are enslaved, Egypt’s Pharaoh is frightened of them. God would choose Moses to lead his people out of slavery and back to Canaan, where God would be their king, though not for long. And so the story continues for centuries. Through it all, God would relentlessly pursue his people, calling them back to the love of God and neighbor, rescuing them, and always preserving a remnant of the faithful, a nucleus of his redeemed and chosen people.

#### *A man of faith*

As we go forward in Act 3 through all the stuff about the Law, the priests, and the rest, it’s be easy to lose sight of the truth that God’s plan will progress on the basis of faith. It was about faith with Abraham, and it is still about faith.

---

<sup>3</sup> The book of Ruth is an excellent example. It tells the story of a young Moabite woman, i.e., not an Israelite and not a descendent of Abraham, who through her Israelite mother-in-law, is blessed by God and incorporated into God’s people. She goes on to become the great grandmother of King David, the greatest of all Israel’s kings.

<sup>4</sup> Circumcision was such a powerful badge of membership that, in Jesus’ day, there were Jewish men who, seeking to be more acceptable in the Greco-Roman culture, underwent an operation to “undo” their circumcision cosmetically. Referring to circumcision and other markers of faith as badges of membership is one of many helpful phrases from N. T. Wright.

<sup>5</sup> I’ve learned from my classes that the term “Israel” can be confusing. “Israel” was the collective name of the twelve tribes descended from Jacob, Abraham’s grandson. After spending a night wrestling with a stranger who turns out to be God, Jacob was given the name “Israel,” which in Hebrew means something like “one who strives with God.” From that time on, the name “Israel” would not only designate the ancestor Jacob, but also God’s people, as in the twelve tribes “of Israel.” Later, it would take on national and political meaning as well. Thus, David would be King of Israel. Your reading of the Bible will be helped by keeping in mind that “Israel” sometimes refers to the people of God and at other times refers to a kingdom.

When Genesis says that God reckoned Abraham's faith to him as righteousness (in 15:6), it is a way of saying that Abraham's faith enabled the restoration of God and Abraham's relationship. Notice that this pivotal statement about Abraham's faith having put him right with God comes before Abraham is given the sign of circumcision in Genesis 17.

Nearly two millennia after Abraham, Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Rome. He wanted them to understand that with God it had always been about faith, going all the way back to Abraham. It was faith, and faith alone, that restored Abraham to a right relationship with God, not circumcision or Sabbath-keeping or any of the other "works of the law" that would come later.

Thus, Paul uses Genesis 15:6 to demonstrate that righteousness was Abraham's by virtue of his faith, even before God taught him the rite of circumcision as a sign of the covenant. And it happens centuries before Moses brought down the Law from the mountain. Thus, even the Law of Moses could not be the basis of a restored relationship with God. That happens through faith. And it is a faith available to everyone, to all the families of the earth, not merely those who were given the Law.

Abraham was not Jewish when God made his promises to him. He was uncircumcised and did not have the Law. He was just a man. A man who trusted his Lord. It was this trust that proved the wisdom of God's choice. It was always about this faith and trust. Faith would be the means by which God's promise to Abraham would be extended to all the families of the earth. It is our own faith in Jesus that marks us out as God's people.

Next week, we come to Moses and the story of the Exodus, the time when God saved his people from slavery in Egypt. God will give his people the Law and instruct them on building a suitable place for God to dwell with them. But through it all, it will be a story about faith.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In God's wisdom, he has given us a library of writings, the Bible, which is largely a collection of stories about God, about his creation, and about ourselves. They are stories that beg us to use our imagination for we can enter a story in ways that we could never get into a book of systematic theology. These stories are given to us so that, through them, we might come to know God better, to live in a right and loving relationship with him who made us. So, here are a few questions to ask yourself as you try to step within the story of Abraham and Sarah. You may want to read Genesis 12-22 first, if it's been awhile. If you are new to these stories, you might consider first reading these chapters in Peterson's *The Message*.
  - Imagine that you are Abraham and you believe that God has told you to leave everything behind to head for a foreign land. What do you think your reaction would be? How would you even know it was God calling you? How would Abraham know? After all, even hearing voices doesn't tell us everything – we medicate that! Do you think something remarkable must have happened within Abraham's heart? How hard must it have been for him to head out?
  - Even better, imagine that you are Sarah. You are in your eighties and your husband comes home announcing that he is going to have an heir – by you! You might laugh as Sarah did. You might even take things into your own hands like Sarah. How could you trust your spouse enough? How could you trust God enough? In Sarah's mind, what might this promise cost her?
2. This is a story about faithfulness: God's faithfulness to Abraham and Abraham's faithfulness to God. How would you define faithfulness? Have there been times in your life when you felt like God was being unfaithful? How did you deal with that? What does it really mean to be faithful to God? How could we go about being more faithful to God? What do you think God expects of us?
3. Here's one that will get you thinking. The language of Abraham's story is linked to the creation stories. In what ways is this story one of new creation? What are some similarities between the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 (Act 1) and the story of God's covenant with Abraham?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

**Monday, Genesis 12** God calls Abram and makes three promises to him: a land, numerous descendants, and that *all* the families on earth would be blessed through him. It is this last promise that is often forgotten but is the key to understanding God's redeeming work and the charge given us by Jesus Christ.

**Tuesday, Genesis 17** God gives Abraham a sign of God's covenant: circumcision. Note that this comes after God promises Abraham countless descendants and pronounces him righteous because of his faith.

**Wednesday, Genesis 18:1-15** God again promises a child to Abraham and Sarah.

**Thursday, Genesis 22** God commands Abraham to sacrifice his miracle child, Isaac.

**Friday, Hebrews 11:8-22** The entire passage about the faith of Abraham.

**Prayer List**

