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A CHRIST-CENTERED PROCLAMATION OF THE
ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

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APPROVAL SHEET

A CHRIST-CENTERED PROCLAMATION OF THE
ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

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For Nikki Leigh Daniel

The wife of my youth, mother of my children,
helpmate in life, partner in ministry,
my perfect one—my only one.

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PREFACE

Ever since I earned my Master of Divinity from Southern Seminary in 2002, I have considered the possibility of pursuing a Doctor of Ministry degree. Over the years, I have researched multiple schools and degree programs. At one point, I was accepted into a doctoral program and was preparing to begin my studies but decided against moving forward. It seemed that I could never settle on the right school, the right program, and the right timing. All that changed when I learned that Dr. Jim Hamilton was launching a Doctor of Ministry degree with an emphasis in Biblical Theology at Southern Seminary. The opportunity to study biblical theology with Dr. Hamilton, and with the other outstanding faculty at Southern Seminary, and the opportunity to grow in my knowledge of the Scriptures and ability to faithfully exposit them was just the academic and pastoral challenge I desired. I am extremely grateful for Dr. Hamilton, my program director and project supervisor, also for all the faculty who teach seminars for the Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Theology. As a result of both their teaching and example, I know God's Word more deeply and am consequently a more faithful expositor of God's Word and shepherd of God's flock.

I also want to thank my church family, Crawford Avenue Baptist Church. It is my joy to pastor the people of Crawford Avenue Baptist. Thank you for your generous and happy support through this process. Some churches do not possess the foresight to discern the long-term benefits of permitting their pastors extended times away for study and growth, but you not only allowed me to work on this degree you actively encouraged my efforts. My earnest desire is that whatever increased knowledge and growth I have experienced through my studies will resound to your joy and benefit through my

ministry.

My parents, Jim and Kay Daniel, have never failed to offer me their love, support, and encouragement. Dad, thank you for your gentle nudges over the years for me to enroll in a doctoral program. Mom, thank you for pushing me academically when I was young and assuring that I possess the foundational skills to earn a degree like this. To my sister, Susan Melchior, and her husband, Jonathan Melchior, thank you for showing me, as a spiritually lukewarm high school student, what it means to zealously follow Jesus without reservation. I swore I would never go to Bible College. God had other plans.

Nikki Daniel, you are the love of my life. Thank you for believing in me and challenging me to question caution, to overcome reluctance, and to pursue opportunities that are out of my comfort zone. As I worked on this degree, you sacrificed the most. I get the degree, but Jesus knows your sacrifice, and I am confident that you will receive the greater reward. Once the diploma is in hand, I look forward to more date nights, more free time with family, and more getaways for just you and me. To my children, Noah, Isaiah, and Tatom, you are the delight of my heart. Although it is difficult for you to comprehend why I would want to do “more” school, thank you for cheering me on along the way and always greeting me with joy and excitement when I returned home from Louisville. My prayer is that God will grant you an insatiable desire for God’s Word and that like Abraham you will walk all the days of your life with the God of promise through faith in the His promised seed, Jesus Christ.

James Gilbert (Bert) Daniel Jr.

Augusta, Georgia

May 2021

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books written by forty different authors over a period of approximately fifteen hundred years. The authors of Scripture employ narrative, law, prophecy, poetry, letters, apocalyptic literature, and other various genres to communicate their message. When all their writings are compiled, the average English Bible contains over seven hundred and eighty thousand words.¹ The Bible is rich in its diversity, majestic in its breath, and glorious in its unity.

Understandably, many Christians confess that they find the Bible intimidating. It is not unusual for a church member to confess to his pastor, “I want to understand the Bible better, but I don’t know where to start.” Or he might express his frustration, “I began reading the Bible, but I stopped because it didn’t make much sense to me.”

As a result, pastors should employ many strategies to increase biblical literacy among church members.² However, even when a general knowledge of the Scriptures increases, many often lack the ability to properly integrate the various parts of Scripture in a way that reflects the larger story of the Bible. People need a framework for Scripture in order to understand how the various pieces of the Bible unite to tell the story of God’s redemption.

Various frameworks have been offered, and many are helpful in their own right. Covenant, however, seems to be the framework that most naturally emerges from

¹ “How Many Words Are There in the Bible?,” *Word Counter Blog* (blog), December 8, 2015, https://wordcounter.net/blog/2015/12/08/10975_how-many-words-bible.html.

² For an excellent example of fostering the personal discipline of biblical intake, see Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 21-78.

the biblical text itself. Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum assert “that *the progression of the covenants* forms the backbone of Scripture’s metanarrative, the relational reality that moves history forward according to God’s design and final plan for humanity and all creation, and unless we ‘put together’ the covenants correctly, we will not discern accurately ‘the whole counsel of God’ (Acts 20:27).”³

Consequently, a clear and informed survey of the biblical covenants would prove helpful to any congregation. It’s beyond the scope of this project to examine all the biblical covenants. Rather, the focus of this project will be the Abrahamic Covenant as it is revealed in the book of Genesis. I chose the Abrahamic Covenant because it functions best as an introduction to the covenants of the Bible and as a paradigm through which to understand all the other covenants in Scripture.

James Montgomery Boice boldly claims, “With the exception of Jesus Christ, Abraham is probably the most important person in the Bible. ...No one can understand the Old Testament without understanding Abram.”⁴ It is worth noting that the first eleven chapters of Genesis cover over two thousand years of history. But in the following ten chapters, the author slows down, only covering twenty-five years, all of which tell the story of Abraham⁵ and his family.

At the heart of this story is the covenant God made with Abraham, and it is difficult to overestimate the influence of the Abrahamic Covenant upon the rest of Scripture. Gentry and Wellum observe, “The covenant with Abraham is the basis for all

³ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 31. This is not to say that covenants constitute the central theme of the Bible. Rather, that covenants provide the central framework for the Bible. Michael Horton explains, "Once again, it is important to remind ourselves that we are not treating the covenant motif as a central doctrine. In other words, it is not a matter of reducing everything in the Bible to the covenant, but of recognizing the rich covenantal soil in which every biblical teaching takes root." Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 23.

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 435-436.

⁵ In Gen 17, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham and Sarai’s name to Sarah. For the sake of clarity and simplicity, I will use the names Abraham and Sarah throughout this work.

of God's dealings with the human race from this point on, and the basis of all his later plans and purposes in history."⁶ Therefore, a proper understanding of the Abrahamic Covenant will greatly enhance one's understanding of how the bible fits together to tell the story of God's redemptive work in Christ Jesus.

Ministry Context

In 2002, I became the pastor of Berea Baptist Church in Grovetown, Georgia, a suburb of Augusta, Georgia. Berea was in dire need of revitalization, and after a long period of struggle, the Lord blessed Berea with years of growth and effectiveness. In the fall of 2015, Berea merged with a historic but declining downtown congregation, Crawford Avenue Baptist Church. Crawford Avenue was founded in 1881, and in the fifties and sixties Crawford Avenue was arguably the largest Southern Baptist Church in Augusta with over one thousand in attendance on Sunday morning. Prior to the merger, Crawford Avenue had dwindled down to approximately twenty-five to thirty-five in attendance. The merger has proven to be a blessing to both congregations. We will soon celebrate our five-year church merger anniversary. Most of our members are still white suburbanites. However, our church has embraced a vision to reach our diverse community with the gospel. New ministries are continuing to develop; some folks are moving closer to the neighborhood; and I believe we are making steady progress toward seeing our vision become a reality. Given our ministry context, I have four main goals for my project.

My first goal is to provide the congregants of Crawford Avenue with a covenantal framework for reading the Scriptures. I read Gentry and Wellum's *Kingdom through Covenant* in the summer of 2018.⁷ Gentry and Wellum persuaded me that the

⁶ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 332.

⁷ Ibid.

covenants provide the most natural and textual framework for reading and understanding the biblical narrative. I have sought to build my pastoral ministry on expositional, Christ-centered sermons. However, I now realize that over the years I have not preached much on the biblical covenants nor explained their import on the larger story of Scripture. My desire is to unpack the richness of the biblical covenants for our people and thereby equip them with a biblical framework for understanding the Scriptures.

My second goal is to expose the congregants of Crawford Avenue to a Christ-centered reading of the whole Bible. Augusta is an increasingly transient city. A large Army base, several colleges, and a couple of nuclear plants ensure a significant portion of our members will only be with us for two to three years. Since the beginning of my pastoral ministry, I have preached expositional sermons through books of the Bible. My preaching texts have come primarily from the New Testament. Often a series through one New Testament book extends a year or a year and a half. Therefore, in a two to three year period, a member of our church may only hear sermons from the New Testament, and at that pace the sermons they hear may be limited to only two or three books in the New Testament. I am burdened that our people hear the Word proclaimed from all of the Scriptures and that they see Sunday after Sunday how all of the Scriptures are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus. Therefore, my aim is to expose our folks to the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) over a two to three year period. Therefore, I have determined to preach in a two to three year timeframe one series in each of the following major divisions of Scripture: Law, History, Poetry, Major Prophets, Minor Prophets, Gospels and Acts, Paul’s Letters, and General Letters. A Christ-centered exposition of the Abrahamic Covenant will be instrumental in exposing our people to the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) and to providing them with a Christ-centered hermeneutic for reading Scripture.

My third goal is to evangelize unbelievers by exposing them to the redemptive unity of Scripture. Some might argue that Augusta is the buckle of the Bible Belt. It is the

birthplace of the Southern Baptist Convention. Most people in Augusta have some knowledge of the Bible and of the gospel. But, for many, it's a superficial knowledge. They are familiar with certain stories in the Bible and recognize certain characters in the Bible. But these stories and characters represent little more than moral tales. They do not understand how these historical accounts relate to the larger purpose of God's redemption in Jesus. Paul filled his evangelistic preaching with references to the Old Testament Scriptures (Acts 13:16-41; 14:3-7; 20:17-35; 22:1-21; 23:1-6; 24:10-21; 26:2-23; 28:17-20), and like Jesus before him, demonstrated how the Old Testament Scriptures find their fulfillment in Jesus (Luke 24:13-35). I am persuaded that the redemptive unity of the Bible is one of the most beautiful and compelling apologetics for the Christian faith. Therefore, I hope that a Christ-centered proclamation of the Abrahamic Covenant will awaken unbelievers to the glorious, redemptive unity of the Bible and that the purposes of God in Jesus will be compelling and irresistible. My hope is that their preconceived notions about the Bible will be shattered and that they will glory in Jesus in whom all the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant are "yes and amen" (2 Cor 1:18-20).

My fourth goal is to encourage a missionary impulse to reach our diverse community and the unreached peoples of the world with the gospel. Our church is now located in a diverse community. This is true of the larger Central Savannah River Area (CSRA)⁸ as well as our more immediate neighborhood, Harrisburg. For example, according to one study, the residents of Harrisburg are 51% Black, 42% White, 2% Hispanic / Latino, 2% Asian, and 3% Other. The diversity of our community and neighborhood presents certain challenges, but more importantly it affords a tremendous opportunity to bear witness to the power of the gospel to unite diverse peoples in love.

⁸ "Located in east-central Georgia, along the Savannah River, the CSRA includes 13 counties: Burke, Columbia, Glascock, Hancock, Jefferson, Jenkins, Lincoln, McDuffie, Richmond, Taliaferro, Warren, Washington, and Wilkes. The largest city in the CSRA is Augusta—the economic core of the region." Georgia Department of Community Affairs, 2012, https://www.dca.ga.gov/sites/default/files/csra_regional_assessment_and_sip_final_draft_0.pdf, "CSRA Regional Plan 2035."

Furthermore, our desire is not only to reach the peoples of our immediate community but to obey Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations. In recent years, we have experienced the joy of sending out one church planter and two missionaries, and several more are prayerfully considering the possibility of being sent out on mission from our body. My intent in this series is to fuel that missionary impulse by demonstrating that the missionary mandate finds its roots in the Abrahamic Covenant and was therefore always an integral part of God's purpose for the world.

Biblical Theology

Diverse definitions of biblical theology abound. In their book *Understanding Biblical Theology*, Edward W. Klink and Darian R. Lockett present five prominent models for doing biblical theology: biblical theology as historical description, biblical theology as history of redemption, biblical theology as worldview-story, biblical theology as canonical approach, and biblical theology as theological construction.⁹ As a broad survey Klink and Lockett's presentation is helpful. However, Gentry rightly identifies the volume's weakness: "nowhere in the book do they assess or critique the epistemological foundations of the different views. They simply record the advantages and disadvantages of the approaches presented without making the basic assumptions explicit, but in so doing, they never get to the heart of the differences between the five approaches."¹⁰ As Gentry points out, only two of the approaches surveyed, biblical theology as history of redemption and biblical theology as worldview-story, presuppose a high view of Scripture and therefore qualify as an evangelical biblical theology.¹¹

Based on a reading of *Understanding Biblical Theology*, an evangelical might

⁹ Edward W. Klink and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

¹⁰ Peter J. Gentry, "The Significance of Covenants in Biblical Theology," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 20, no. 1 (2016): 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

conclude that there are only two evangelical approaches to biblical theology from which to choose. Yet, it is not that simple. Evangelical scholars have proposed a variety of definitions of biblical theology; many of these definitions borrow from one or several of the four approaches presented by Klink and Lockett. For example, in *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, Graeme Goldsworthy provides a helpful survey of the different evangelical approaches to biblical theology. Goldsworthy identifies nine different approaches; each represented by a leading scholar: Geerhardus Vos; Edmund P. Clowney; Dennis E. Johnson; Willem VanGemeren; William J. Dumbrell; Sidney Greidanus; Charles H.H. Scobie; Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen; and finally, Robinson and Hebert, the approach for which Goldsworthy advocates.¹²

I find it most helpful to think of biblical theology in three categories: a definition of biblical theology, a hermeneutic for biblical theology; and a method for biblical theology. No doubt, the categories of definition, hermeneutic, and methodology conceptually overlap at certain points; however, it is still helpful for us to maintain a distinction between each as we seek to answer the question—what is biblical theology?

A Definition of Biblical Theology

I propose that biblical theology is *the story of God's progressive revelation of redemption in Christ*.

A few comments are necessary. First, biblical theology is a story. Propositional truth is critical to know God and his world. At the same time, we recognize that God did not merely reveal himself to us in propositions. God has revealed himself to us in a story. Biblical theology is especially concerned to know God's story recorded for us in the pages of Scripture.

Second, biblical theology emerges from God's revelation. As noted earlier, the

¹² Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 76-99.

Bible is comprised of sixty-six books recorded over a span of fifteen hundred years. Therefore, in its individual volumes the Bible is incredibly diverse. At the same time, all sixty-six books tell one grand story because all possess one divine author. Therefore, in its overall message, the Bible reflects a glorious unity.

Third, biblical revelation is progressive. In his definition of biblical theology, Geerhardus Vos emphasizes the “historic progressiveness” of biblical theology. Vos writes, “Biblical theology deals with revelation as a divine activity, not as the finished product of that activity. ...It has not completed itself in one exhaustive act, but unfolded itself in a long series of successive acts.”¹³ The progression of biblical theology through the narrative of Scripture is “organic;” the story and its themes unfold from seed to bud to full maturity as God’s story progresses.¹⁴

Fourth, the story of biblical theology is a story of redemption. Again, Vos observes, “Revelation does not stand alone by itself, but is (so far as Special Revelation is concerned) inseparably attached to another activity of God, which we call *Redemption*.”¹⁵

Finally, the story of God’s redemption revealed progressively in Scripture finds its fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. As Paul declares, “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor 1:20).¹⁶ In redemptive history, all roads lead to Christ. “Biblical theology, then, is the study of how every text in the Bible relates to Jesus and his gospel.”¹⁷

¹³ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 5-6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹⁶ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture citations are taken from *The English Standard Version* (ESV).

¹⁷ Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, 38-42.

A Hermeneutic for Biblical Theology

In his book *What Is Biblical Theology?*, James M. Hamilton Jr. defines biblical theology as the task of understanding and embracing “the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors... their understanding of earlier Scripture, redemptive history, and the events they are describing, recounting, celebrating, or addressing in narratives, poems, proverbs, letters, and apocalypse.”¹⁸ Hamilton is right to stress the critical role hermeneutics plays in biblical theology. Hamilton convincingly argues that we are to read the Bible as the biblical authors read the Bible. As the story of God’s redemptive work in Christ unfolds the biblical authors consistently assume the worldview of previous biblical authors and interact with their work. We must adopt their interpretive grid for doing biblical theology if we are to rightly understand the story.

A Method for Biblical Theology

Richard Lints agrees with the hermeneutic we have proposed. Lints writes, “The modern evangelical theological framework ought to seek to mirror the interpretive matrix that is found in the redemptive revelation of the Scriptures.”¹⁹ Lints, then, provides us with a methodology for applying this hermeneutic.²⁰ Based on Lints’ methodology I propose that we read any biblical text along the four horizons: the contextual horizon, the covenantal horizon, the canonical horizon, and the contemporary horizon.²¹

¹⁸ James M. Hamilton Jr., *What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible’s Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 15-16.

¹⁹ Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 310.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 290-310.

²¹ Lints presents three horizons: the textual horizon, the epochal horizon, and the canonical horizon (*Ibid.*, 295-310). In *Kingdom through Covenant*, Gentry and Wellum adopt Lints’ methodology (118-129). Brian Payne, in an Old Testament Seminar, taught the four horizons presented here. I prefer the four horizons to Lints’ three horizons because covenants represent a more natural structure of the biblical narrative than epochs. In addition, the contemporary horizon reminds us of the necessity of discerning when and how the biblical story intersects with our own. Brian Payne, “Four Horizons for Each Text” (lecture, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, July 11, 2018).

The contextual horizon requires that we read the text in its immediate context and apply the grammatical-historical method to determine the author's original intent. The covenantal horizon properly locates the text within the biblical storyline. In so doing, the interpreter will be able to engage intertextually and notice connections and patterns (types) to previous periods in the biblical revelation. The canonical horizon applies the promise-fulfillment pattern to the text and discerns the way in which the present text finds its ultimate fulfillment in God's plan of redemption in Christ. Finally, the contemporary horizon is a reminder that, as the saying goes, "all theology is practical, and all practice is theological." Biblical theology is defective if it only results in knowledge and not transformation. In John 5:39-40, Jesus declares to the biblical scholars of his day: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life." According to Jesus, their knowledge of the Scriptures is deficient not only because they do not discern that the Scriptures bear witness to Jesus, but also because they refuse to "come" to Jesus in faith and obedience.

Biblical Theology and Preaching

Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert define expositional preaching as "preaching in which the main point of the biblical text being considered becomes that main point of the sermon being preached."²² As we have seen, we cannot arrive at the true meaning of a biblical text without doing biblical theology; this means we cannot faithfully do expositional preaching without doing biblical theology. Biblical theology empowers us to understand the meaning of a text both in its original context as well as in the larger story of God's redemption in Christ.

Very practically, biblical theology protects the preacher from two common

²² Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert, *Preach: Theology Meets Practice* (Nashville: B & H Books, 2012), 36.

dangers in preaching: the twin dangers of moralistic preaching and grace-only preaching. Moralistic preaching is tempted to present biblical characters only as moral examples from whom to learn. Greidanus refers to this as “superficial ‘character-imitation’ preaching.”²³ It’s not that this line of application is entirely unwarranted. Rather, it’s insufficient because it does not adequately account for how the lives of the biblical characters relate to the larger story of God’s redemption for all peoples. It reduces biblical characters to an example to be followed and ignores their role in the larger story of salvation history.

On the other hand, grace-only preaching exclusively sees biblical characters as types of Jesus, and their only function is to point to Jesus and his perfect work of redemption. So, the preacher might remind his hearers of all the ways in which a biblical character, despite his well-intended obedience, fails to meet God’s perfect standard and therefore cannot justify himself before God. Only Jesus, they point out, perfectly obeyed God’s commands and died on the cross to atone for our sins. So, like the biblical character that has gone before us, we can only experience God’s blessing and redemption through faith in Jesus. Again, this line of application is not unbiblical. It is warranted, necessary, and life-giving. However, when a preacher too quickly moves from the historical narrative to the fulfillment in Jesus, the moral imperatives present in the text are ignored or drained of any exhortatory effect. A consistent diet of grace-only preaching leads, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to moral laxity at best and licentiousness at worst.

Preaching that is grounded in biblical theology should protect against both the dangers of moralism and licentiousness. The choice is not to point to the biblical characters as only examples to follow or as only types that find fulfillment in God’s

²³ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 139.

promised salvation in Christ. Biblical theology enables us to interpret the text along multiple horizons so that we may exhort with moral authority and we may offer hope as we glory in God's free grace in Christ.

Sermon Series

The beginning of a story is critical to understanding the whole. You understand, if you have known the frustration of walking into a movie a few minutes late, missing the critical opening scene, and then spending the rest of the movie trying to figure out the plotline. The same is true of the Bible. In the English Bible, the first book of the Bible is entitled Genesis, which is Greek for "origin." The Hebrew Bible titles the same book, בראשית, which means "beginning" and is a reflection of the first words of the first verse of the Bible: "In the beginning..." (Gen 1:1). Both titles capture the truth that God initiates both the creation and the redemption of his world, and the book of Genesis discloses the story. Hamilton argues, "To do biblical theology is to think about the whole story of the Bible. We want to understand the organic development of the Bible's teaching so that we are interpreting particular parts of the story in light of the whole."²⁴ We must start at the beginning in order to grasp the whole. Therefore, we must begin with Genesis. As T. Desmond Alexander asserts, "Genesis, as the first volume of this first section of the Bible, orients the reader to the rest of the Pentateuch, and thus to the rest of the Bible."²⁵

Scholars recognize two possible structural outlines for the book of Genesis. Some believe that the repeated refrain, "these are the generations of..." (Gen 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2) marks the major divisions within the book. Others suggest that the author divided his work into two primary divisions—primeval

²⁴ Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?*, 12.

²⁵ T. Desmond Alexander, "Study Notes on Genesis," in *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 40.

history chronicled in Genesis 1-11 and the story of the patriarchs recorded in Genesis 12-50. All seem to agree that God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12 constitutes a watershed moment in the book of Genesis and is critical to understanding the story of the Bible as a whole. Paul R. House contends, "God's promises to Abraham provide a framework for the rest of the Old Testament, indeed for the rest of the Bible. No doubt many routes to the unity of Scripture exist, but none dare neglect Abraham's role in that unity."²⁶ In similar fashion, Dever boldly suggests that "the most critical event in the Bible between the fall of Adam and the birth of Christ occurs in Genesis 12. ...The Lord calls Abram (Gen 12:1-3). This call sets off the story of the rest of the Bible."²⁷

Therefore, I plan to preach a sermons series at Crawford Avenue on the life of Abraham with an emphasis on God's covenant with Abraham. The series will be entitled, "Abraham & the God of Promise," which captures both the biographical and covenantal focus of the series. Theologically, the series will explain the role of Abraham in the biblical story and the pivotal role of the Abrahamic Covenant in God's purpose of redemption. Spiritually, the series will trace the relational dynamics between God and Abraham in order to illustrate a life in covenantal relationship with the God of the Bible. I intend to demonstrate through this series that God's covenantal relationship with Abraham is established by grace, experienced through faith, vindicated by works, and finally realized in Abraham's greater son, the Lord Jesus.

Table 1 presents a plan for executing the series. The left column tracks the number of weeks in the series; the middle column identifies the text of Scripture for each sermon; and the final column provides the title for each message.

²⁶ Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 76.

²⁷ Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 75.

Table 1. “Abraham & the God of Promise” sermon series

<i>Number of Weeks</i>	<i>Scripture Text</i>	<i>Title</i>
Week 1	Genesis 12:1-9	The Promise of a New Beginning
Week 2	Genesis 12:10-20	The Power of the Promise
Week 3	Genesis 15:1-21	God Guarantees His Promise
Week 4	Genesis 16:1-16	Unbelief and the Promises of God
Week 5	Genesis 17:1-27	Circumcision, Baptism, and the Promises of God
Week 7	Genesis 21:1-6	Faithful Promises and Surprising Joy
Week 8	Genesis 22:1-19	God’s Promises and God’s Provision

Genesis 12:1-9

In these verses, God reveals the foundational components of the Abrahamic covenant, which are blessing, seed, and land.²⁸ The theme of blessing resounds, appearing five times in three verses. God’s fivefold declaration of “blessing” stand in stark contrast to the fivefold appearance of curse in Genesis 3-11.²⁹ Divine initiative will conquer the curse of sin with the blessing of God’s redemption.³⁰ And, seed and land, specifically, serve as the means by which God will bring blessing to Abraham and

²⁸ “The triad of divine promises were: 1. a nation of numerous descendants (seed), 2. a country (land) and 3. the blessing of nations (12:1-3). These elements of the promised blessing are the building blocks of the theology of Genesis and form the threads which connect the destiny of Israel and the mission of the church.” Kenneth A. Mathews, “Genesis,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 140.

²⁹ T. Desmond Alexander, “Abraham,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 368.

³⁰ Hamilton rightly argues that “the narratives of Genesis 12-50 are thick with the blessings of Genesis 12 overcoming the curses of Genesis 3. ... The promise of seed to Abraham guarantees that the cursed difficulty in childbirth and conflict between the genders will be overcome. The conflict between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman will also be resolved by the seed of Abraham, in whom all the nations will be blessed. And the curse on the land is answered by the promise of land, where the collective seed of Abraham will become a great nation.” James M. Hamilton Jr, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 80, 82.

through Abraham to the nations.³¹

Genesis 12:10-20

God's covenant with Abraham is full of promise and hope, which makes Abraham's subsequent fear of Pharaoh and betrayal of Sarah all the more perplexing and alarming. A famine forces Abraham and Sarah to travel to Egypt for provisions. Abraham fears the Egyptians will kill him and take Sarah for themselves. In fear, Abraham tells the Egyptians that Sarah is his sister, not his wife. Pharaoh selects Sarah to be a member of his court, and Sarah is endangered by Abraham's cowardice.

Despite Abraham's fear and betrayal, God's promise stands: "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse... (12:3)." Pharaoh's house is afflicted with plagues, which leads to Sarah's release. Abraham and Sarah depart Egypt unharmed.³² Yet, the nagging question remains—given Abraham's cowardice, deceit, and overall moral failure, how will God bless this man and all the families of the earth through him?

Genesis 15:1-21

In Genesis 15:5, God promises Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. Despite Abraham's initial hesitations, Abraham believes the promise. We read in Genesis 15:6: "And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." Then, God and Abraham act out an ancient near

³¹ Stephen G. Dempster encapsulates the Abrahamic Covenant in two words, "geography and genealogy," which represent the "themes of land and seed." Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 77.

³² Abraham and Sarah's departure contains exodus themes. Pharaoh insists, "Here is your wife; take her, and go" (Gen 12:19. See Exod 12:31). Later, Abraham repeats his offense; this time Abraham surrenders Sarah to Abimelech. Surprisingly, the same exodus themes reappear. However, this time not only do Abraham and Sarah escape, they escape with plunder (Gen 20:14-16. See Exod 12:35-36). I am indebted to James M. Hamilton Jr. for this insight. James M. Hamilton Jr. "Biblical Theology and Typology" (lecture, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, January 8, 2019).

eastern covenant ceremony. In a surprising twist, God guarantees the covenant with his life! In fact, the covenantal ceremony contains the rudimentary elements of penal substitutionary atonement.

Genesis 16:1-16

Sarah has yet to conceive. She is frustrated with God's timing and her doubts regarding the promise increase: "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children" (Gen 16:2). Sarah determines to accomplish what she fears God is unable or unwilling to do—grant her a child. Sarah directs Abraham: "Go into my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her" (Gen 16:2). Initially, Sarah's plan works. Hagar, Sarah's servant, conceives and gives birth to Ishmael. However, in time, surrogacy results in jealousy, resentment, and division. The tension seems unbearable, and Sarah drives Hagar and Ishmael away. "The entire household loses: Sarah loses respect, Hagar loses a home, and Abraham experiences heartache for a lost wife and a rejected son."³³

The conflict recalls the devastating effects of sin in the garden. God cursed the serpent, declaring, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen 3:15). Adam and Eve's sin was followed by the birth of two brothers, Cain and Abel. The seed of the serpent raged against the seed of promise, and Cain killed Abel. Similarly, Abraham and Sarah's unbelief is followed by the birth of Ishmael and later Isaac. Again, the seed of the serpent rages against the seed of promise. The angel of the LORD prophesies over Ishmael: "He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all kinsman" (Gen 16:12). From both examples, we glean that the promise will only be realized through struggle, conflict, and death.

³³ Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50: From Abraham to Joseph*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 58.

Genesis 17:1-27

In Genesis 17, God reiterates his covenant promises to Abraham and establishes circumcision as the sign of the covenant. The word for “circumcision (מִלּוּ) is used ten times in Genesis 17, signaling the prominent role circumcision will play in the life of Abraham and all his descendants (Gen 17:10-11). In the old covenant, circumcision is practiced in the hopes that the one circumcised will one day have a heart devoted to God. Not only that, the prophets foretell a day when God will circumcise the hearts of all his people. By his death and resurrection, Jesus guarantees the promise (Lk 22:20), and the promise is realized in the new covenant reality of regeneration (Col 2:11-12). The recipient of the new covenant receives a new heart—a circumcised heart—which expresses itself both in turning away from sin and turning toward Christ in faith. This new covenant reality is symbolized, not by circumcision, but rather by Christian baptism.

Genesis 21:1-6

God’s first promise to Abraham, “I will make you a great nation” (Gen 12:2), assumes Abraham’s need for offspring. And then, God states explicitly in Gen 12:7: “To your offspring I will give this land.” The promise seems absurd. “Sarai was barren; she had no child” (Gen 11:30). And immediately following God’s promise to Abraham, we learn that “Abram was seventy-five years old” (Gen 12:4). How will an old man with a barren wife produce an offspring, much less a nation? Much of the Abrahamic narrative seeks to resolve this seemingly irreconcilable dilemma, and, after twenty-five years full of hopes and doubts, the dilemma is resolved. God surprises Abraham and Sarah with his faithfulness and miraculously grants them an offspring in the birth of Isaac (Gen 21:1-7).

Genesis 22:1-19

God commands Abraham, “Go (יָד) to the land of Moriah, and offer (Isaac) there as a burnt offering” (Gen 22:2). Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks point out

that the command “go” (הלך) is only used here and in Genesis 12:1 when God commands Abraham, “Go (הלך) from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”³⁴ These two passages bracket Abraham’s life and represent two dramatic tests of faith. In Genesis 22, the command of God seems to threaten the promise of God. How will Abraham become a great nation through his seed, Isaac, if he is required to take Isaac’s life? Nevertheless, the radical call to obedience is matched by Abraham’s radical faith. Abraham obeys, and God’s provision in the moment of Abraham’s testing not only results in the salvation of Isaac, it also points forward to God’s salvation of all his people through Abraham’s greater Son, the Lord Jesus.

³⁴ Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 301.

CHAPTER 2

THE PROMISE OF A NEW BEGINNING

In the gospel of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, God promises his people a new beginning. Genesis, the first book of the Bible, opens with these famous words, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” It was a beginning full of glory and wonder and possibility. However, the story of human history quickly takes a dramatic turn. Beginning in chapter three and running through chapter eleven the progression of human history is marked by sin, brokenness, and judgment. Adam and Eve rebel against God and are cast out of the garden (Gen 3). Evil so pervades human society that God destroys the earth in a worldwide flood (Gen 6). At the Tower of Babel, the peoples conspire to rob God of his glory, and as a result God confuses their languages and scatters the peoples across the globe (Gen 11).

God’s encounter with Abraham in Genesis 12 marks the promise of a new beginning. This passage is filled with hope! Humanity has made a complete mess of things, and God promises to do something about it – through this man, Abraham. James Montgomery Boice, a Christian pastor, boldly claims, “With the exception of Jesus Christ, Abraham is probably the most important person in the Bible... No one can understand the Old Testament without understanding Abram.”¹

In Genesis 12, God appears to Abraham. It is here that Abraham encounters the God of Promise, who brings hope out of despair, life out of death, and salvation out of judgment. God’s promise to Abraham is the promise of a new beginning – for Abraham,

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 435-436.

for his family, and ultimately for the world. We will examine Genesis 12:1-9 by examining three aspects of God’s promise to Abraham and then by making three applications to our modern context.

God’s Promise

In the Bible, God relates to his people through covenants. These covenants come with promises. More specifically, these covenants are bonds initiated by God and then guaranteed by blood.² In the Bible, God establishes six major covenants with his people – the Adamic Covenant, the Noahic Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, and the New Covenant.

The word covenant actually does not appear in Genesis 12. In reference to Abraham, the word covenant first appears in Genesis 15:16. However, God introduces all the foundational elements of the Abrahamic covenant in the opening verses of Genesis 12. Then, God further reveals and develops his covenant with Abraham in the ensuing narrative, specifically in Genesis 15, 17, and 22.³

The Hebrew Bible demarcates the literary structure of Genesis 12:1-9 with the verb הלך; it is translated “go” in 12:1 and “went” in 12:4. Therefore, our text divides nicely into two sections, 12:1-3 and 12:4-9. The first command, “go,” is followed by seven divine promises:

- | | |
|-----|---|
| v.1 | Go... |
| v.2 | (1) And I will make you a great nation, |
| v.2 | (2) and I will bless you, |
-

² O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 4. P. R. Williamson adds, "The term (*berit*) is found some eighty-two times in the Pentateuch alone and it is used to describe both interpersonal... and divine-human 'covenants.'" P. R. Williamson, "Covenant," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 139.

³ Some have argued that Gen 15 and Gen 17 represent two separate Abrahamic covenants. Yet, most scholars disagree. Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum are right to contend, "The Abraham covenant is one covenant, not two." Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 688, esp. 312-318.

- v.2 (3) and make your name great,
v.2 (4) so that you will be a blessing.⁴
v.3 (5) I will bless those who bless you,
v.3 (6) and him who dishonors you I will curse,
v.3 (7) and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.⁵

In these three verses, God reveals the foundational components of the Abrahamic covenant, which are blessing, seed, and land.⁶

Blessing

As Kenneth A. Mathews observes, “The idea of blessing dominates the theology of Genesis; the word ‘bless’ in its verbal and noun forms occurs eighty-eight times, more than in any other biblical book.”⁷ In Genesis 12:1-3, we learn that God’s intention to bless converges on Abraham. God will bless Abraham; God will bless or curse others based on their disposition towards Abraham; and God will bless the families of the earth through Abraham (Gen 12:3).⁸ Mathews observes, “The divine oath is like an avalanche of blessing cascading in wave after wave on the patriarch and his children yet to come.”⁹

In Genesis 12:1-3, the theme of blessing resounds, appearing five times in

⁴ Some translate *והיה ברכה* as an imperative, “be a blessing.” Consequently, they see two imperatives in 12:1-3, “go” and “be”; each followed by three promises. For example, Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 266-277.

⁵ This presentation is an adaption of Kenneth A. Mathews’ structural layout of Gen 12:1-3. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 108.

⁶ “The triad of divine promises were: 1. A nation of numerous descendants (seed), 2. A country (land) and 3. The blessing of the nations (12:1-3). These elements of the promised blessing are the building blocks of the theology of Genesis and form the threads which connect the destiny of Israel and the mission of the church.” Kenneth A. Mathews, “Genesis,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 140.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁸ Victor P. Hamilton observes, “The blessings of God are not all to be turned in on Abram. A great nation, blessed, a great name – yes. But Abram must be more than a recipient. He is both a receptacle for divine blessing and a transmitter of that blessing.” Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 373.

⁹ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 104-105.

three verses. God's fivefold declaration of "blessing" stands in stark contrast to the fivefold appearance of curse in Genesis 1-11.¹⁰ In a world marked by the curse of sin, God determines to shower his people with the blessings of grace, hope, redemption, and renewal. Some might lament, "To date, my life is a microcosm of Genesis 1-11. On account of bad decisions and willful rebellion, I've made a mess of things. My life is a train wreck." In Genesis 12, God announces hope to those who are weary of sin and weary of the curse that comes as a result of sin. God offers a new beginning – the blessing of grace, hope, redemption, and renewal – for all who will turn from their sins and trust in his promise.

Seed

In Genesis 12:2, God promises, "I will make of you a great nation." Of course, descendants are necessary if one is to become a great nation. So, the promise of seed is implicit in God's promise to make Abraham a great nation. In Genesis 12:7, the promise of seed is stated explicitly: "to your offspring (seed) I will give this land."

However, there's a problem. The promise seems absurd. We learn from Genesis 11:30 that "Sarai was barren; she had no child." And immediately following God's promise to Abraham, we learn that "Abram was seventy-five years old" (12:4).¹¹ Centuries later, the apostle Paul reflects on God's promise to Abraham, Abraham's age, and Abraham's ability to impregnate Sarah at this point in his life. Paul frankly concludes

¹⁰ T. Desmond Alexander, "Abraham," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 368. James M. Hamilton Jr. rightly argues that "the narratives of Genesis 12-50 are thick with the blessings of Genesis 12 overcoming the curses of Genesis 3. ... The promise of seed to Abraham guarantees that the cursed difficulty in childbirth and conflict between the genders will be overcome. The conflict between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman will also be resolved by the seed of Abraham, in whom all the nations will be blessed. And the curse on the land is answered by the promise of the land, where the collective seed of Abraham will become a great nation." James M. Hamilton Jr, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 80, 82.

¹¹ "To receive a promise of becoming a great nation would itself be a blessing, especially in view of Sarah's barrenness (11:30). A great nation, at least to get started, needs both an ancestor and an ancestress." Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 372.

that Abraham was “as good as dead” (Rom 4:19). Given his age and Sarah’s barrenness, Paul concludes that Abraham’s chances of winning the lottery were better than his chances of impregnating Sarah. So, as wonderful as these promises are, as hope filled as these promises are, the promises seem absurd. How will an old man with a barren wife produce one offspring, much less an entire nation?¹²

This dilemma—test of faith—goes unresolved for another twenty-five years. Only after twenty-five years of waiting, and at times despairing, does Sarah finally conceive and give birth to Isaac, the promised seed. Of course, Isaac later fathers Jacob and then Jacob fathers twelve sons, from whom the twelve tribes of Israel are birthed. Within this nation, Abraham’s unique and chosen line is preserved, which ultimately results in the birth of Jesus, the true seed in whom all the promises of the covenant are realized (Matt 1:1; Luke 1:68, 72-73).¹³

Land

From Genesis 11:31 to Genesis 12:9 the word “land” appears seven times. Land is a critical aspect of God’s covenant with Abraham. This makes sense. In order for Abraham to be a great nation not only does he need descendants, he needs land where his descendants will live and sustain themselves.¹⁴

In Genesis 12:1, God commands Abraham, “Go... to the land that I will show you.” However, in Genesis 12:6, a problem emerges. When Abraham arrives at this destination, the land is inhabited: “at that time the Canaanites were in the land.” Yet, despite the Canaanites’ presence, God immediately makes a promise to Abraham. In

¹² Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis*, 152.

¹³ John Calvin asserts, “Therefore God (in my judgment) pronounces that all nations should be blessed in His servant Abram, because Christ was included in his loins.” John Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. Calvin Translation Society, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 348-349.

¹⁴ “The theme of land naturally flows, since a great number of children require a living space.” Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 80.

Genesis 12:7, God vows, “To your offspring I will give this land.”

The initial fulfillment is less than inspiring. When Sarah dies, Abraham purchases a field and a cave for her burial (23:1-20). Upon Abraham’s death, Sarah’s burial plot is the only parcel of land in Canaan that Abraham can claim as his own. Abraham dies believing in a promise that was realized in part but was largely unfulfilled. It was approximately six hundred years later before Joshua successfully led the nation of Israel in the conquest of Canaan (Josh 21:43).

The land promise is initially fulfilled in the burial plot of Sarah and then in Joshua’s conquest of the land of Canaan, but the greater fulfillment is yet to come.¹⁵ Recalling God’s promise to Abraham, Paul refers to Abraham as an “heir of the world” (Rom 4:13). Furthermore, the author of Hebrews indicates that Abraham’s expectations to receive the promise of land extended beyond the boundaries of Canaan. For in his wanderings through Canaan, Abraham was “looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb 11:10). John gives us a glimpse of the promise in its fullness. He reports, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw a holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...” (Rev 21:1-2).

Now we can envision how the dual themes of seed and land will be fulfilled in perfect harmony. Through the true seed, the Lord Jesus, an offspring will come forth that comprises all the peoples of the earth, and they will inhabit the land, which stretches across the expanse of the new heavens and the new earth.¹⁶ So, in Genesis 12, we possess in seed form a vision of God redeeming the entire world—the peoples of the world and

¹⁵ In other words, the promise of land is achieved in multiple fulfillments. There is an initial fulfillment and a typological fulfillment. See Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 105; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 281. For a more thorough presentation of the argument presented, see Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 824-839.

¹⁶ Dempster encapsulates the Abrahamic covenant in two words, "geography and genealogy," which represent the "themes of land and seed." Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 77.

the world itself.

Our Response

God's promises to Abraham necessitated a response. Abraham responded in faith and as a result experienced the blessings of God's promises. Similarly, the promises God made to Abraham demand a response from us. If we are to experience the blessings of God's redemption, like Abraham, we too must believe, follow, and go.

Believe

We recall that the first eleven chapters of Genesis are characterized by humanity's rebellion against their Creator. In these chapters the author of Genesis retells the story of God creating a perfect and glorious world and how man and woman made a mess of his creation. Genesis 12 interrupts the narrative. In Genesis 12, God intervenes and boldly declares that he will restore what humanity has ruined. God promises to make things right again.

Right away, we notice the priority of God's initiative. Abraham is not seeking God. Abraham is a pagan from Ur of Chaldeans (Gen 11:27-32). We have no reason to believe that Abraham possesses any interest in God or in God's plan of redemption. God appears unannounced in Abraham's life. God comes with a promise. God declares seven "I will" pronouncements over Abraham: "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" (Gen 12:1-3).¹⁷

¹⁷ "The striking feature of these opening words of God to Abram—the first recorded time God had spoken to anyone since Noah—is the sevenfold repetition of the words, 'I will.' ... The tone of this chapter is much different from that of Genesis 11. ... (Genesis 11) shows men and women functioning without God, setting about to make a name for themselves without God and without his help. It is an account of what they have done and are planning to do. By contrast, Genesis 12 tells of God and God's plans. It tells us what he will do." Boice, *Genesis*, 444.

God's solution to the brokenness of this world is not to give Abraham a five-step strategy for global renewal. God's plan is not to inspire Abraham to execute a plan so that Abraham could save the world. God shows up and declares, "Abraham, I will save you and through your seed I will save the world from the curse of sin so that all the families of the earth will know my blessing of salvation and redemption."

As a consequence, Abraham's primary responsibility is not to make sure the promise will come true by saving himself or by rescuing the world. Rather, Abraham's fundamental responsibility is to believe God's promise is true and to trust that God will accomplish his promised Word. This is how Abraham is saved. Abraham is delivered from the curse of sin and experiences the blessing of God's salvation by believing the promise of God.

Likewise, this is how we experience the blessing of God in our lives today. We believe the promise of the gospel. The promise of the gospel is not look inside yourself and you'll find salvation or here's five things to do to save yourself. Rather, God declares in the promise of the gospel, "I will save you. All my promises in Jesus Christ are true. Believe that he is my Son, that he died for your sins, that he rose again from dead, and you will be saved."

Follow

Genesis 12:1 and 12:4 share an important lexical connection. In Genesis 12:1, God commands Abraham, "Go (הלך) from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Then, in Genesis 12:4, we read, "So Abram went (הלך), as the LORD had told him..." So, God tells Abraham to הלך ("go"), and Abraham הלך ("went"). In other words, Abraham obeys. He is told to go, and he goes. Abraham's faith is expressed by obedience. In obedience to God, Abraham leaves everything behind – his country, his kindred, and his father's house (Gen 12:1) – and follows the call of God.

Jesus calls his disciples to do the same. Jesus speaks with the same divine authority and demands the same wholehearted allegiance. Jesus declares to Peter and Andrew, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt 4:19). And Peter and Andrew respond with the obedience of Abraham. Matthew records, “Immediately they left their nets and followed him” (Matt 4:20). Later, Jesus enters the world of Matthew the tax collector and issues the same decree, “Follow me” (Matt 9:9). And Matthew records, “And he rose and followed him” (Matt 9:9). Jesus requires their full allegiance. And like Abraham, the disciples leave all behind—whether it’s their fishing boat or their tax booth—and they follow in obedience.

Jesus goes on to make it clear that this expectation to follow is not limited to Abraham or the Twelve, but rather applies to all who would be his disciple. In Matthew 16:24, Jesus asserts, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” The call of the cross, like the call of God in Abraham’s life, is a call to renounce self-determination and to follow God in obedience. John Calvin eloquently makes the connection: “The vocation of Abram... is a common pattern of the life of all the faithful. We are not indeed all indiscriminately commanded to desert our country; this point, I grant, is special in the case of Abram; but generally, it is God’s will that all should be in subjection to his word.... Therefore, by example of Abram, entire self-renunciation is enjoined, that we may live and die to God alone.”¹⁸

Not every disciple of Jesus will be called to physically part with their home, leave their country, or take up residence in a foreign land. But all disciples of Jesus are called to lay down their own will and to follow Jesus in complete obedience and submission to his lordship. This is the call of Jesus upon our lives – to believe the promise of the gospel and to follow him in obedience. This commitment will always include some level of sacrifice. For some, it will require more sacrifice than others. But it

¹⁸ Calvin, *Genesis*, 351.

will always include the denial of selfish ambition in order to embrace the greater treasure of knowing and following Jesus.

Go

In the Gospels, Jesus' call to "come and follow me" eventually becomes "go and make disciples" (Matt 28:18-20). Therefore, God's call upon Abraham's life to "go" sounds similar to Jesus' commission to his followers to "go" and make disciples. Of course, dissimilarities exist between God's instructions to Abraham and Jesus' instructions to his disciples, but a comparison of the two also reveals striking similarities.

For example, Christopher J.H. Wright summarizes God's instructions to Abraham in Genesis 12 as "go... and be a blessing."¹⁹ More specifically, in Genesis 12 God commands Abraham to "go" and promises that as Abraham goes that he will "bless" Abraham. Furthermore, God promises that as he "blesses" Abraham that Abraham will be a "blessing" to others—that through Abraham "all the families of the earth will be blessed." Therefore, we can revise Wright's summary to "go... be blessed... and be a blessing."

Jesus' commission to his disciples follows a similar pattern. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus instructs his disciples to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Notice, Jesus commands his disciples to "go" and promises that as they go they will be blessed. In particular, they will be blessed with his ongoing

¹⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 201 & 205. Wright's summary of God's instructions to Abraham is helpful, but some of Wright's larger theological conclusions regarding mission are not. For a more biblical presentation of the relationship between God's renewal of creation and the believer's asymmetrical responsibility to evangelize and to do justice, see Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

presence—"I am with you always, to the end of the age."²⁰ As they experience the blessing of God's presence others will be blessed through them—people from "all the nations" will become disciples of Jesus and will be taught the ways of Jesus. On both occasions, God's covenant people are called to "go," and as they "go" God blesses them, and as they go with the blessing of God the "nations" experience God's blessing through them.

Furthermore, after God commands Abraham to "go," in Genesis 12:1, we read in Genesis 12:4, "Abram went." The verses that follow, Genesis 12:5-9, read like a travelogue, a record of Abraham's travel starting in the north and continuing south. Abraham's travels constitute a remarkable act of faith. We remember that when Abraham arrives in Canaan, there's a problem. The land is occupied: "At that time the Canaanites were in the land" (Gen 12:6). In response, God immediately reassures Abraham: "Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.'"

In response, what does Abraham do? Abraham does not respond by complaining, "O, God, you got this all wrong. This land is occupied. There are far too many people here for me to claim this land." This might seem like a reasonable response. We might have been tempted to respond with such skepticism. Years later, the Israelite spies, who are Abraham's descendants, choose this response. They are tasked with surveying the land of promise and providing a report on how the people of God might possess the land. In unbelief, they discourage the people from taking action and protest, "The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its

²⁰ In John 14:15-18, Jesus reassures his disciples that it is through the coming of the Spirit that they will continue to experience his presence after his physical departure. In Gal 3:13-14, Paul identifies the "blessing of Abraham" as the reception of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—so that in Christ Jesus the *blessing of Abraham* might come to the Gentiles, *so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith*." Paul is not saying that the "blessing of Abraham" only includes the reception of the Spirit, but one cannot comprehend the "blessing of Abraham" without appreciating the believer's reception of the Spirit through union with Christ. Therefore, "the blessing of Abraham" in the believer's life includes the reception of the Holy Spirit, who is representative of the ongoing presence of Jesus (Rom 8:9-11).

inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. And there we saw the Nephilim... and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them” (Num 13:32-33).

In contrast to the Israelite spies, Abraham responds in faith to God’s promise. Abraham builds an altar and worships the LORD (Gen 12:7). Upon encountering the Canaanites, Abraham doesn’t return home discouraged and defeated. Abraham worships. And Abraham’s worship is a declaration that he believes the promise. Then, Abraham is on the move again. In Genesis 12:8-9, we read that Abraham “moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. And Abraham journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.”

What is Abraham doing? Abraham is surveying the land. He’s taking a closer look at his promised inheritance. If someone has a close relative who passes away, and they discover that their loved one has left them several hundred acres of land as an inheritance, what would that person do? They would probably check out the tract of land on a map. They might get in their car and drive to see it. They might walk the land and identify the land markers so that they would be well acquainted with the property. This is what Abraham does. By faith, Abraham surveys his promised inheritance. And, as Abraham surveys the land, he pauses along the way to build an altar and to worship. In essence, Abraham is claiming this land for the LORD. It seems that by his actions Abraham is declaring, “One day, this is where the LORD will be worshipped. One day, me and my descendants will dwell in this place, and in this place we will worship the LORD.”²¹ John Calvin insightfully notes, “He endeavored as much as in him lay, to

²¹ “Abram’s action planted the flag, so to speak, at the heart of the promised land, and declared that Yahweh’s writ runs everywhere.” Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 126. Also Wenham concludes, “Thus the brief itinerary of Abram described in vv5-9 takes him from the northern to the southern border of the land. He not only sees what has been promised to him; he walks through it, and he lives and worships in it. Symbolically, he has taken possession of it.” Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 281.

dedicate to God, every part of the land to which he had access, and perfumed it with the odour (sic) of his faith.”²²

Like Abraham, the church is called to “go.” Some will physically go; others will pray, send, and support those who go. But all are called in one way or another to support this work of going.²³ As a result, the church will go into hostile territory – into lands that are already occupied. By faith, she is to take up residence in those places. She is to worship God in those places. She is to call upon the name of the Lord and to believe that the promise of God will be realized and to believe that the land she inhabits and the people of that land will one day experience the blessing of God’s grace and redemption through faith in the promised seed, Jesus Christ.²⁴

Many have pointed out that biblical missions does not begin in Matthew 28, rather the foundation for biblical missions can be found in Genesis 12.²⁵ What do Christian missionaries do? They “go.” They leave country, kindred, and homes behind. They “go” because they believe the promise that in Jesus “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” They take residence in hostile lands. In those hostile lands, they live; they worship; they pray; they bear witness to the promise. As they do so, the promise is being realized. It is happening. The families of the earth are believing the promise, and

²² Calvin, *Genesis*, 357.

²³ For a biblical and practical discussion of the various ways that the Great Commission might be expressed in the lives of believers, see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 191-199.

²⁴ Commenting on Abraham’s travels through Canaan, Boice cites Matt 28:18-20 and makes the same application: “We, like Abram, are called to be pilgrims on earth. But also like Abram, we are called in God’s name to take possession of it. The vision of the heavenly city, which we are to have, is not opposed to our taking possession of this present world in the name of Christ and for Christ’s glory. ... The reason why many of us do not obey the Lord at this point is the same reason the ten spies did not approve the conquest. We have our eyes on the giants, and we have forgotten that Christ is Lord of heaven and earth and that he has promised to be with us to the end.” Boice, *Genesis*, 468.

²⁵ “Also, the divine charge to our father Abraham to be a blessing to the families of the nations helps us understand the mission of Christ in the world, which is our mission to as the church. As the ‘light unto the Gentiles’ we are to busy ourselves in adding brothers and sisters to the household of faith.” Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 97.

the families of the earth will believe the promise until all the peoples of the world know the blessing of God.

Conclusion

God's encounter with Abraham in Genesis 12 is filled with hope. Shortly after God's creation of the world, things go terribly wrong. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve rebel against God in the garden, and their rebellion leads to generations of human depravity and divine judgment. Genesis 12 marks a new beginning.

It's as though God is starting over. In so doing, God appoints Abraham to be a new Adam.²⁶ Consider the parallels. God provided Adam with a land in which he and his family could live – the Garden of Eden. God also promises Abraham and his descendants a land – the Land of Canaan. God instructed Adam to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth. In similar fashion, God promises to make Abraham a great nation by granting him descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen 15:5). By his disobedience, Adam plunges humanity into sin and the curse of sin. In Abraham, God promises to create a new humanity who will know God's blessing rather than his curse. In all these ways, God establishes Abraham as a new Adam. In Abraham, God promises a new beginning for Abraham and for all his creation.

In this way, the Abrahamic covenant is the foundation for the rest of the story of the Bible, the story of God rolling back the curse of sin and securing blessing for his creation through his promised Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The story of a new beginning – a new start marked by grace, redemption, and renewal. If we are to experience a new beginning and know the blessing of God's redemption in our lives, then we must believe. We must believe God's promise of salvation in Jesus. We must follow. We must yield to

²⁶ Gentry and Wellum observe, "Here, after Adam and Noah, God is making another new start. Abram and his family constitute another Adam." Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 260. Greidanus highlights the connections between Adam and Abraham discussed here. *Preaching Christ from Genesis*, 146.

the call of Jesus – “Follow me.” And, as the church of the Lord Jesus, we must go. We must go and reclaim the world for God’s glory by sharing the promise of his redemption and salvation and calling others to believe and to receive the promise.

CHAPTER 3

THE POWER OF THE PROMISE

Genesis is the first book in the Bible. The word Genesis actually means “beginning.” If someone decides, “I’m going to read the Bible,” it is likely that they will want to start reading at the beginning. And, therefore, they will commence their reading in Genesis.

When folks set out to read the Bible for the first time, many assume that for the most part they already understand the message of the Bible. They imagine that the message of the Bible boils down to the following maxim: *If you do good, you will get rewarded. If you do bad, you will get punished.* Of course, they may possess some knowledge that the Bible contains a multitude of stories and different types of literature, which add variety and excite interest. But they assume that the various stories and literary pieces all serve to support the basic principle: good deeds get rewarded; bad deeds are punished.

Then, one actually begins to read Genesis, and the narrative throws them for a loop. Genesis opens, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). In Genesis 1, God supernaturally creates all things by speaking the world into existence. Consequently, the Genesis’ narrative begins with a world full of glory, wonder, and possibility. Shortly thereafter, God’s image-bearers, Adam and Eve, rebel against God, and God banishes Adam and Eve from the garden. At this point, the novice Bible reader is tracking. In their minds, this all makes sense. Adam and Eve failed to do good; they did bad. Therefore, they are not rewarded; they are punished.

A quick overview of Genesis 1-11 reveals much of the same – a downward spiral of sin and the unfortunate consequences that result from sin. However, Genesis 12

represents a decisive break in the narrative. God enters into covenant with Abraham, and through this covenant God promises a new beginning. The reader might be tempted to think, “Okay. Finally. Abraham and his descendants will get it right. Now, God has someone with whom he can work. Abraham and his descendants will do good so that God will reward and bless them because, of course, *if you do good, you get rewarded. If you do bad, you get punished.*”

Yet, for the perceptive reader, the narrative seems to increasingly deviate from the simple maxim. At one level, it is obvious from the biblical narrative that God rewards obedience, and sin often results in disappointment, pain, and suffering. But it’s not that simple. God’s interactions with His people do not always conform to our maxim: *if you do good, things will go well. If you do bad, you will be punished.* In fact, Abraham and his descendants prove to be less than ideal covenant partners. At times, Abraham acts like a coward; Isaac a scoundrel; Jacob a cheat; and Joseph a braggart.

No doubt, there are times when these men experience the negative consequences of their sin and personal character flaws. But, surprisingly, in spite of their sin, God continues to bless them, to help them, and to use them to fulfill his purpose of bringing redemption to the world. It’s the strangest thing. At times, it’s a bit unsettling. And it is actually really good news!

It’s good news because through their experiences we learn that God’s promise of a new beginning is not finally dependent upon their faith but upon God’s faithfulness. God’s promise of a new beginning is not finally dependent upon their obedience but God’s grace. And the same is true for us. God’s promise of a new beginning in Christ is not finally dependent upon our faith but upon God’s faithfulness. God’s promise of a new beginning in Christ is not finally dependent upon our obedience but upon God’s grace.

In Genesis, God’s covenant partners often prove to be weak, but God’s promise is strong. The text we will examine in this chapter, Genesis 12:10-20, beautifully illustrates this truth.

A Severe Trial

God's initial promise to Abraham is full of blessing and hope (Gen 12:1-3). God promises to bless Abraham and his offspring and through Abraham's offspring to bless all the peoples of the world. Abraham responds to God's promise with remarkable faith. Abraham believes God's promise and follows God in obedience.

However, Abraham's obedience comes at a cost. Abraham endures multiple trials on his path of obedience. In response to God's promise, Abraham leaves family and friends behind in order to follow God's call to Canaan. In Genesis 12:1, the LORD commands Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Genesis 12:4 records Abraham's response, "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him...." Of course, Abraham takes with him Sarah, his wife, Lot, his nephew, and his servants. But, he leaves behind the place to which he is accustomed and the people, family and friends, with whom he is acquainted. Departure from his home and separation from his people is a trial in itself.

When God first spoke to Abraham, God promised to make Abraham into a great nation. In Genesis 12:2, God declares, "And I will make of you a great nation." But, if Abraham is to become a great nation, he must possess offspring. Yet, in Genesis 11:30 we learn that Abraham's wife, Sarah is "barren; she had no child." One can imagine the pain Abraham and Sarah experienced, as they were unable to bear children. Today, many couples, who experience infertility, know the pain and the sorrow of unfulfilled dreams and unrealized expectations. In the years of waiting, perhaps Abraham and Sarah's suffering was compounded by God's promise of an offspring. God promised! Why is God not coming through? Why is God torturing us? Abraham and Sarah's infertility is a trial.

In order to be a great nation, Abraham must also possess land. But when Abraham arrives in Canaan, the land is occupied: "At the time, the Canaanites were in the land" (Genesis 12:6). As a result, Abraham never really settles in Canaan. He is a

sojourner, a stranger, traveling from one spot to another in someone else's land (Gen 12:4-9). Then Abraham's relationship to the land goes from bad to worse. In Genesis 12:10, we read, "Now there was a famine in the land." The land of Canaan, the land that God has promised to Abraham is struck with famine. So now Abraham is forced to evacuate the land that God promised to him. We can imagine that Abraham might have been tempted to think, "You mean I left everything behind for this! I left my family and friends for a promised land that is occupied. Enemies and threats surround me. I have yet to find a lot where I can settle. Not only is the land occupied, the land is afflicted with famine. Water is sparse; food is scant. I left everything behind for a land I must abandon in order to find food for me and my family somewhere else." An occupied and famine-stricken Canaan is a trial.

Consequently, Abraham departs from Canaan and heads towards Egypt.¹ However, when Abraham arrives in Egypt, Abraham's condition worsens still. In Genesis 12:11-12, we learn that Abraham fears for his life. Abraham is a sojourner, an immigrant, forced to pursue entry into a foreign country in order to preserve his life and the life of his family. In Egypt, Abraham has no civil rights or protections.² Sarah is beautiful.³ Abraham fears that Pharaoh's men might spot Sarah's beauty, kill him, and enlist Sarah in Pharaoh's harem. Exile in Egypt and the fear of death is a trial.

When we take all these matters into consideration, we realize that when Abraham arrives in Egypt, Abraham is without a home, childless, hungry, and fears for

¹ Some fault Abraham for leaving Canaan for Egypt. However, famine pressed others to do the same (Gen 26:1; 47:1; Ruth 1:1). On this occasion, it seems that Abraham is not at fault for going to Egypt but for his actions while in Egypt.

² "As an immigrant there he would lack the support and protection afforded by the wider family network. The danger of immigrants being exploited is frequently harped on in the law, e.g., Exod 22:20(21); 23:9." Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 287.

³ Some question Sarah's beauty at sixty-five years of age, but we must remember that Sarah was only middle-aged. Life expectancy for the patriarch extended well beyond our own. Sarah did not die until she was one hundred and twenty-seven years old (Gen 23:1).

his life. Since God made his promise to Abraham in the opening verses of Genesis 12, Abraham has faced one difficulty after another. The compounding effect of Abraham's difficulties leads us to conclude that Abraham was enduring a severe trial.

Abraham's experience reminds us that there is always a cost to pay when we trust in God's promise and follow him in obedience. Like Abraham, we too will be tried; we will be tested (2 Tim 3:12; Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet 4:12-19). In the opening verses of Genesis 12, we see that Abraham responds to the promise of God with remarkable faith. Now, we see that Abraham's faith is being tested by a remarkable trial.

A Weak Faith

Although Abraham demonstrates exemplary faith in the opening verses of Genesis 12, Abraham's actions in Egypt amount to a colossal moral failure. In an attempt to avoid the potential threat of Pharaoh, Abraham trades faith for fear.⁴ Abraham instructs Sarah to identify herself as his sister rather than his wife. Now, technically speaking, Sarah is Abraham's sister. Abraham and Sarah share the same father, but different mothers.⁵ But, of course, Abraham knows good and well that as a result of their marriage Sarah is now first and foremost his wife.⁶

The real victim in this developing fiasco is Sarah. Perhaps the most harrowing

⁴ Matthew Henry poetically observes, "The grace Abram was most eminent for was faith; and yet he thus fell through unbelief and distrust of the divine Providence." Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible Publishers, 1968), 88.

⁵ "The genius of the ruse was its half-truth. Abram could claim the truth – 'she really is my sister' (20:12) – since they had the same father, and at the same time he avoids reference to her as wife (12:12). But the folly of Abram's plan was its consequences. Although he would save his life, he jeopardized his future by placing at risk Sarai, the mother of the promised son. Moreover, others suffered because of the deception, bringing guilt on themselves unknowingly (12:17-18; 20:9; 26:10)." Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 127-128.

⁶ Some propose that Abraham's deceit is justified because his real intent is to stall so that he might have more time to distract potential threats and to protect Sarah. For example, see Robert B. Robinson, "Wife and Sister through the Ages: Textual Determinacy and the History of Interpretation," *Semeia* 62 (1993): 103–28. I will argue that Abraham's deceit is not justified, but a failure of faith in God and his promise.

moment in our narrative is recorded in Genesis 12:15: “And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house.” The word translated “taken” is the pual form of קָח . It functions as the only passive verb in the entire account. The passive use of the verb seems to emphasize the reality that Sarah did not actively choose to go to Pharaoh’s house. Sarah did not desire, nor decide, to go to Pharaoh’s house. Rather, she “was taken” to Pharaoh’s house. Sarah is a passive victim in Abraham’s ploy for self-preservation.

We are left to wonder how Sarah felt about this arrangement—estranged from her husband and claimed by a foreign despot in a strange land. She must have been afraid. She must have anxiously wondered whether she would be treated with dignity and respect or whether she would be mistreated, abused, and perhaps discarded.

The Scriptures command Christian men to embrace a biblical masculinity, which requires a man’s joyful acceptance of the God-given responsibility to love and to lead those entrusted to their care.⁷ Women, children, families, churches, and even entire nations benefit when Christian men embrace this call to love and to lead for the good of others. At the same time, when masculinity is detached from God’s original creative design and purposes, masculinity can quickly turn toxic. And the poisonous effect of either a harsh and domineering masculinity or an aimless and passive masculinity can be devastating in the lives of others. In Egypt, Abraham functions as the antithesis of biblical masculinity. Abraham plays the part of a coward. Rather than defend and protect Sarah, Abraham pimps out his wife for his own safety and benefit. Some might quibble that Abraham’s assertion that Sarah is his sister was not technically a lie. But Abraham’s moral failure is not finally dependent upon whether or not he technically told the truth or a lie. Abraham’s guilt lies in his failure to protect his wife and therefore in his utter lack

⁷ For a defense of biblical complementarianism, see John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

of husbandly love and decency.

This wife-sister narrative is repeated three times within the book of Genesis revealing a pattern of failed male leadership. First, in Genesis 12:10-20, Abraham claims that Sarah is his sister rather than his wife in order to protect himself from Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Second, in Genesis 20:1-18, Abraham again identifies Sarah as his sister rather than his wife in order to deceive Abimelech, king of Gerar. Finally, in Genesis 26:1-11, Abraham's son, Isaac, presents Rebekah as his sister rather than his wife in order to, like his father, preserve his life from Abimelech, king of Gerar.⁸ As Daniel H. Gordis notes, "Three episodes in the space of fifteen chapters of a single Biblical book beg for discussion."⁹

Although each account includes its own particularities, the similarities are so unmistakable that some scholars doubt the historical veracity of all three accounts. Some argue that it is too improbable that Abraham would find himself in a second predicament so similar to the first and respond in similar fashion. Furthermore, they assume that it is too extraordinary that Abraham's son, Isaac, would not only find himself in the same predicament but then also repeat his father's same mistakes.¹⁰ Therefore, some propose that underneath these three accounts is only one historical event and that the other two accounts are fictitious, literary redactions to the original.¹¹

⁸ Robert Alter demonstrates the importance of "type-scenes" in the construction of biblical narratives. Alter observes, "The most crucial case in point is the perplexing fact that in the biblical narrative more or less the same story often seems to be told two or three or more times about different characters, or sometimes even about the same character in different sets of circumstances." Then, Alter presents the wife-sister narratives of Genesis as an example: "Three times a patriarch is driven by famine to a southern region where he pretends that his wife is a sister, narrowly avoids a violation of the conjugal bond by the local ruler, and is sent away with gifts (Gen 12:10-20; Gen 20; Gen 26:1-2)." Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 58.

⁹ Daniel H. Gordis, "Lies, Wives, and Sisters: The Wife-Sister Motif Revisited," *Judaism* 34, no. 3 (Summer 85): 344–59, 345.

¹⁰ For example, Eugene H. Maly concludes, "We have here an incident that originally involved Isaac. Then, in the course of transmission of the patriarchal narratives, the story was told also of Abraham, but in a more artificial and more dramatic form." "Genesis 20:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:7-11 and the Pentateuchal Question," Eugene H. Maly, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (July 1956): 255–62, 261.

¹¹ For a helpful summary of the literature and pertinent issues, see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand

However, good reasons exist for not doubting the integrity of each of the three accounts. First, in Genesis 20:13, Abraham's knowledge of the sociopolitical dynamics of his day leads Abraham to conclude that Sarah's beauty is cause for alarm as they travel from one foreign region to the next. Based on this knowledge, Abraham devises a plan that he assumes will need to be implemented repeatedly in the future. Abraham recalls, "When God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, 'He is my brother.'" Many modern scholars seem trapped in their own experiences and unable to sympathize with the sociopolitical dynamics of Abraham's day. They are surprised that Abraham finds it necessary to employ such a tactic with Pharaoh and then again twenty-five years later with Abimelech. But Abraham was not surprised. In fact, before Abraham set out on his journeys, he assumed that this plan—no matter how immoral—was necessary and would need to be enacted on multiple occasions.¹²

Second, the fact that Abraham stumbled so badly on two occasions and in like fashion is not reason to doubt the historical veracity of the text but rather is the theological point of the text. Yes, Abraham's repeated cowardice should capture our attention. However, the intent is not for us to respond, "Well, of course, this could never have happened twice." But rather for us to respond, "O, Abraham, not again. How could you? I see so much of my own inconsistency in you." As Derek Kidner observes, "Critical scholars reckon a duplicate of 12.10ff, ultimately on the ground that a man does not repeat a lapse of this kind. But it is easier to be consistent in theory than under fear of death."¹³

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 190-191; Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 124-126.

¹² Mathews argues, "We learn that the wife-sister deception was a recurring tactic employed by the patriarch wherever he went (v. 13); this helps explain why more than one such event appears in the patriarchal narrative." *Ibid.*, 247.

¹³ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 148.

Third, if on at least two occasions foreign leaders took interest in Abraham's wife when he arrived as a sojourner in their land, it is not difficult to believe that a traveling Isaac might encounter the same. As sojourners, both Abraham and Isaac faced the dangers of living as a minority in a foreign land without the protections of family and relational networks. In addition, it is not difficult to imagine Isaac responding in kind—like father like son. Isaac learned from his father how to navigate the unpredictable and dangerous despots of foreign lands.

The wife-sister narrative involving Isaac is crucial to understanding Isaac's role in God's covenantal purposes. In fact, despite the critical role Isaac's birth plays in perpetuating the covenantal promises of God, Genesis 26 "is the one chapter that is given over completely to the activities of Isaac."¹⁴ And what do we learn about Isaac from this one chapter? We learn that Isaac is truly Abraham's son. God promises Isaac his covenantal blessing and protection, just like he had promised Abraham. In Genesis 26:3, the LORD declared, "Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and bless you." Like his father Abraham, Isaac believes God's promise, and he obeys. Isaac remains in Gerar. However, like his father, when Isaac encounters the leader of this foreign land, he is afraid (Gen 26:6). Fear causes Isaac to lie and to endanger his wife just as his father had done before him.

The threefold type-scene punctuates the truth that Isaac is Abraham's son. The promise goes through Isaac, and Isaac is just like Abraham. Isaac is "Abraham Jr."¹⁵ He is like Abraham in his faith and in his fear, in his courage and in his deceit, in his obedience to the covenant of God and in his failure to the covenant of marriage. Most striking, Isaac, like Abraham, is the underserving recipient of the lavish grace and rich mercies of God's covenantal promise.

¹⁴ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, 190.

¹⁵ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 397.

Upon further reflection, Abraham and Isaac bear a striking resemblance to the first man, Adam. God charged Adam with the responsibility to exercise dominion over the Garden of Eden and to protect his wife, Eve (Gen 2:15). When the serpent entered the Garden and threatened Eve's safety, Adam failed to protect Eve. Adam's passivity contributed to Eve's demise (Gen 3:6). When God confronted Adam and Eve for their disobedience, Adam's passivity transforms into active denial and blame-shifting: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (Gen 3:12). Adam fails to protect Eve from the serpent, and when his wellbeing is threatened, Adam throws Eve under the bus to save himself. Tragically, Abraham and Isaac prove to be like Adam—men who fail to protect and defend their wives, whom God entrusted to their care. Failed masculinity is a theme that runs throughout the book of Genesis and in particular through the progeny of Adam, Abraham, and Isaac.

Unfortunately, so many in our society have tasted the bitter fruit of failed masculinity. For some, it's a Dad, who abandoned his post at home, and the family came to know him far more for his absence rather than his presence. For others, it's a husband, who betrayed the vows of marriage and left deep scars of pain and distrust in the hearts of his spouse and children. And, of course, modern examples of men usurping their responsibility to lead, provide, and protect can be multiplied over and over.

Both the biblical and the contemporary patterns of failed masculinity reveal that what we all need is a real man. We all need a man, who is not just looking out for himself. We need a man who is willing and eager to protect, to defend, and to give himself for the sake of others. Who could that man be? He's the New Adam, the New Man – the Lord Jesus. Jesus is the final answer to failed masculinity.¹⁶

When the soldiers come to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is

¹⁶ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 271-276. Greidanus agrees that "the way of contrast" is one means of appropriately interpreting Old Testament typologies and identifying their fulfillment in Christ.

with his disciples. Jesus' life is in danger. Soon the decision of a foreign authority will ensure Jesus' execution. In John 19:16, we read, "So he (Pilate) delivered him (Jesus) over to them to be crucified." However, at the point of Jesus' arrest, Jesus does not demand of his disciples that they endanger themselves to defend him. Neither does Jesus attempt to use his disciples as scapegoats. To the contrary, Jesus offers up himself and insists upon the disciples' freedom: "I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go" (Jn 18:8). Jesus' action in the Garden anticipates the redemptive work he is about to accomplish at the cross in which Jesus will die in the place of his disciples in order to secure their freedom.

In Genesis 12:13, Abraham instructs Sarah, "Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake." Abraham's words to Sarah function as an inverted gospel, an anti-gospel—as no gospel at all. Abraham insists, "Sarah, you sacrifice your dignity and your safety for my sake. You give your life for mine." But Jesus' message to his people—to his bride—is just the opposite. Jesus does not require that his bride forfeit her dignity and sacrifice herself for his salvation. Rather, Jesus sacrifices his dignity, his safety, and ultimately his life to ensure the salvation and eternal security of his church (Eph 5:25). Jesus sacrifices himself at the cross for our redemption (Acts 20:28). Jesus declares, "I will give my life, so that your life might be spared."

A Powerful Promise

The Scriptures teach us that God rewards obedience and judges disobedience. And, at the same time, the Scriptures clearly demonstrate that God's covenantal relationship with his people does not finally depend on their obedience. Rather, God's covenantal relationship with his people is finally dependent upon God's promise of grace realized in Jesus.

This principle is vividly demonstrated through Abraham's moral failure in

Egypt. An initial read of the narrative invokes shock and dismay. Abraham is supposed to represent a new beginning, and just a few verses after Abraham is introduced Abraham chooses to pimp out his beloved wife in order to protect himself. Like Adam, in short order Abraham disappoints.

Yet, despite Abraham's lack of faith and moral courage, Abraham's life continues to be marked by the pervading presence of God's promise. In Genesis 12:3, God promised, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse." In Egypt, Abraham is faithless. Abraham is a coward. Yet, strangely, God continues to bless Abraham. In Genesis 12:14-15, Abraham remains aloof as Sarah is taken to Pharaoh's house. Yet, in the very next verse, Genesis 12:16, consistent with God's promise in Genesis 12:3, Pharaoh blesses Abraham. We read, "And for her sake he (Pharaoh) dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels."¹⁷ Despite Abraham's moral cowardice, God allows Abraham to experience the blessing of the promise. Through Pharaoh God blesses Abraham. Abraham leaves Egypt wealthier than when he arrived! And, in the end, Abraham and Sarah exit Egypt unscathed.

There's more. Not only does Abraham receive the blessing, Pharaoh receives the curse. Remember. Abraham is the one who sinned. Abraham sinned against Sarah. Also, Abraham sinned against Pharaoh. In Genesis 12:18-19, Pharaoh interrogates Abraham: "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife?"¹⁸ There is no record of Abraham's response in the text. It seems that Abraham's silence is an admission of guilt.¹⁹ Abraham doesn't say anything because Abraham has nothing to say;

¹⁷ It was common practice in the Ancient Near East for the groom to pay a dowry to the bride's family (Gen 24:52-53; Ex 22:15-16; 1 Sam 8:22-28).

¹⁸ "Much like the biblical injunction, Ancient Near Eastern law codes forbade adultery and promised the death penalty for guilty parties." Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 252.

¹⁹ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 290; Mathews adds, "One cannot help but think, however, that the

he has no defense for his actions. Abraham is guilty as charged.²⁰

Nevertheless, judgment doesn't fall on Abraham. Judgment falls on Pharaoh. In Genesis 12:18, we read, "But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife." Abraham is spared. Pharaoh is cursed. Eventually, Pharaoh releases both Sarah and Abraham unharmed.

The inexperienced Bible reader might find all of this confusing, even unsettling. However, the more we come to know ourselves, the more we realize that God's dealings with Abraham represent "good news" because we are far more like Abraham than we realize. We too are morally inconsistent; we too possess a lackluster record of obedience. Like Abraham, if we are to experience God's salvation and redemption, we need a promise stronger than our moral fortitude.²¹

This is exactly what God offers us in Jesus – a promise of forgiveness and redemption that is not dependent upon our obedience but upon the invincible promise of God's grace and our simple trust in that promise. The apostle Paul declares in Romans 4:13, 16: "For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir to the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith... That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring." So, it's not our impressive record of unflappable obedience that saves us. Rather, it's faith in the promise—the promise of God's grace extended to us in Jesus—

rebuke has a divine cast to it... does the king speak unwittingly the words of divine correction to Abraham?" Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 256.

²⁰ Mathews observes that when Abraham pulls the same trick on Abimelech in Gen 20, Abimelech also rebukes Abraham. Mathews notes, "Abimelech's first speech entails a rebuke of the patriarch's behavior, chiding him repeatedly by using words related to the key term, 'done' (עשה, 5x)." Ibid., 255. So, Abimelech interrogates Abraham, "What have you done (עשה) to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom this great sin? You have done (עשה) to me things (עשה) that ought not to be done (עשה)... What did you see, that you did (עשה) this thing" (Gen 20:9-10)?

²¹ "The major themes of the narrative endure: the overriding faithfulness of God and the cowardly faithfulness of Israel. That is, the one who lied is still the one preferred... The preeminence of Abraham here rests not on Abraham's virtue, but on God's promise." Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 129.

that saves us.

God's dealings with Abraham are also good news because God's relationship with Abraham reveals that God does not relate to us as a cosmic scorekeeper, who is relationally detached and who mechanically distributes rewards and punishments based on our performance. Rather, God relates to us based on his promise of grace, which means that God relates to us on the basis of his covenantal relationship with us. God relates to us as a Father, who loves us and who is bound to us by covenant. David is convinced that this is good news. In Psalm 103, David rejoices, "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities... As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him" (Ps 103:10, 13).

To relate to God based upon the covenant of his grace is to be freed from the scrupulous "tit for tat" which can plague our conscience – "If I do this, then God must do that. If I am good, then God must reward me. If I do bad, then God will punish me." To relate to God outside of his promise of grace is to reduce the Christian life to a cosmic scorecard—an endless behavioral chart in which God is always keeping score. Through God's dealings with Abraham, God invites us to experience the Christian life as a relationship with him based on his character and grace. God invites us to know him as he truly is "the LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6).

A Redemptive Pattern

The Bible is an amazing book! The Bible often employs types or patterns as a means to communicate God's redemption of his people. The type may be a symbol, a person, or an event that represents a pattern of God's salvation – a typical way in which God acts to save his people. This literary concept conveys that if God saved his people like this there and then, then we can expect that God will save his people in a similar

fashion here and now.²²

The account of Abraham and Sarah's deliverance from Egypt functions as a pattern of God's future salvation. The two events are separated by four hundred and thirty years, and yet the parallels are undeniable. Consider some of the particulars of this redemptive pattern. In Genesis 12, famine afflicts Canaan. The famine forces Abraham and Sarah to flee to Egypt. Consequently, Abraham, and especially Sarah, become captives in Egypt. Abraham's life is threatened, and Sarah's dignity and safety are in peril. In order to remain faithful to his covenant promise and to redeem his covenant partners God strikes Pharaoh with plagues (Gen 12:17). As a result, Pharaoh not only releases Abraham and Sarah but also forces them out. In Genesis 12:19, Pharaoh insists, "Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go." In Genesis 12:20, Abraham and Sarah depart from Egypt richer than when they first arrived.

Approximately four hundred years later, God's people once again find themselves in Egypt. Why? Because famine once again struck the land of Canaan, and Jacob and his sons settled in Egypt to escape the famine (Gen 47:4). Eventually, the Egyptians take captive the people of God, and the Egyptians unjustly condemn the people of God to serve as slaves in the Egyptian Empire (Ex 1:13-14). Once again, God remembers and acts upon the covenant promise he has made with his people (Ex 2:24). God afflicts Pharaoh with ten plagues.²³ Once Pharaoh's will is finally broken, Pharaoh

²² James M. Hamilton Jr. explains, "When we see a later author present a repetition of an earlier pattern, which was informed by a promise, as readers we begin to sense that we are dealing with a sequence of events (a type, pattern, or schema) that the biblical authors saw to be significant, even if they were puzzled by it (cf. 1 Pet 1:10-12). The repetition of these patterns creates a kind of template that represents the *type* of thing God does or the *type* of thing that happens to God's people. When we start thinking about what *typically* happens, we are dealing with *typology*, and since this is what has *typically* happened in the past, we begin to expect that this is the *type* of thing God will do in the future. That is, the type is prospective, forward looking, as it points beyond itself to its fulfillment." James M. Hamilton Jr. *What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible's Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 44.

²³ When Pharaoh poses a threat to Sarah and God's covenantal promises, "the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife" (Gen 12:17). The word translated plague is **צָרָה**. God responds in kind to Pharaoh's oppression of Israel. God sends ten plagues to afflict Pharaoh and Egypt (Ex 9-11). It is not until the tenth plague that we encounter the word **צָרָה** again. We read, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Yet one plague (**צָרָה**) more I will bring upon Pharaoh and upon

not only releases the people of God, he also forces them out. In Exodus 12:31-32, Pharaoh insists, “Go (הלך) out from among my people... take (לקח) your flocks and your herds...” In Exodus 12:31-32, the words “go” (הלך) and “take” (לקח) parallel Pharaoh’s declaration to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12:19. In addition, when the people of God leave Egypt, like Abraham and Sarah, they depart wealthier than when they arrived (Ex 12:35-36).

God’s salvation of Abraham and Sarah from Egypt establishes a pattern of God’s redemptive work. The narrative is crafted to highlight the reoccurring themes of God’s salvation. When God redeemed Moses and the people of God in Egypt, God worked in a similar fashion as he had worked four hundred years earlier to save Abraham and Sarah in Egypt.²⁴

Ultimately, this pattern of redemption is fulfilled in the salvific work of the Lord Jesus. Biblical authors often talk about God’s redemption in Jesus as a new exodus evoking Abraham and Sarah’s exodus from Egypt as well as Moses and Israel’s exodus from Egypt.²⁵ For example, Paul is echoing this exodus theme when he declares, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13-14). As Roberts and Wilson assert, “Paul’s gospel is an exodus.”²⁶ Like Abraham and Sarah, and like Moses and Israel, humanity is enslaved to a tyrant—to a cruel taskmaster. Humanity is enslaved to Satan, to sin, and to death. But God, being faithful to his covenant promise,

Egypt. Afterward he will let you go from here. When he lets you go, he will drive you away completely” (Ex 11:1). The tenth plague (שני), the loss of Pharaoh’s firstborn son, finally breaks Pharaoh’s resolve, and Pharaoh lets Israel go as he had let Abraham and Sarah go so many years before.

²⁴ Alastair Roberts and Andrew Wilson, *Echoes of Exodus: Tracing Themes of Redemption through Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 67.

²⁵ For a more extensive and academic presentation of the exodus theme in biblical salvation see Bryan D. Estelle, *Echoes of Exodus: Tracing a Biblical Motif* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018); For an excellent and more accessible treatment of the same theme see Roberts and Wilson, *Echoes of Exodus*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

determines to redeem us through his Son, Jesus. Through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, God delivers a crushing blow to Satan, sin, and death. In fact, God's victory is so decisive that Satan, sin, and death are forced to release their grip on us, and when we are set free from their shackles we step into a freedom, a wealth, a spiritual abundance that we never previously experienced. The domain of darkness is plundered, and God's people are victoriously set free!

If we follow this pattern of God's salvation through Abraham, and then Moses, and then Jesus, it's similar to observing a line of the popular Russian, wooden, stacking dolls. Each doll is similar; they all possess the same outward appearance. But, there is at least one significant difference between the dolls. Each doll is slightly larger than the previous. Therefore, the dolls are able to stack inside of each other. Each doll is designed to fit inside the next doll, which is just slightly larger than the prior doll. As a result, there is an internal consistency within the dolls as well as a natural progression. A similar dynamic exists in the considered accounts of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. All of the accounts possess a number of striking similarities. The astute observer recognizes an internal consistency that is difficult to deny. But, there are differences as well. Each account represents a progression beginning with the salvation of one man and his wife, and then progressing to the salvation of one man and a nation, and finally culminating in one man accomplishing salvation for the world.²⁷

Furthermore, all of these redemptive narratives tell the story of how God saves his people not because they deserve deliverance or because they earned deliverance. Rather, in each account, those delivered—whether Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Israel, or all of redeemed humanity—are not delivered because of the merits of their faithfulness but because of the power of God's promise. They are saved because of the invincible power of God's covenant promise to redeem his people.

²⁷ For the Russian doll illustration I am indebted to *Ibid.*, 68.

Conclusion

The Bible often presents Abraham as a model of faith (Heb 11:8-12, 18-19). Accordingly, Abraham's initial response to God's promise challenges and inspires us (Gen 12:1-9). In fact, as Paul clearly teaches, Abraham receives the promises of God's covenant by faith (Rom 4; Gal 3). If we are to experience God's promise of salvation, we must do the same.

And yet, if we only see Abraham as a model of faith to admire and emulate, then we omit a significant portion of his story. If we only see his faith and not his faithlessness, we risk misunderstanding how Abraham did in fact experience the promises of God and how by implication we might as well.

It is not a mistake that the Bible reveals not only Abraham's faith but also his unbelief, not only Abraham's courage but also his timidity, not only Abraham's steadfastness but also his inconsistency. Yes, Abraham's faith unites him to the promises of God, but it is not finally Abraham's faith that saves him. It is God and God's faithfulness to his promises that saves Abraham. And so it is with every true Christian.

Have you assumed that the basic message of the Bible is that *if you do good, you'll be rewarded, and if you do bad, you'll be punished*? If so, then it's not hard to understand why the Bible might bore you, why perhaps the Bible has never really moved you, why the Bible has never captured your heart. Do you see that the message of the Bible is far more glorious and gracious than you ever imagined? The Bible is not a moral codebook for those who have never broken the rules. The Bible is a promise full of hope for sinners who have a propensity to make a mess of things – sinners like Abraham, like you, and like me.

CHAPTER 4

GOD GUARANTEES HIS PROMISE

A popular leadership adage advises that wise leaders should “underpromise and overdeliver.” Instead of overpromising what one is able to realistically deliver, one should promise less than what can be realistically delivered. Then, instead of disappointing others, one will delightfully surprise others by exceeding their expectations. As a result, people will be more inclined to trust the leader in the future.

When one reads God’s initial promise to Abraham in Genesis 12, he might cringe a bit and wonder, “Did God overpromise? Will God really be able to deliver?” God promises to bless Abraham and to make Abraham a great nation. In order for Abraham to become a nation, Abraham must possess an heir. But Abraham and his wife are childless. Furthermore, Abraham is old, and Sarah, his wife, is barren.

God’s promise proves even more spectacular when you realize that the promise extends beyond the fulfillment of Abraham and Sarah’s personal dream to give birth to an heir. God promises that through Abraham and his heir “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3). Therefore, the promise contains generational, national, and even global implications. Consequently, no one can reasonably doubt the ambition, the boldness, and the vast scope of God’s promise.

At times, Abraham himself wonders, “Did God overpromise?” And, as a result, Abraham speculates, “Will God underdeliver? Will he be able to deliver at all?” In Genesis 15, we see that Abraham is a man of faith. But, like all of us, Abraham also has his doubts, especially as the years pass and the promises of God continue to go unfulfilled. In Genesis 15, Abraham struggles to believe the promise. Abraham voices his doubts, and God graciously responds by guaranteeing his word with both a promise and a

pledge.

When we read God's promises of salvation in the Bible, we are also tempted to doubt. God promises in Jesus to cancel our record of sins, to replace our old, spiritually dead hearts with new, spiritually vibrant hearts, to indwell us and seal us with his Holy Spirit, to love us and to take care of us like a father loves and provides for his children, to never leave us and to never forsake us, to make all things new, and to grant us eternal life with him forever. Like Abraham, we might wonder, "Did God overpromise? Will God underdeliver?" And God calls us, like he called Abraham, to believe the promise and to trust that he will faithfully fulfill his word.

Abraham's Doubt

Genesis 13 and 14 record Abraham's heroic acts to save Sodom and his nephew, Lot, from the captivity of foreign invaders. As a reward for Abraham's efforts, the King of Sodom offers Abraham the spoils of the battle. Abraham refuses to accept the spoils from Sodom, explaining, "I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich'" (Gen 14:22-23). In short, Genesis 13-14 records Abraham's remarkable courage in the LORD and devotion to the LORD.

It is in this context that God once again speaks to Abraham in Genesis 15:1 and declares, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield, your reward shall be very great." As God protected Abraham against foreign foes, God will continue to defend Abraham by serving as Abraham's "shield." In addition, Abraham need not fear missing out on the spoils of battle. Whatever Abraham may have voluntarily forfeited to the King of Sodom, God will repay. God assures Abraham, "your reward shall be very great."¹

¹ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 163.

These connections in the narrative between Genesis 13-14 and the opening verse of Genesis 15 seem rather clear. However, there is something curious about the transition. In light of the faith, courage, and singular devotion Abraham demonstrated in Genesis 13-14, why would God feel it necessary to admonish Abraham in the opening verse of Genesis 15 not to fear? God may simply be punctuating his rescue of Abraham so that Abraham would remember God's faithfulness when faced with future threats. However, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes apparent that underneath Abraham's genuine faith and courage God perceives a nagging fear. Abraham is afraid that despite God's faithfulness in battle and in provisions, God will not come through on the one promise that is most dear to him—the promise of a son.

Immediately following Genesis 15:1, where God promises to protect and provide for Abraham, Abraham confesses in Genesis 15:2-3: "O LORD God what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? ...Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household shall be my heir." Abraham's mention of Eliezer as his heir is surprising, for this is the one and only mention of Eliezer in the Abrahamic narrative. Most commentators conclude that Eliezer is one of Abraham's servants.² Abraham still believes the promise, but Abraham contemplates the possibility that God might not fully deliver on the promise, and he will be forced to grant his estate to Eliezer and to hope that the promise will be realized in him.

One might assume it was easy for a man like Abraham and his wife, Sarah, to believe God's promise. Abraham and Sarah lived so long ago, and one might conclude that therefore Abraham and Sarah were not sophisticated and enlightened like modern people. They must have been superstitious, gullible, and inclined to believe the

² For a fuller discussion, see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 419-422.

fantastical. However, those assumptions are wrong. The biblical account reveals that faith was not easy for Abraham and Sarah. In actuality, Abraham and Sarah expressed doubts and at times struggled mightily to believe God's promise. Abraham and Sarah had never flown in an airplane, and they did not have access to the Internet. But they did understand how babies are made. They knew that they had yet to give birth to a child. And worse yet, Sarah was barren, and neither of them was getting any younger. Realistically, one could argue that it made more sense for Abraham and Sarah to be planning their funeral than to be planning a baby shower. Consequently, Abraham had his doubts. Will God provide the child he promised? "O LORD, God, what will you give me, for I continue childless..." (Gen 15:2)?

God's Promise

God responds to Abraham's doubt by reaffirming and clarifying his promise. God insists, "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir" (Gen 15:4). God chooses to refer to Eliezer as "this man" rather than to refer to Eliezer by name. This suggests that when God envisioned the fulfillment of his promise to Abraham, Eliezer's name never entered God's mind. God never associated Eliezer's name with the fulfillment of his promise to Abraham. Accordingly, God is not interested in a contingency plan. God will fulfill his promise, and God clarifies that the fulfillment of the promise necessitates that Abraham and Sarah possess not any heir but their own biological heir.³

No doubt, God's promise to Abraham and Sarah is unusual. Normally, God does not explicitly promise a couple that they *will* give birth to a baby. It is important, therefore, for us to remember that God's promise to bless Abraham and Sarah with a

³ The Hebrew (אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִמְּעִיךָ הוּא יִירָשְׁךָ) literally reads, "that which will come from your own loins will be your heir," which further underscores the point. Notably, the same phrase is used in 2 Sam 7:12 when God promises David an heir who will reign on the throne of David forever.

child goes beyond Abraham and Sarah living their best life now. God's promise to Abraham and Sarah is directly related to God's plan to bring salvation to the world and specifically to how God will bring salvation to the world.

In Galatians 3:16, the apostle Paul discerns, "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ." Appealing to the singular use of "offspring," Paul argues that God promised to fulfill his word to Abraham through an individual and unique offspring. Paul's argument seems strange at first. As Paul knows, both the Hebrew word, זרע, and the Greek word, σπέρμα, which is translated "offspring" or "seed," are collective singulars. In other words, the singular form can be used to refer to a descendant or to more than one descendant. In English, the word "seed" perfectly illustrates the point. "Seed" is a collective singular in English. The singular form can refer to an individual child or to a multitude of children.

Given the lexical ambiguity, Paul's argument is not fundamentally based upon Hebrew grammar, but rather upon Old Testament theology. Paul discerns a redemptive line of descent that runs through the biblical narrative. Therefore, it is through the line of a unique group of individuals that God consistently accomplishes salvation for his people. This theme initially emerges in the garden. God curses the serpent and declares, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring (זרע) and her offspring (זרע); he shall bruise (qal, imperfect, third person, masculine, *singular* of שוף referring to "her offspring") your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen 3:15).⁴ The pattern continues in Abraham. The author of Genesis strives to demonstrate that Abraham is the descendant of Adam and that the promise will continue through Abraham's unique

⁴ John MacArthur Jr., *Galatians*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 84. Also see James M. Hamilton Jr., "The Skull Crushing Seed of The Woman: Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Genesis 3:15," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 30–54.

biological line of descent. As a result, the promise is not realized through Eliezer, and later not through Ishmael, but rather through the unique seed, Isaac. This redemptive line of descent appears again and again until it finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus so that the promise continues not through Esau but through Jacob, not through Saul but through David, not through John the Baptist but through Jesus.⁵

In response to Abraham's doubt God reaffirms his promise, and in so doing God emphasizes that the promise will be realized through a unique, individual seed. In the immediate historical context of Genesis 15 this means that the promise made to Abraham and Sarah will be fulfilled in Isaac. In the larger context of redemptive history this means that God's promise will ultimately be fulfilled through Abraham's greater Son, the Lord Jesus. In this sense, Jesus is the promised seed and no substitute will suffice. Jesus himself declares, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:7). And the apostles reiterate, "For there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

After God reassures Abraham that the promise will be realized through his biological heir, God reasserts the even greater promise to make Abraham a nation and through Abraham to bless all the peoples of the earth (Gen 12:1-3). God instructs Abraham, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them" (Gen 15:5). We can assume that Abraham quickly realizes that this is a task that he cannot complete for some estimate that the Milky Way Galaxy contains approximately

⁵ "To sum up: Paul reads the Genesis promises in light of the story line of the OT, which narrows the promise down to a son of David and finds its fulfillment in the one man, Jesus of Nazareth. The "offspring" texts should be interpreted, then, in terms of corporate representation. Jesus is *the representative* offspring of Abraham and David and the fulfillment of the original redemptive promise in Gen 3:15. Thus, the promise should be conceived typologically, for the offspring promises have their fulfillment in Christ, so that the offspring promises in the OT point forward to and anticipate the coming of Jesus Christ." Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 230.

one hundred billion stars.⁶ God follows his impressive demonstration with this spectacular promise: “So shall your offspring be” (Gen 15:5). Not only will God fulfill his original promise to bless Abraham with a son, he will be faithful to fulfill the larger promise to make Abraham a great nation.

Genesis 15 contains a pattern. The pattern is that God will fulfill his promise in the one and then in the many. God will fulfill the promise in Isaac, the one, and then in the nation, the many. God declares, “your very own son shall be your heir” (Gen 15:4). Isaac represents the one. Then, in reference to the number of stars in the sky, God exclaims, “So shall your offspring be” (Gen 15:5). The innumerable multitude represents the many. So the promise is that the unique, individual seed will result in an innumerable offspring.

Notably, Paul follows the same pattern in Galatians 3. In Galatians 3:16, Paul stresses that the promise will be fulfilled in the one unique seed, Jesus Christ. But later, in Galatians 3:29, Paul concludes, “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” Paul’s argument moves from the one to the many. Paul understands that God’s promise will ultimately be realized in the one man, Jesus Christ, the true son of Abraham. And then the promise will be fulfilled in the many, all those who experience God’s salvation as a consequence of their union to Christ by faith. As the Puritan, William Perkins, remarks, “It is here to be observed that the promises made to Abraham are first made to Christ, and then in Christ to all that believe in him... The promises of the gospel are first directed and made to Christ, and then by consequent to them that are by faith engrafted into Christ.”⁷

The genius of Paul’s argument is revealed in his double use of word

⁶ Elizabeth Howell, “How Many Stars Are in the Universe?,” Space.com, May 18, 2017, <https://www.space.com/26078-how-many-stars-are-there.html#:~:text=Averaging%20out%20the%20types%20of,200%20billion%20stars%20or%20more..>

⁷ William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. J. Stephen Yuille, Joel R. Beeke, and Derek Thomas, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 189.

“offspring.” Paul makes use of the word first in Galatians 3:16 and again in Galatians 3:29. As noted earlier, both in Hebrew, עֶרְוָה, and in Greek, σπέρμα, the word is a collective singular. In Galatians 3:16, Paul insists that seed is to be read as singular. But, in Galatians 3:29, Paul obviously understands seed to be plural. Why? Paul is not making a lexical argument. Paul discerns a pattern—a pattern revealed in Genesis 15 and reiterated throughout the Abrahamic narrative. The pattern is that the promise will be fulfilled in the one, and through the one the promise will be fulfilled in the many.

When Abraham presents God with his doubts, God does not trim his promise or renege on his promise. God boldly reaffirms his promise and provides greater clarity on just how he intends to fulfill it.

Abraham’s Doubt

In Genesis 15:6, Abraham responds in faith to God’s reaffirmation of the promise. We read, “And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” Momentarily, we will return to this text. For now, it is enough to note that Abraham’s confidence in the LORD’s promise has been restored. Abraham believes that the LORD will grant him an heir and that through this heir the LORD will grant him as many descendants as there are stars in the sky.

At this point, the LORD reminds Abraham of another promise. In Genesis 15:7, God asserts, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” Perhaps this is too much for Abraham to process at one time. Does Abraham believe God will provide him with an heir? Yes. Does Abraham believe that through this heir God will make him a great nation? Yes. Will God enable Abraham to possess all the land of Canaan? Abraham is not so sure. Abraham feels that he needs more proof, more assurance. In Genesis 15:8, Abraham expresses his need for further validation: “O LORD God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” Again, Abraham is not naïve. Abraham does not possess a smartphone, and he does not have access to the

twenty-four hour news cycle. But Abraham is keenly aware that he does not possess the resources to conquer the land of Canaan by himself. Once again, Abraham doubts whether or not God will come through on his promise. Abraham desires reassurance. Notice God's response. God responds with a pledge.

God's Pledge

In Genesis 15:13-16, God reiterates and elaborates on his promise to bless Abraham with the land. God explains that Abraham will die in peace. Abraham's descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, namely Egypt. After four hundred years, Abraham's descendants will return to the land, execute God's judgment on the Amorites, and possess the land.

This is the promise. But God guarantees his promise to Abraham with a pledge. At this point, God officially enters into covenant with Abraham. In Genesis 15:18 we read, "On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram..." God's previous interactions with Abraham have already included many of the essential components of the covenant. However, this is the first time the word "covenant" is actually used in the Abrahamic narrative. In Genesis 15, God makes a pledge to Abraham. This pledge officially establishes and formalizes the covenant.

The covenant ceremony is captured in Genesis 15:9-12, 17-19. God instructs Abraham, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon" (Gen 15:9). Abraham obeys. Abraham sacrifices the animals, and he "cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other" (Gen 15:10).

God and Abraham are acting out an ancient near eastern covenant ceremony. Normally, both covenant partners pass through the divided parts, pledging their fidelity to the covenant and accepting that failure will bring upon them the same fate as the animals through which they pass. The ceremonial symbolism is explained in Jeremiah 34:18-20,

in which transgressors of the covenant are doomed to become “like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts.”⁸ In passing through the divided animals, the covenant partners are acknowledging, “If I do not fulfill my obligations to the covenant, I accept the curse of the covenant. Like these slaughtered animals, my fate will be death.”

The particulars of the ceremony seem strange to us, but the basic concept is familiar. People from previous generations often lament that deals can no longer be secured with a handshake. A handshake represents a commitment, a pledge. In days past, if someone shook on a deal, they were pledging their honor, their reputation. Essentially, they were acknowledging, “If I don’t fulfill my obligations in this deal, then it will be a blemish—a blight—against my name and my integrity.” Today, we make deals by signing a contract, and contracts also include penalties. When a person places their signature on a contract, they pledge, “If I break this contract, I am still liable for my portion of the contract and may be in danger of financial penalties or criminal charges.”

The stage is set for each of the covenant partners, God and Abraham, to pledge their fidelity to the covenant by passing through the butchered animals. Surprisingly, however, God puts Abraham to sleep. As Abraham sleeps, “a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces” (Gen 15:15). Both symbols represent the person and presence of God.⁹ As Abraham sleeps, God assumes full responsibility for the promises of the covenant. God guarantees the covenant with his life.¹⁰

⁸ The full citation from Jer 34:18-20 makes it clear that the slaughtered animals symbolize death and failure to keep covenant results in death: “And the man who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between the parts—the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf. And I will give them into the hands of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives. Their *dead bodies* shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.”

⁹ “The smoke and fire, like the ‘fiery, cloudy pillar’ of the Exodus, were evidently a theophany, a manifestation of God.” Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 136. Also see Ex 3:2; 13:21-22.

¹⁰ “The fact that only God passes between the pieces is quite remarkable and shows that the promise depends upon him and him alone.” Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018),

Scholars debate whether or not the promises of the Abrahamic covenant are unconditional or conditional. Rightly understood, the Abrahamic covenant is both. Abraham and his descendants must meet certain obligations (e.g. Gen 17:1-2; 18:19; 22:16-18). Failure to meet these requirements will threaten the validity and fulfillment of the covenant. Yet, as demonstrated in the covenant ceremony in Genesis 15, God guarantees the conditions of the covenant by pledging to suffer the penalty for the failure of Abraham and his descendants to meet their covenantal obligations. Gentry and Wellum are right when they observe,

The Abraham covenant consists of unconditional/unilateral and conditional/bilateral elements and is not reducible to one of these features alone. ...God's demand for obedience does not nullify God's promises and make the covenant bilateral; instead it creates an antinomical tension within the covenant relationship. ...This growing tension between God unilaterally keeping his promises *and* demanding an obedient partner is resolved neither here nor in later covenants, as evidenced by Israel's and the Davidic king's disobedience. Yet even within the Abrahamic covenant is a hint at how it will be resolved: 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering' (Gen 22:8). However, as the covenants unfold, God's provision will not merely be a lamb in our place (nor the entire priestly-sacrificial system under the law-covenant); God's provision is his own dear Son, the true seed of Abraham, who, because he is God, can satisfy *God's own righteous demand* and who, because he is human, can fully obey for us as the faithful human covenant partner.¹¹

Accordingly, the covenantal ceremony contains the rudimentary elements of penal substitutionary atonement. God vows to take the curse (penalty) in Abraham's place (substitutionary) by receiving in himself the curse of the covenant symbolized in the bloody death of the animals (atonement). Of course, God made good on his pledge when Jesus, the Son of God, became "a curse for us... so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles" (Gal 3:13-14).

The themes of sin, curse, and atonement are increasingly unpopular in our day, even among some who profess to be evangelical Christians.¹² Some claim that penal

287.

¹¹ Ibid., 693-694.

¹² For a more extensive defense of penal substitutionary atonement, see Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution*

substitutionary atonement misrepresents God as a God of wrath, rather than a God of love. Certainly, in our telling of the gospel, we must communicate that when the Father offered the Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin, he was fundamentally compelled by love, not wrath. John 3:16 does not say, “God so *hated* the world, that he gave his only Son,”¹³ but “God so *loved* the world, that he gave his Son.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, the question remains: why did God’s love for us compel God to offer his Son as an atoning sacrifice? No doubt, the answer to that question is that the curse of our covenantal unfaithfulness must be satisfied. In the biblical narrative, these two truths are not at odds, but harmoniously reveal the unrelenting love of a holy God to rescue his children from the curse of his just judgment so that they might know the blessing of his life. So, John writes, “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10).

Abraham’s Faith

One verse stands at the center of the narrative and is critical to understanding Abraham’s relationship with God as well as our relationship with God. The verse is

(Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007).

¹³ N.T. Wright is determined to correct this fallacy. Unfortunately, as Tom Schreiner points out, Wright seems to minimize the wrath of God and penal substitution. See Unbelievable? with Justin Brierly, "What Happened on the Cross?," Premier Christian Radio, posted November 12, 2016, accessed July 4, 2018, <https://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/Episodes/Unbelievable-What-happened-on-the-cross-NT-Wright-Tom-Schreiner.-500th-podcast-episode>.

¹⁴ Sinclair B. Ferguson’s words are compelling and moving: “The subtle danger here should be obvious. If we speak of the cross of Christ *as the cause* of the love of the Father, we imply that behind the cross and apart from it he may not actually love us at all. He needs to be ‘paid’ a ransom price in order to love us. But if it has required the death of Christ to persuade him to love us (‘Father, if I die, will you begin to love them?’), how can we ever be sure that the Father himself loves us – ‘deep down’ with an everlasting love? True, the Father does not love us *because* we are sinners; but he does love us *even though* we are sinners. He loved us *before* Christ died for us. It is *because* he loves us that Christ died for us!” Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance: Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 66.

Genesis 15:6: “And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”

New Testament authors explicitly cite Genesis 15:6 four times in the New Testament (Rom 4:9, 22; Gal 3:6; Jas 2:23) because they consider this text to be so vital to understanding the Abrahamic Covenant and God’s larger plan of redemption.

Furthermore, none of these citations amount to a passing reference; rather, each citation significantly contributes to larger theological discussions addressing how a person can be justified before God.

Of course, Genesis 15:6 does not mark the first time Abraham expresses faith in God. In Genesis 12, Abraham responds in faith to God’s initial promise. Abraham’s faith is demonstrated in Genesis 12 by his willingness to leave the safety and security of the familiar and to follow God to an unknown location (Heb 11:8).¹⁵ Just as Genesis 15:6 is not the first time that Abraham exercises faith in God, we also conclude that it is not the first time that Abraham’s faith is counted to him as righteousness. Abraham’s initial faith in God results in Abraham’s justification before God. Therefore, just as Genesis 15 formally establishes God’s already constituted covenant with Abraham, so Genesis 15 formally acknowledges Abraham’s justification, which Abraham had already experienced when he initially believed the promise.¹⁶

But what does it mean that Abraham “believed the LORD”? And what does it mean that Abraham’s faith is “counted to him as righteousness”? Of course, much could be said, but three observations are especially important to highlight. First, Abraham’s faith is not faith in faith, but faith in the LORD. Even in our increasingly secular society, people often consider it a badge of honor to be identified as a “man of faith” or a “woman of faith.” Therefore, it is important to point out that Abraham is not simply a “man of

¹⁵ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 166.

¹⁶ Brian Vickers, *Justification by Grace through Faith: Finding Freedom from Legalism, Lawlessness, Pride, and Despair*, Explorations in Biblical Theology (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2013), 58.

faith.” Abraham is a man who “believed the LORD” (15:6). Of course, “LORD” is a reference to not any god, but to Yahweh, the personal God of the Bible. Furthermore, Abraham not only entrusts himself to the LORD, Abraham believes “the word of the LORD” (15:4).¹⁷ In other words, Abraham believed the LORD’s specific promise that God will miraculously grant a promised child to him and his barren wife and that through this child a nation will emerge through whom the world will be blessed.

Contrary to popular opinion, faith itself is not a virtue. One may place his faith in an ideology of world domination and hate, or one may place his faith in a silly farce that the world will be saved from its demise by benevolent, flying marshmallows. Faith itself is not virtuous. The value of faith is measured by its object. The object of Abraham’s faith is the LORD and the Word of his promise. Likewise, our faith is not in faith itself. Our only hope of being justified before God is to believe in the God of the Bible and the fulfillment of his promise made to Abraham, which is realized in Jesus Christ, Abraham’s greater son.

Second, Abraham’s faith is not a perfect faith, but it is a genuine faith. In chapter 2, we noted Abraham’s previous lapse of faith in Genesis 12 by which Abraham risked Sarah’s safety in order to preserve himself. In this chapter, we have noted Abraham’s anxiety that God might fail to fulfill his promises to grant Abraham a son and land. In fact, immediately following the affirmation of Abraham’s faith in Genesis 15:6, Abraham expresses doubt in God’s promise in Genesis 15:8. In reference to the land promise, Abraham questions, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” In the following chapter, Genesis 16, Abraham’s faith fails him again as Abraham accepts Sarah’s proposal to conceive an heir through her servant, Hagar. The author of Genesis is not interested in convincing us that Abraham’s faith is perfect. To the contrary, the author seems to be intent on disclosing the numerous times that Abraham’s faith proves less than

¹⁷ Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 135.

perfect. Evidently, the author of Genesis wants us to know that Abraham is declared righteous not because Abraham's faith is perfect but because Abraham's faith in the LORD and in his promise is genuine and because Abraham perseveres in this faith.¹⁸

We have already established that faith itself is not a virtue, rather the value of faith is measured by its object. Therefore, this also means that a Christian is not justified by the measure of their faith or the perfection of their faith but rather by the worth of the object of their faith, namely God's promise realized in Jesus Christ. Faith does not save. The LORD saves. And the LORD saves through the Promise of his Son, Jesus Christ. Our faith does not possess the power to save us. Our faith, imperfect as it is, unites us to the power of God's promise in Jesus, which possesses the power to save.

Third, Abraham's faith was not righteousness, but Abraham's faith was counted as righteousness.¹⁹ Good works are often evaluated as righteousness. Someone does something good, and his good deed is assessed to be righteous. For example, in Psalm 106:30-31, the psalmist makes reference to Numbers 25 and commends Phinehas for executing a rebellious couple in Israel, who was responsible for inciting God's wrath against the people of God. In reference to Phineas' decisive action on behalf of the LORD, the psalmist asserts, "that was counted to him as righteousness from generation to generation forever." In other words, Phinehas' act of administering God's justice is determined to be a righteous deed. Phinehas' action is evaluated for what it is—righteous and good.

However, on other occasions, one might assign to something a value, which is

¹⁸ In Rom 4:19-20, Paul asserts, "He (Abraham) did not weaken in faith, when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in faith as he gave glory to God." Vickers is right to ascertain, "How can Paul say such things? ... Paul certainly knew the details of Abraham's life, but he was not looking for perfect faith, the kind that never entertains a shred of doubt or fear, but persevering faith in the justifying God that keeps on in the face of doubt and fear. Perseverance over time, not perfection, is the fruit of faith—perfection must wait until faith and hope are realized." Vickers, *Justification by Grace through Faith*, 89-90.

¹⁹ For the following discussion, I am indebted to *Ibid.*, 59-61.

contrary to its nature. For example, in Proverbs 27:14, the sage observes, “Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing.” The word spoken is offered as a blessing. However, given the unfavorable timing, the recipient regards the blessing as a curse. A similar principle is at play in God’s response to Abraham’s faith. Abraham’s faith is not righteousness in the same way that Phineas’ act of moral courage is deemed to be righteous. Normally, a work of obedience is associated with righteousness. Phineas’ act of justice is acknowledged as righteous. But faith is not a work. Work is doing. In contrast, faith is trusting. However, surprisingly, God chooses to declare Abraham’s faith as righteousness. Paul perceived the redemptive significance of this statement for understanding God’s relationship with humanity. This means that humanity does not fundamentally relate to God on the basis of works but on the basis of faith. As the apostle Paul declares in Romans 4:4-5: “Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.”

Conclusion

God never overpromises and underdelivers. Aged Abraham and barren Sarah do give birth to a child, Isaac. Later, Isaac gives birth to Jacob, and Jacob gives birth to twelve sons, who gives birth to the twelve tribes of Israel, a nation of innumerable descendants. Furthermore, the seed of Isaac ultimately gives birth to Jesus, Abraham’s greater son. Although Abraham and his descendants fail to keep covenant with God, God honors his pledge to fulfill all their covenant obligations on their behalf through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Through Jesus the promise is not only secured for the nation of Israel but for all the nations because, just like God did with Abraham, God counts their faith in the promise as righteousness. Redemptive history reveals that God did not overpromise, and far from underdelivering, God has exceeded all Abraham’s wildest

expectations.

CHAPTER 5
UNBELIEF AND THE PROMISE OF GOD

A survey of Abraham's life reveals that Abraham was a man of faith (Heb 11:6-12; 17-19). And yet the Bible does not gloss over Abraham's doubt and unbelief. In 1773, William Cowper wrote the now famous hymn entitled "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." The final verse reads,

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plan.¹

"Blind unbelief is sure to err" serves as an apt description of Abraham and Sarah's actions in Genesis 16.

Abraham and Sarah doubt God's promise. They fail to believe that God will provide them with an heir. Their unbelief does not constitute an outright rejection of God's promise. Abraham and Sarah do not denounce God's plan as rubbish and consciously cease to believe the promise. They just sense that God's plan is not working as they had hoped, and so they design a better plan, an improved plan, a Plan of Redemption 2.0. Then they act upon it.

At first, it seems that their plan works. But quickly it becomes apparent that far from working their actions create a mess of monumental proportions—a mess for themselves, for their children, and for generations to come. Yet, even in the consequences of their unbelief, God shows mercy. In Genesis 16, we encounter the unintended

¹ Master's Seminary, ed., *Hymns of Grace*, Pew ed. (Los Angeles: The Master's Seminary Press, 2015), 88.

consequences of unbelief and the mercy of God.

Abraham and Sarah's Unbelief

In Genesis 12, God promised a child to aged Abraham and barren Sarah. God also promised that through this child Abraham would become the father of a great nation and would be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. Abraham believed the promise. But, as time passes and the promise goes unfulfilled, Abraham and Sarah have their doubts.

In Genesis 15, Abraham becomes weary of waiting. Since God has yet to provide him and Sarah with a child, Abraham proposes that Eliezer, one his servants, be appointed as his heir. God rejects Abraham's proposal and reaffirms his promise to provide Abraham and Sarah with a biological descendant. Abraham is reassured.

In Genesis 16, approximately ten years have elapsed since God made his original promise to Abraham, and Sarah's confidence wanes. One can imagine Sarah's disappointment and grief when month after month and year after year her hopes of conceiving and bearing a child go unrealized. As a result, Sarah devises an alternate solution. Sarah possesses a servant named Hagar. Since Sarah and Abraham are not having any luck getting pregnant, Sarah determines that Abraham should try to conceive a child by Hagar. In Genesis 16:2, Sarah instructs Abraham, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." Sarah's plan is clearly at odds with God's promise.² In Genesis 15:4,

² Ancient Near Eastern Customs permitted a wife to bear children through her maidservants, however, it is apparent from the text, as will be shown, that God did not approve of Sarah's solution to fulfill the promise. See Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 445; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 137; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 184-185; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 7. Iain M. Duguid's statement is most striking: "Often in the Bible, such a statement ('Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.') is the preliminary to a 'But God...!' where God steps in miraculously to resolve the problem. Here in Genesis 16, however, there is no 'But God...!' There is only 'But Sarai...!' Sarai thought that she had found the solution in the person of her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar. What we have here is a classic human attempt to solve a problem with man's wisdom, not God's." Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel*

God explicitly indicated to Abraham, “your very own son shall be your heir.”³ Despite the clear promise of God’s Word, Abraham agrees to Sarah’s plan. Abraham takes Hagar to be his wife, and Hagar conceives.

Abraham and Sarah’s unbelief and their actions that follow amount to sin. The author of Genesis highlights Abraham and Sarah’s rebellion by crafting the narrative in such a way as to draw parallels between Abraham and Sarah’s actions and the sinful actions of Adam and Eve in the garden. First, the author makes a lexical connection between Eve’s initiative to tempt Adam to sin and Sarah’s initiative to tempt Abraham to sin. The key words here are לקה and נתן. In Genesis 3:6, we read, “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took (לקה) of its fruit and ate, and she also gave (נתן) some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.” In Genesis 16:3, we read, “Sarai, Abram’s wife, took (לקה) Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave (נתן) her to Abram her husband as a wife.” Second, the author makes another lexical connection between Adam’s willingness to follow Eve into sin and Abraham’s willingness to follow Sarah into sin. The key phrase here is שמע לקול. In Genesis 3:17, God rebukes Adam, “Because you have listened to the voice (בישמעת לקול) of your wife...” In Genesis 16:2, we read, “Abram listened to the voice (וישמע אברם לקול) of Sarai.”⁴ Third, like Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah sin because they fail to believe God’s word. In Genesis 3:1, the serpent prompts Eve to question God’s Word. He deceptively asks, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” Later, the serpent provokes Eve to

According to Abraham (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2015), 63.

³ The Hebrew (אשר יצא ממעיך הוא ירשך) literally reads, “that which will come from your own loins will be your heir.”

⁴ Wenham points out that the phrase שמע לקול, sometimes translated "obey" or literally "listen to the voice," only occurs in these two passages. In addition, both of the passages involve a husband following the questionable advice of his wife, which further confirms the author's intent to associate Abraham and Sarah's actions with those at the fall. See Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 7.

deny what God has clearly spoken. In Genesis 3:4, the serpent brazenly insists, “You will not surely die.” In similar fashion, Abraham and Sarah’s strategy to conceive a child through a surrogate stands in direct contrast to God’s Word spoken to Abraham in Genesis 15:4: “And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: ‘This man (Eliezer) shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.’” Finally, Adam and Eve attempt to avoid culpability by blaming God, each other, and the serpent (Gen 3:12-13).

Likewise, in Genesis 16, Abraham and Sarah blame-shift to avoid responsibility. In Genesis 16:2, Sarah faults God for his failure to provide her with a child: “Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children.” When Hagar conceives, Sarah blames Abraham for her feelings of regret: “May the wrong done to me be on you” (Gen 16:5)! In an attempt to defend himself, Abraham seeks to avoid culpability by placing all the responsibility back on Sarah: “But Abram said to Sarai, ‘Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please’” (Gen 16:6).

Just like Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, in Genesis 16, both Abraham and Sarah doubt God’s word. As a result, Abraham fails to protect Sarah from the deception of sin and to lead her to trust God’s word. Instead, Sarah leads Abraham into sin, and Abraham willingly follows. This moral breakdown results in a fracture in Abraham and Sarah’s relationship with God and with one another.

Unintended Consequences

Immediately following the implementation of Sarah’s plan, it seems that Sarah’s proposal works. Ten years of waiting on the LORD yielded no child and a whole lot of frustration and disappointment. In Genesis 16:3-4, we read, “Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived.” Easy enough! Now, Abraham possesses an heir. Perhaps God should have consulted Sarah sooner and not wasted the last ten years. But, as quickly as Sarah’s plan seems to come together and move things forward, it falls apart.

Abraham and Sarah's actions quickly result in familial division and generational conflict.

Familial Division

Immediately following the news that Hagar has conceived, Hagar's disposition toward Sarah changes. In Genesis 16:4, we read, "And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt (קלל) on her mistress." As a result, in Genesis 16:5, Sarah complains to Abraham, "I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt (קלל)." ⁵

In response to Hagar's disdain, Sarah drives Hagar and her son from the family. Genesis 16:6 records, "Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from them." The author of Genesis does not reveal exactly how Sarah mistreats Hagar, but we do know that Hagar decides that Sarah's mistreatment of her is so unbearable that she cannot remain. Hagar departs. Now she is estranged from her new husband, Abraham, and her mistress, Sarah. As Hagar sets out, she carries in her womb Abraham's only child. Wenham concludes, "Thus the scene ends in total disaster for all concerned. Hagar has lost her home, Sarai her maid, and Abram his second wife and newborn child." ⁶

Generational Conflict

Once Hagar achieves some distance from Abraham and Sarah the "angel of the LORD" ⁷ appears to Hagar with a message. The angel's words essentially function as a

⁵ God designed marriage to be a lifelong monogamous relationship. As Gen 2:24 declares, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." Polygamy is a violation of the one flesh union. After establishing God's ideal for marriage in Gen 1, the author of Genesis repeatedly demonstrates the relational strife caused by polygamy. The rancorous relationship between Sarah and Hagar further illustrates the inherit perils of polygamy and further substantiates that polygamy is an aberration of God's original design for marriage.

⁶ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 9.

⁷ In the Old Testament, the phrase "angel of the LORD" appears some fifty times. The angel is both equated with God and distinguished from God. This is also true in Gen 16. In Gen 16:10 and 13, the "angel of the LORD" is equated with God, but in Gen 16:11, the "angel of the LORD" is distinguished from God. Based on this evidence many Christian commentators identify the angel as a Christophany, an appearance of the preincarnate Son of God. For further discussion, see Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 450-451; Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 188-189.

birth announcement for the child that Hagar is carrying. In Genesis 16:11-12, the angel announces, “Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.”

Birth announcements are popular in our own day. Expecting families will often announce on social media or on a postcard through the mail that they are pregnant. The announcement might come with a sonogram picture and a brief statement of the parent’s gratitude and hopes for the child. Upon reading the angel’s birth announcement for Ishmael, one immediately recognizes that this is not a birth announcement that they would design for their own child. The angel prophesies that Ishmael will live a life of perpetual conflict, which will include ongoing hostility between him and his kinsmen.⁸ As the narrative will reveal this conflict will be most acutely realized in the ongoing tensions between Ishmael and his descendants and his future brother, Isaac, and his descendants.

The conflict between Ishmael and Isaac can be traced through the biblical narrative. Genesis 16 opens by foreshadowing the future rivalry between Ishmael and Isaac. Twice Hagar is identified as an Egyptian (16:1, 3). In the Old Testament, the Egyptians continually function as one of Israel’s primary foes. Accordingly, Hagar’s hostility towards Sarah appears immediately after she conceives (Gen 16:4). Three generations later Hagar’s descendants, the Ishmaelites, sell young Joseph, a descendant of Isaac, into slavery to the Egyptians (Gen 37:25-28; 39:1-2). And Joseph’s bondage in Egypt serves as a precursor to the four hundred years of Egyptian slavery that his people

⁸ The “angel of the LORD” declares that the unborn child will be “a wild donkey of a man” (Gen 16:12). As Hamilton notes, “This designation is derogatory and derisive.” Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 454. Mathews goes on to observe, “Taken together each part of v.12 intensifies the picture of Ishmael as an antagonist whose hostilities are indiscriminate and without restraint.” Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 191.

eventually endure. Hagar and Ishmael's descendants will perpetually serve as a source of irritation for Isaac and his descendants.⁹

Who are the contemporary descendants of Ishmael? Arabs, in particular Muslim Arabs, claim to be Ishmael's descendants.¹⁰ In *The World's Religions*, perhaps the most widely celebrated modern survey of religion, Huston Smith makes this comment regarding the relationship between Ishmael and Arab Muslims: "Here we come to the first divergence between the koranic and biblical accounts. According to the Koran, Ishmael went to the place where Mecca was to rise. His descendants, flourishing in Arabia, become Muslims; whereas those of Isaac, who remained in Palestine, were Hebrews and became Jews."¹¹

Muslims believe that the prophet Muhammad was a physical descendant of Ishmael. Of course, Muslims celebrate Muhammad as a man of *jihad*, holy war. In an article entitled *Muhammad: The Warrior Prophet*, Richard A. Gabriel notes, "Muhammad used terrorism to strike fear in the hearts of his enemies on a large scale."¹² Gabriel provides several examples, including this one: "On another occasion, again against a Jewish tribe of Media, he ordered all the tribe's adult males, some nine hundred, beheaded in the city square, the women and children sold into slavery, and their property distributed among his Muslims followers."¹³ Contemporaries, who claim physical lineage to Ishmael and identify themselves with his brutal tactics, acknowledge the fulfillment of the angel's prophetic words regarding Ishmael and the perpetual aggression of Ishmael's

⁹ "Hagar's son, Ishmael, was not just a continual problem for Abraham and Sarah; his descendants would also be a perpetual thorn in Israel's flesh." Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality*, 70.

¹⁰ Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 138.

¹¹ Huston Smith, *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 223.

¹² Richard A. Gabriel, "Muhammed the Warrior Prophet," *Historynet* (blog), Summer 2007, <https://www.historynet.com/muhammad-the-warrior-prophet.htm>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

descendants against their kinsmen.

The Mercy of God

Abraham and Sarah's unbelief results in division and conflict. They and their descendants will suffer the repercussions of their failure to trust God. At the same time, God remains faithful to his promise and showers his mercy and blessing on Abraham and his family, who now include Sarah *and* Hagar as well as Isaac *and* Ishmael. Two extremes exist, when people attempt to understand God's relationship to Hagar and Ishmael. Some disdain Hagar, Ishmael, and their descendants. They justify their disdain by referencing Ishmael's troubling birth announcement (Gen 16:11-12) and Hagar and Ishmael's future expulsion from Abraham's household (Gen 21:8-21). On the other hand, some immortalize Hagar, Ishmael, and their descendants. For example, some Muslims believe that God's promises to Abraham are fulfilled through Ishmael rather than Isaac, although even the Koran is not clear on this point.

Neither extreme accurately reflects the biblical narrative. As Mathews observes, "The Genesis narrative (chaps 16; 21) present an ambiguous view of Hagar-Ishmael: they are rivals to Sarai and Isaac; but they are also blessed by the LORD by virtue of their relationship to Abram (16:10; 21:13, 18)."¹⁴ The Bible presents Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, and Ishmael as flawed persons who become the recipients of God's undeserved mercy. Consequently, out of familial division, God in his mercy works familial restoration, and out of generational conflict, God in his mercy works generational and global redemption.

Familial Restoration

In the cultural context of the ancient near east, Hagar possesses little earthly status or clout. She is a foreigner in Abraham's home and a servant to Sarah. Despite the

¹⁴ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 178-179.

biblical expectation that God’s people treat foreigners and servants with respect and fairness (Ex 22:21; Deut 24:14), Abraham and Sarah use Hagar as a pawn in their larger scheme to secure an heir for themselves. Hagar is not entirely innocent in the arrangement. Yet, Abraham and Sarah clearly bear the greater culpability in this moral debacle. Initially, Abraham and Sarah enjoy every social and economic advantage over Hagar, but rather than use their advantages to protect and bless Hagar, they use their advantages to exploit her. When Hagar is expelled from the household, she is pregnant and without a husband to provide for her and her child. Hagar’s future is bleak.

But, in Genesis 16:7, we read, “The angel of the LORD found her by a spring in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur.” There is no record of Hagar calling out to the LORD in her distress. Rather, the author stresses God’s initiative by recording, “The angel of the LORD found her.” In other words, the angel of the LORD determined to go looking for Hagar—pursuing her—until he found her. This is mercy.

Throughout the Genesis 16 narrative, Abraham and Sarah never refer to Hagar by name. They only refer to Hagar as “servant,” which further substantiates the concern that Abraham and Sarah’s dealings with Hagar lack empathy. In contrast, the first word that the angel of the LORD speaks to Hagar is her name: “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going” (Gen 16:8). This simple act of addressing Hagar by name implies that the angel of the LORD has appeared, at least in part, to restore something of Hagar’s dignity. This is mercy.

After Hagar informs the angel of the LORD that she is fleeing from Sarah, the angel of the LORD instructs Hagar, “Return to your mistress and submit to her” (Gen 16:8). Although Hagar must have recoiled at the thought of returning to Sarah, Hagar obeys.¹⁵ This also is mercy. Hagar’s return ensures that Abraham will provide for her

¹⁵ “Knowing now that the situation may be even more tense than before, Hagar offers no resistance or rebuttal. She is a lady of faith and obedience.” Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 452.

physical needs and the physical needs of her expectant child. In addition, Hagar's return provides the opportunity for Ishmael to know his father and to grow up under Abraham's parentage. Years later, Sarah insists that Hagar and Ishmael be banished from the household, but the years Hagar and Ishmael spend with Abraham result in a parental relationship between Abraham and Ishmael that continues until Abraham's death (Gen 25:9).

In Genesis 16:10, the angel of the LORD goes on to make a promise to Hagar. The angel of the LORD announces, "I will multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." Of course, this promise sounds familiar; it is similar to God's promise to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 15:5, when God declared to Abraham, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them... So shall your offspring be." In her estranged state, Hagar is a woman without a husband and her son is a child without a father, but God commits to make Ishmael and his descendants a great nation. This is mercy.

In Genesis 16:11, the angel of the LORD announces the birth of Ishmael, "Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction." Ishmael's name will serve as a perpetual reminder to Hagar of God's mercy in her life. Ishmael means "God hears," and despite Hagar's lack of social standing and adverse circumstances, the LORD has "heard" Hagar's suffering and has shown her mercy.¹⁶

Hagar clearly understands her interaction with the angel of the LORD as an expression of God's mercy in her life. In Genesis 16:12, Hagar identifies the LORD as **אלהים רואה**, "you are the God who sees," for as Hagar acknowledges, "Truly here I have seen

¹⁶ God's response to Hagar mirrors God's later response to Isaac's descendants, the Hebrews, when they are enslaved in Egypt. In Exod 2:23-25, we read, "During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew."

him who looks after me.” God shows mercy to Hagar and her unborn child, Ishmael, by restoring them to Abraham’s household.¹⁷ In so doing, God reestablishes their relationship with Abraham and through their relationship with Abraham they experience the blessing of God (Gen 12:1-3).

Generational and Global Redemption

Humanly speaking, the birth of Ishmael originates in the mind of Sarah. However, after Ishmael is born Sarah never claims Ishmael as her own child. Rather, Sarah casts out Hagar and Ishmael with her. Then, the angel of the LORD reveals that Ishmael will be perpetually at odds with others, especially his future brother, Isaac. At the same time, the narrator closes Genesis 16 by reiterating three times in verses 15-16 that Ishmael is the son of Abraham. So, what is God’s relationship to Ishmael and his descendants?

We must begin by revisiting God’s promise to bless Abraham with a seed, an offspring. In one sense, both Isaac and Ishmael are Abraham’s seed. However, it is apparent in the biblical account that God’s promise functions differently in Isaac’s life as opposed to Ishmael. Tracing God’s seed promise through the biblical narrative enables us to better understand this distinction between Isaac and Ishmael.

Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum follow the theme of seed through the biblical narrative and identify four distinct, yet related, uses of seed.¹⁸ “First, ‘the seed of Abraham’ refers to a *natural* (biological) seed, namely every person who was in any way

¹⁷ Wenham points out that in the immediate context Hagar’s fortune exceeds Sarah’s: “Though Sarah is portrayed as mistress throughout, not simply exploiting her maid Hagar but also telling her husband what to do, it is apparent that Hagar comes out the best in the end. She becomes Abram’s wife. She receives divine promises. And eventually she bears a son not for Sarah as was planned (v2) but, as the narrative says three times (vv15-16), for Abram.” Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 4.

¹⁸ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 690-693.

biologically descended from Abraham.”¹⁹ This includes all of Abraham’s physical children, the children of Sarah, Hagar, and Keturah, including Isaac and Ishmael. “Second, the ‘seed of Abraham’ refers to a *natural (biological), yet special* seed tied to God’s elective purposes.”²⁰ In this case, the “seed” refers to Isaac and to the nation of Israel that is birthed from him. God promised to make both Isaac and Ishmael into great nations, but it is Isaac’s seed that is the “natural, yet special seed” that produces the nation of Israel. “Third, the ultimate ‘seed of Abraham,’ refers to the *true / unique* seed, namely Christ (Gal 3:16), the antitype of the previous *special* seeds of Abraham.”²¹ Jesus is the physical descendant of Abraham (Matt 1:1) and Abraham’s son, Isaac (Matt 1:2). Moreover, Jesus is the seed through whom all the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant are finally realized. “Fourth, the New Testament teaches that all believers, regardless of nationality are the *spiritual* ‘seed of Abraham’ now that Christ has come and inaugurated a new covenant.”²² Through faith in Jesus, the Jews and Gentiles, comprise the people of God. Their identification as “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise,” is not dependent upon their physical lineage, but rather a spiritual lineage attested to by saving faith (Gal 3:26-29).

This quick biblical theology of seed corrects the misguided notion that the promises of the Abrahamic covenant are fulfilled in Ishmael. Ishmael is Abraham’s son, and God does promise to bless Ishmael with descendants and a nation. But the essential promise of the Abrahamic Covenant to bless Abraham and through Abraham’s seed to bless the nations is assigned to Isaac and his seed. Generally speaking, this promise is carried along by Isaac’s descendants, the nation of Israel. In particular, this promise is

¹⁹ Ibid., 691.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 691-692.

realized through the unique lineage that directly runs from Isaac to the true seed, the Lord Jesus Christ. On this point, it is noteworthy that a number of times in both the Old Testament and the New Testament God is referred to as the “God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob,”²³ but never is God referred to as the “God of Abraham, Ishmael, and Nebaioth.”²⁴ The biblical account testifies again and again that the essential promises of the Abrahamic Covenant are realized through Isaac and not Ishmael. Therefore, Hagar and Ishmael should not be immortalized. Even if one could prove that Muhammad is the physical descendant of Ishmael, the fact remains that the promise is realized through Isaac and his greater son, the Lord Jesus.

On the other hand, Ishmael and his descendants should not be disdained. Unfortunately, some might appeal to Scripture as a justification to write off those who claim to be descendants of Ishmael as cursed and hopelessly lost. But, a careful study of Scripture will not support such claims. It is true that, in Genesis 16:12, the angel of the LORD characterizes Ishmael as a “wild donkey” and as a man of incessant conflict. As noted, this is not a favorable description. Yet, in the book of Genesis, Isaac’s son, Jacob, provides an equally critical assessment of some of Isaac’s famed grandchildren, Simeon and Levi. In Genesis 49:5-7, Jacob pronounces over Simeon and Levi, “Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel.” Remember that Simeon and Levi serve as representative heads of two of the tribes of Israel and that Levi will come to represent the priestly line of Israel responsible for

²³ Interestingly, the bulk of these references occur in two places. First, they appear in God’s revelation of himself to Moses (Ex 3:8, 15; 4:5), and second, they appear in the words of the Lord Jesus (Matt 22:32; Mk 12:26; Lk 12:28).

²⁴ According to Genesis 25:13, Nebaioth was Ishmael’s firstborn son.

leading God's people in worship and mediating between the people and God. Since Jacob's condemnation of Simeon and Levi does not constitute God's outright rejection of Simeon and Levi, we should not conclude that the angel of the LORD's unfavorable description of Ishmael, in Genesis 16, represents God's absolute rejection of Ishmael and his descendants. In fact, in Genesis 17, we are told three times that Abraham circumcised Ishmael (17:23, 25-26), which further indicates that although Ishmael is not the promised seed of Abraham he undoubtedly benefits as a result of his relationship to Abraham.

The promise of the Abrahamic covenant is that through Abraham and his seed, Isaac, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3). This means that Ishmael and his descendants will also experience God's blessing of redemption. And they will experience the blessing of God's redemption as all people will—by believing the promise of God made to Abraham, transmitted through Isaac, and realized in Jesus Christ.

Biblical faithfulness demands that Christians fully embrace the global implications of God's redemptive promises made to Abraham. In a biographical piece entitled *I Am Not Abraham's Mistake* by Derek Rishmawy, a Palestinian Christian, Rishmawy graciously addresses some of the personal pain as well as some of the missional implications of an unbiblical prejudice against Arabs.²⁵ Rishmawy shares that "some of (his) well-meaning, evangelical brothers and sisters ignorantly implied: that (his) entire ethnic heritage was an unfortunate mistake—Abraham's mistake to be exact."²⁶ Rishmawy goes on to demonstrate that God's promise of redemption in the Abrahamic Covenant is realized through Isaac but applies to all the peoples of the earth including the descendants of Ishmael. In Galatians 3:28-29, Paul insists on this very point, as he explains the implications of God's redemptive promises to Abraham: "There

²⁵ Derek Rishmawy, "I Am Not Abraham's Mistake," *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), April 13, 2015, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/i-am-not-abrahams-mistake/>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." As Rishmawy concludes the record of his own personal experience, he aptly testifies, "I guess what I'm trying to say is, as a Palestinian Christian, I am not Abraham's mistake. I am God's choice in Christ."²⁷

Tragically, some Christians might dismiss entire ethnic or religious groups, like Arab Muslims, as beyond the gospel's reach. Yet, it is ironic that Western Christians, of whom most are ethnically far more removed from the lineage of Abraham and Isaac than the descendants of Ishmael, might be tempted to suspect that Arabs are beyond the hope of the gospel. The apostle Paul provides the ideal pastoral admonition to Western Christians who might entertain such ill-advised thinking: "Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh... remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:11-13). The genealogical lineage of most Western Christians is far removed from that of Abraham and Isaac, and we have been brought near not because of our ethnic pedigree but because in God's mercy, he brought us near through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Therefore, we must not dismiss Arabs as unreachable or disdain Arabs as irreparably cursed. Instead, we must love, and pray, and give, and support, and go to share the love and mercy of God in Christ with all peoples of the world.

Conclusion

Genesis 16 concludes, "Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram" (v16). At eighty-six years old, approximately eleven years had passed

²⁷ Ibid.

since God first announced his promise to Abraham in Genesis 12, and the promise is still unfulfilled. Yet, it is mercy that God's promise to Abraham and Sarah still stands. Sarah concocted the ill-conceived plan for Abraham to produce an heir through Hagar, and Abraham willingly complied. Their impatience and unbelief resulted in pain and conflict for their immediate family and for generations to come. And yet, the promise still belongs to Abraham, to Sarah, and to their seed.

Some might protest that based on the events recorded in Genesis 16 Hagar proves to be more righteous than Sarah. Given Sarah's distrust in God to fulfill his promise and Sarah's mistreatment of Hagar, it would be difficult to argue otherwise. Consequently, one might contend that the promise should proceed through the more worthy Hagar rather than through Sarah. But, such a rationale misconstrues the essence of the Abrahamic Covenant. At the heart of the Abrahamic Covenant is the reality that the promise is not a reward for good works, or outstanding behavior, or even perfect faith. Rather, the promise is a gift from God. And, as such, the promise is unearned; the promise is undeserved. Instead, God imparts the promise by grace, and the promise is received through faith. In Genesis 16, God shows mercy to Hagar and to Ishmael. But God also shows mercy to Abraham and Sarah because Abraham and Sarah are also—perhaps even more so—in need of God's mercy.

This is good news for all of us. Some might be bullish that they will receive God's salvation because they are more righteous than their spouse, or more spiritual than their neighbor, or a better person than their friend who faithfully attends church. All of that is good and well, but it will not put one in right standing with God. Like Abraham and Sarah, the only way that we can experience the blessing of God's redemption is by believing the promise of God's grace, which is realized in the perfect life, atoning death, and glorious resurrection of Abraham's greater son, Jesus Christ. If we believe the promise and trust in Jesus, then God will save us. And even in the midst of the unintended consequences of our own unbelief and sin, God will help us, and He will

shower on us mercy upon mercy.

CHAPTER 6
CIRCUMCISION, BAPTISM, AND THE
PROMISES OF GOD

As the pastor of a Reformed Baptist Church, prospective members will often ask, “To join the church, do I have to be baptized again?” Both new converts and mature believers pose the same question, having been baptized as infants by well-meaning parents in another church tradition.

Of course, different denominations hold different rationales for their practice of paedobaptism. Given our church’s affirmation of Reformed soteriology, many who apply for membership at our church and have been baptized as infants come from churches that hold to a Presbyterian doctrine of paedobaptism. So, they resonate with our Reformed soteriology but understandably do not understand the distinctive of Baptist ecclesiology.

Often the prospective member believes that his prior baptism is justified based on the connection between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism, or at least that is what they have been told. The reasoning goes something like this: In the Old Testament infants were baptized as a sign of entrance into the covenant community, likewise in the New Testament infants of believing parents are baptized as a sign of membership into the church. This is a simple expression of the Reformed paedobaptist position, which is profoundly influenced by an understanding of covenant theology and in particular the relationship of the various covenants progressively revealed through the biblical narrative.¹

¹ “The perennial debate over the meaning and subjects of baptism is best viewed in light of the larger polemics regarding the relationships between the biblical covenants. Different views on baptism

Therefore, we must revisit the Abrahamic covenant if we are to faithfully and pastorally respond to the questions of a believer who has been baptized as an infant but is presented with the possibility of being baptized as a believer. In reconsidering the Abrahamic Covenant, we must ask some fundamental questions. What is circumcision? How did circumcision function within the Abrahamic Covenant? What is the relationship between circumcision and the fulfillment of God’s redemptive purposes in Christ? Then, we will be better prepared to rightly discern the relationship between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism. Finally, we will flesh out some of the practical implications.

It is my contention that that Old Testament practice of physical circumcision is fulfilled in the New Covenant promise of a circumcised heart, which is evidenced by repentance and faith. Furthermore, baptism is reserved for those who have experienced the promise of a new heart.

Definition of Circumcision

As P.R. Williamson explains, “Male circumcision, the surgical removal of the prepuce (i.e., foreskin), is a rite of great antiquity.”² In fact, the practice of circumcision predates Abraham and was practiced by many of Israel’s contemporaries. As Wenham asserts, “In the ancient Near East the majority of Israel’s neighbors practiced circumcision, including the Egyptians, Canaanites, and Arabs (cf. Jer 9:24-25 [25-26]).”³

In the biblical narrative, circumcision is first mentioned in Genesis 17. “This

reflect different ways of putting together Scripture in regard to covenants. ...It does not concern them (paedobaptists) that in the New Testament there is no express command to baptize infants and no record of any clear case of infant baptism. ...Covenant theology, then, according to the paedobaptist, *requires* infant baptism.” Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 813.

² P. R. Williamson, “Circumcision,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 122.

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 23.

chapter is a watershed in the Abraham story.”⁴ Here, God reiterates his covenant promises to Abraham and establishes circumcision as the sign of the covenant. The word for “circumcision” (מול) is used ten times in Genesis 17, signaling the prominent role circumcision will play in the life of Abraham and all his descendants. The LORD insists that covenant faithfulness will now include Israel’s willingness to practice circumcision: “This is my covenant, which you shall keep... 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” (Gen 17:10-11).

Function of Circumcision in the Abrahamic Covenant

As previously noted, the practice of circumcision was not unique to Abraham or his descendants. However, different cultures practiced circumcision for different reasons. “In these other ancient Near Eastern cultures, circumcision seems to have been chiefly a marriage or fertility rite, carried out either at puberty or as part of the prenuptial ceremony.”⁵ So, although the practice of circumcision was not unique to Abraham and his descendants, the function of circumcision within the Abrahamic covenant was. For Abraham and his descendants, circumcision was inextricably tied to God’s redemptive promises articulated in the covenant. This means that the rite of circumcision served as a sign for both inward transformation of the heart as well as outward identification with the people of God.

Inward Transformation of the Heart

In Genesis 17, God makes clear that the covenant contains moral obligations for Abraham and his descendants. God declares, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply

⁴ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 16.

⁵ Williamson, “Circumcision,” 122.

you greatly” (Gen 17:2). God’s promise will be realized upon the condition of Abraham’s covenant faithfulness.⁶ Abraham’s initial response is promising: “Then Abram fell on his face” (Gen 17:3). Abraham falls prostrate in submission to “God Almighty” as an expression of his commitment to “walk” before the LORD as “blameless” (Gen 17:2). God’s command to be circumcised soon follows, suggesting that God intends for circumcision to function as the mark of devotion Abraham has just expressed and that God requires.

God, then, commands that all those related to Abraham’s household including blood relatives, servants, and future offspring receive the mark of circumcision. God instructs, “He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised” (Gen 17:12-13). So, all males in the household are circumcised in hopes that like Abraham they too will eventually devote themselves to God and his ways.

In Deuteronomy, Moses confirms the moral dimensions of circumcision. In Deuteronomy 10:12-13, Moses admonishes Israel to fulfill their covenant obligations: “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?” Then, Moses exhorts the people by not only reminding them of their circumcision but of the moral ramifications of their circumcision: “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn” (Deut 10:16). As Eugene H. Merrill points out, “Circumcision was the sign of outward conformity to the covenant ideal.... More important was an inner

⁶ Again, I would argue that the Abrahamic Covenant is both unconditional and conditional. See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 693-694.

conformity to the requirements and purpose of God, a circumcision of the inner person.”⁷

Of course, Israel failed to submit to God and be devoted to his ways. Physical circumcision was a reality. A spiritual circumcision of the heart was not. As a result, the people often experienced the curses of the covenant rather than the blessings. Yet, God offers hope. In Deuteronomy 30:6, the obligation becomes a promise. God has already obligated Israel to be physically circumcised, but God promises to one day do what Israel has proven unable to do, to circumcise their hearts. Moses announces, “And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring... And you shall again obey the voice of the LORD and keep all his commandments that I command you today” (Deut 30:6, 8).

Later, the prophets affirm and elaborate upon the moral dimensions of circumcision (e.g. Jer 4:4; 6:10; 9:25-26; Ezek 44:7). In addition, they reiterate and further develop God’s promise to grant his people a spiritual circumcision of the heart. For example, Jeremiah prophesies: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers... my covenant that they broke... ‘I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts’” (Jer 31:31-33).

Ezekiel makes a similar promise in Ezekiel 36:25-27: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

No doubt, Ezekiel’s prophecy provides the literary context for Jesus’

⁷ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 203.

declaration to Nicodemus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Jesus explains what it means to be “born again” with a parallel statement: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). So, according to Jesus, to be “born again” is to be “born of water and the Spirit.” And what does it mean to be born of “water and the Spirit”? Based on the linguistic parallels between Ezekiel’s prophecy and the words of Jesus, we can deduce that “to be born of the water,” is “to be clean from all your uncleanness.” And, “to be born of the Spirit,” is to be given a “new heart,” a “heart of flesh” rather than a “heart of stone,” a heart that is devoted to the Lord and his ways.⁸

Although the promises of Jeremiah and Ezekiel may not contain the exact words “circumcision of the heart,” they speak of the same reality.⁹ God’s promise to circumcise the heart (Deut 30:6, 8) is the same as his promise to grant a new heart (Jer 31:31-33; Ezek 36:25-26), which is then reflected in Jesus’ insistence upon the new birth (John 3:3-5).¹⁰ Therefore, circumcision was practiced in the hopes that the one circumcised would have a heart devoted to God. Not only that, circumcision was practiced in the hope that God would one day fulfill the word of the prophets and circumcise the hearts of all his people.

⁸ For a fuller discussion of alternative interpretations of John 3:5, see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 1991), 191-196. Carson concludes, “Most important of all is Ezekiel 36:25-26, where water and spirit come together so forcefully, the first to signify cleansing from impurity, and the second to depict the transformation of heart that will enable people to follow God wholly” (195).

⁹ For example, “Although the word *circumcision* is not found anywhere in Jeremiah’s Book of Consolation, the thematic elements between Deuteronomy 30:1-10 and Jeremiah 30-33 are clear. Both texts refer to restoration of the people after a return from exile (Deut 30:1-3; cp. Jer 30:3). Likewise, both texts envision geographical and internally transformative elements upon the return from exile. The return from exile results in a newly prepared and consecrated people of God who will be devoted to him from a circumcised heart.” John D. Meade, “Circumcision of Flesh to Circumcision of Heart: The Typology of the Sign of the Abrahamic Covenant,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Mediating Position Between*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2016), 142.

¹⁰ “Circumcision of the heart... speaks of internal identification with (God) in what might be called regeneration in Christian theology... Under a slightly different figure Israel’s restoration to full covenant blessing was described by Jeremiah and Ezekiel as the engraving of the covenant stipulations upon the fleshly tablets of the heart.” Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 388.

Outward Identification with the People of God

In Genesis 17:10, God instructs Abraham: “This is my covenant, which you shall keep between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.” God emphasizes that the command to be circumcised is not limited to Abraham. In Hebrew, the corporate nature of the command is even more apparent. We read, “This is my covenant, which you (plural) shall keep (תשמרו) between me and you (plural) (וביניכם) and your offspring after you.”

The mark of circumcision will identify Abraham and his descendants with God and his covenantal promises. God explains, “You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you” (Gen 17:11). Circumcision is covenantal; it is the “sign of the covenant.” As the “sign of the covenant,” circumcision serves as a reminder¹¹ of all the covenantal promises God made to Abraham, the promises of blessing, seed, and land.

Genesis 17 contains a specific link between circumcision and the promise of the seed. At this point in Abraham’s life, he and his wife, Sarah, have no children. Sarah is barren, and the couple is beyond the age of conceiving (Gen 11:30; 15:2; 16:1-2; 18:11-12). The narrator opens Genesis 17 with an announcement of Abraham’s age: “When Abram was ninety-nine years old... (Gen 17:1).” Abraham’s age reminds us of the couple’s childlessness and inability to conceive.

Consequently, the reader is shocked to discover that God’s most pronounced promise to Abraham in Genesis 17 is the promise of seed. God promises that he will “multiply” Abraham “greatly” (Gen 17:2) and make Abraham “exceedingly fruitful” (Gen 17:6). God assigns Abraham with a new name, changing it from Abram to

¹¹ Scholars debate whether circumcision functions to remind God of his promises, like the sign of the rainbow in the covenant with Noah (Gen 9:8-17) or to remind the one circumcised of the promises of God. Perhaps we need not choose. Circumcision may function as a reminder to both. For a fuller discussion, see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 470-472.

Abraham, to signify that Abraham will be “the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen 17:4-5). Consistent with this emphasis on the promise of seed, the word זרע, which is translated “seed” or “offspring,” occurs seven times throughout the chapter.

It is in this context of God’s improbable promise of a seed that God directs Abraham to be circumcised (Gen 17:10-11). In circumcision, Abraham’s organ for sexual reproduction receives the mark of God. Immediately following God’s repeated promise of offspring and directive to be circumcised, Abraham laughs! “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, ‘Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’” (Gen 17:17)? The promise seems both preposterous and surprisingly wonderful.

The chapter concludes with the record of Abraham’s obedience: “That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him” (Gen 17:26-27). It is only now, after Abraham has received the mark of circumcision, that Sarah conceives and gives birth to a child (Gen 21:1-7). Circumcision is a reminder that Abraham cannot create life in Sarah’s barren womb, but God can cause Abraham to do so. The promise of seed will not be realized by man’s potency, but by the power of God.¹² By the power of God, Abraham and his descendants will produce a seed through whom all the nations will be blessed.

If the mark of circumcision identifies God’s people with his covenantal promises, the absence of the mark of circumcision denotes exclusion from God and his promises. God warns, “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” (Gen 17:14).

¹² Others have recognized a connection in the narrative between circumcision and procreation. For example, Hamilton explains, “God will see the circumcised penis of the Israelite before and during sexual congress, and will then ‘remember’ his promise to Abraham and to all his descendants to make them very fertile.” Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 470.

Hamilton rightly notes, “The expression undoubtedly involves a wordplay on *cut*. He that is not himself cut (i.e. circumcised) will be cut off (ostracized). Here is the choice: be cut or be cut off.”¹³

In summary, circumcision functioned as a marker to identify a people with God and his promises. Initially, the promise included Abraham. Then, by the power of God, the promise included Abraham’s family, which in time grew to be a nation, Israel. Circumcision marked Israel as the people of God and as the channel through whom God would fulfill all his covenantal and redemptive promises. Wellum rightly concludes, “In the context of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, the primary purpose of circumcision was to mark out a physical seed in preparation for the coming Messiah.”¹⁴

Fulfillment of Circumcision in Christ

James Montgomery Boice succinctly states, “The Bible declares that Old Testament circumcision was what baptism is in the New Testament.”¹⁵ This is the paedobaptist’s position in a nutshell. Paedobaptists see a one-to-one relationship between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism.

However, the biblical authors reveal a greater discontinuity between circumcision and baptism than the paedobaptist position allows. In this section, we will consider how both of the functions of Old Testament circumcision, previously examined, are fulfilled in Christ. Then, we will be poised to rightly discern the relationship between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism.

¹³ Ibid., 473.

¹⁴ Stephen J. Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2006), 155.

¹⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 592.

Inward Transformation of the Heart

In the Old Testament, Abraham and his descendants, circumcised their households, including their infant children, in hopes that members of their households would one day possess hearts that were circumcised. In addition, they looked forward with hope anticipating a day when God would circumcise the hearts of all his people.

The New Testament authors reveal how the redemptive work of Christ accomplishes the inward transformation of the heart that physical circumcision represented. Nowhere is this more clear than in Colossians 2:11-12: “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

Here, Paul speaks of the “circumcision of Christ.” In doing so, Paul contrasts the “circumcision of Christ” with the Old Testament rite of circumcision. Paul presents us with three contrasts that reveal how the “circumcision of Christ” surpasses the Old Testament shadow.

First, the “circumcision of Christ” is not physical, but spiritual. Paul makes a distinction: “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands” (Col 2:11). Old Testament circumcision was a surgical procedure performed by human hands. In contrast, “the circumcision of Christ” is “a circumcision made without hands.” It is spiritual in nature. As Paul explains, Christ accomplishes this spiritual circumcision in the lives of his people “by putting off the body of the flesh” (Col 2:11). Clearly, this is an allusion to physical circumcision. Physical circumcision resulted in the removal of the foreskin, but spiritual circumcision surpasses physical circumcision for it results in the “putting off” of the entire “body of flesh,” our sinful nature.¹⁶ Paul is announcing the

¹⁶ “Circumcision of the flesh pointed forward to a greater circumcision since the removal of the foreskin became no guarantee that the sign indicated the thing signified. Only the greater circumcision of the heart would bring about the things signified—true devoted service to Yahweh.” Meade,

fulfillment of Deuteronomy 30:6: “And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring.” Paul is celebrating the fulfillment of the new covenant promise that God would grant his people a new heart.¹⁷

Second, the “circumcision of Christ” is not potential, but accomplished. Abraham and his descendants circumcised their children with the hope that one day their hearts would be devoted to the Lord. Paul declares that the “circumcision of Christ” is greater than Old Testament circumcision because the “circumcision of Christ” actually accomplishes what Old Testament circumcision merely signified as potential. By the “circumcision of Christ,” the Colossians believers “were circumcised” (Col 2:11), “have been buried” (Col 2:12), and “were also raised” (Col 2:12). All of these verbal forms are aorist in tense and passive in voice. In other words, the Colossian believers have been acted upon. Christ performed this work of spiritual circumcision. Furthermore, Christ’s circumcision does not signify the potential for their hearts to be transformed, but rather accomplishes the work so that their hearts have been transformed.¹⁸

Third, the “circumcision of Christ” is not by rite, but by faith. Paul explains that the “circumcision of Christ” occurs in the believer’s life “through faith in the powerful working of God” (Col 2:12). Based on the Abrahamic covenant, infants received the rite of circumcision despite their inability to exercise faith in the promises of God. Paul demonstrates that the “circumcision of Christ” is greater because it is always accompanied by the believer’s faith in the power of God to raise Jesus from the dead. In

“Circumcision of Flesh to Circumcision of Heart,” 152.

¹⁷ “In this Paul is in complete continuity with the OT development of circumcision that Yahweh would circumcise the hearts of the people upon the return from the second stage of the exile (Deut 30:6), when he would write the law on their hearts (Jer 31:31-34) and replace their stony hearts with fleshy hearts (Ezek 36:22-36), resulting in a people of God who would be loyal to him and obey him.” *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁸ “Once more Paul chooses the tenses of his verbs with care... But writes Paul, in your conversion/baptism, you *were* ‘circumcised,’ you *were* ‘buried’ with Christ, you *were* ‘raised’ with him. All this lies in the past. What Christ then did, the Christian now shares with him. It is already happened as far as they’re concerned.” Dick Lucas, *The Message of Colossians and Philemon: Fullness and Freedom*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 100.

other words, it always produces and is accompanied by saving faith.

Therefore, according to Colossians 2:11-12, the fulfillment of Old Testament circumcision is not Christian baptism. The fulfillment of Old Testament circumcision is New Testament regeneration. Christ fulfills Old Testament circumcision by circumcising the hearts of his people so that they are transformed to live by faith in his redemptive work and in devotion to God.

Outward Identification with the People of God

In the Old Testament, all of Abraham's physical descendants were supposed to receive the rite of circumcision. The outward mark identified Abraham's descendants with the nation of Israel and with the covenantal promises that God made to Abraham. As a result, those who were physically circumcised constituted a mixed community. Some were regenerate, and some were not. Some trusted in God's promises, like Abraham, and some did not. For most the physical act of circumcision left a mark on their body but did not change their heart. This tragic reality is illustrated in the Bible's long historical record of Israel's unbelief and rebellion.

The great new covenant promise is that the experience of a circumcised heart will no longer be limited to a remnant but will be granted to all God's people. Jeremiah prophesies, "And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, 'from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the LORD" (Jer 31:34). In Christ, this new covenant promise is realized.

All of this signals a dramatic change in the composition of God's covenant people. In the Old Testament, Israel was a mixed community. In contrast, God's new covenant people, the church, only includes those who have experienced regeneration and trusted in God's promise of redemption through Christ. This dramatic change calls into

question what it means to belong to the people of God and what it means to be a true Jew. As Paul contends, “For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil 3:3).¹⁹

Consequently, if the makeup of God’s covenant people has changed, then it is reasonable to deduce that the initiatory rite that marks off the people of God will not be applied to the same individuals. Not only will it not be applied to the same individuals, the physical rite of circumcision is abandoned altogether, and a new covenant sign is introduced in its place.

The Relationship between Circumcision and Baptism

Baptism is the new sign of the new covenant.²⁰ Physical circumcision is an old sign for an old covenant and therefore is not required for the believer in Christ. The early church fiercely debated whether or not new believers in Christ were required to receive the mark of circumcision (Acts 15:1-35). Again and again, the church released believers from the obligation of physical circumcision. They insisted that there was no reason for believers to return to the physical type of circumcision when the spiritual reality had been realized in their hearts through faith in Christ. As a practicality for the sake of mission, one may be circumcised (Acts 16:3). As a religious rite to be justified before God or to be identified with God’s redemptive people, one must reject circumcision. On this point, Paul is unyielding, “Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you... For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Gal 5:2, 6. Also Gal 6:15; 1

¹⁹ See also Rom 2:28-29: “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.” Meade notes, “In Romans 2:29 and Philippians 3:3, Paul has announced that the time of antitypical circumcision has come; and, therefore, it is also time to redefine who the Jew is—both in light of OT anticipation and the inauguration of the new covenant in Christ. The Jew is now one who bears heart circumcision and boasts in Christ not in external circumcision. The true Jew is the one who serves by the Spirit of God.” Meade, “Circumcision of Flesh to Circumcision of Heart,” 151.

²⁰ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 823-824.

Cor 7:19).

Given that Christian believers no longer practice physical circumcision., paedobaptists argue that circumcision has been fulfilled and replaced by baptism. Furthermore, they perceive a one-to-one relationship between the two, concluding that just as infants were circumcised in the old covenant so they should be baptized in the new.

However, only one text in the Bible, Colossians 2:11-12, explicitly compares physical circumcision and baptism, and the point of the passage is to contrast the two.²¹ Paul does not relate baptism to physical circumcision. Rather, Paul relates baptism to the “circumcision of Christ,” which we considered earlier. Paul writes, “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands... by the circumcision of Christ” (Col 2:11). So, Paul is not speaking of a physical circumcision performed by human hands. Rather, he is speaking of a spiritual circumcision, “the circumcision of Christ.” And, how did the Colossians receive this spiritual circumcision? Paul explains, “...having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God” (Col 2:12). Paul’s point is that the Colossian believers received the “circumcision of Christ” at their “conversion-baptism”²² experience.²³ For Paul, baptism, unlike circumcision, is not a sign and symbol of

²¹ John S. Hammett, *40 Questions about Baptism & the Lord’s Supper*, 40 Questions Series (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015), 143.

²² I borrowed this phrase from G.R. Beasley-Murray, “Baptism,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 63. The New Testament authors often speak interchangeably of regeneration, repentance, faith, the reception of the Spirit, and baptism. They viewed each as a vital element of the same experience. See Robert H. Stein, “Baptism in Luke-Acts,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2006), 35–66.

²³ Sinclair B. Ferguson, A. N. S. Lane, and Bruce A. Ware, *Baptism: Three Views*, ed. David F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009). Ware rightly concludes, “In short, the parallel between circumcision and baptism in the new covenant is not between physical circumcision and infant baptism; rather, the parallel is between spiritual circumcision of the heart and baptism, which signifies regeneration, faith and union with Christ” (116).

potential regeneration but of actual regeneration and is therefore only applied to believers.

As we have seen, the Bible never teaches that the replacement for physical circumcision is baptism. Rather, the biblical authors assert that the fulfillment of physical circumcision is regeneration. The relationship between circumcision and baptism is that those, who have received “the circumcision of Christ,” are to receive the new covenant sign of baptism. For baptism is the sign that one has received the new covenant promise of a regenerate heart.

Practical Implications

Christians, who have been baptized as infants, often struggle with the prospect of being baptized as believers. Some ask, “Why should I have to be baptized again?” This is a good question. The Bible does not advocate that individuals be baptized multiple times. Baptism is to be a one-time experience. However, as demonstrated in this paper, infant baptism does not qualify as a biblical baptism.

When we discuss the distinction between circumcision and baptism sometimes it is helpful to ask the question: According to Scripture, what does baptism symbolize?²⁴ With respect to infants, paedobaptists teach that baptism symbolizes a potential regeneration in the future. Yet, one can quickly disprove this claim with a quick survey of New Testament passages on baptism. For example, Paul did not write, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus might possibly in the future be baptized into his death” (Rom 6:3)? Rather, Paul declares, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” Baptism does not symbolize potential inward transformation but actual inward transformation of the heart.

²⁴ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 979.

Furthermore, baptism is a symbol that we are now members of the new covenant community, a community of believers who have placed their faith in Christ's redemptive work. So, Paul does not write, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus may one day put on Christ" (Gal 3:27). Rather, Paul declares, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." "To put on Christ" is to trust Christ, to be united to Christ by faith. Paul says baptism symbolizes that this is true of the Galatian Christians. And, of how many of them is it true? Paul says it is true "for as many of you as were baptized." Not some who were baptized. Not most who were baptized. Rather, "as many of you as were baptized." Baptism symbolizes entrance into the new covenant community, a community of regenerate believers.

After sharing these verses, one might respond, "I would not suggest that you be baptized again. Based on my understanding of Scripture, you have not been properly baptized as a believer. So, I would encourage you to be baptized as a symbol of the saving work God has done in your life through faith in Jesus."²⁵ By offering such biblical counsel, we honor Jesus' command to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 29:19-20).

²⁵ For a biblical and pastorally sensitive presentation of believer's baptism, see Jim Elliff, *Going Under: Discussions on Baptism* (Kansas City: Christian Communicators Worldwide, 2006).

CHAPTER 7

FAITHFUL PROMISES AND SURPRISING JOY

How long does it take for you to lose hope? At times, I am tempted to lose hope. My wife and I have three young children. Sometimes she and I will clean the house in the morning, in the afternoon, and after dinner. Right before bed, the house is a mess. In these moments, I'm tempted to despair and wonder, "Will our house ever be clean?" Sermon preparation can have a similar effect on me. Sometimes I work several hours studying a passage of Scripture only to discover that I am still unable to form a preaching outline and still unsure what I should say. Sunday gets closer and closer, and I'm tempted to lose heart and think, "Well, maybe this is the week I'll stand up and have nothing to say." These examples may seem silly and melodramatic, but I am often surprised how little it takes to dampen my hope and confidence in the Lord.

Of course, we also face much more serious challenges in life that threaten our hope. A student studies and works hard for years to prepare to attend the school of her dreams. Finally, she gets the opportunity to apply, but her application for acceptance is denied. She is tempted to lose hope. Or perhaps you and your spouse desire to have children. But, like Abraham and Sarah, months and even years pass, and no child. Finally, the doctor informs you that there is little to no chance that you will ever conceive and give birth to a biological child. You are devastated. You are tempted to lose hope. Or perhaps a loved one gets sick. The illness seems fairly routine. You assume he will get better; he always has in the past. Instead, he continues to decline. Until eventually he passes from this life into the next. Now you must figure out what life will be like without him. You are tempted to lose hope.

In similar fashion, Abraham and Sarah were often tempted to lose hope. God

promised to make Abraham into a great nation. But in order for Abraham to become a great nation, he must possess a son, who will give birth to descendants, who will give rise to a nation. Yet, Abraham and Sarah are childless. By the time we arrive at Genesis 21, Abraham is one hundred years old. Twenty-five years have passed since God first made his promise to Abraham. Still, no child. Still, the promise remains unfulfilled. Still, Abraham and Sarah wait. Twenty-five years is a long time to wait for anything! Twenty-five years is an especially long time for an elderly, infertile couple to wait for the birth of a promised child.

While waiting, Abraham and Sarah have moments of doubt, but by the grace of God they continue to believe the promise. Now, in Genesis 21, God is faithful to fulfill his promise. God surprises Abraham and Sarah with the joy of promises fulfilled. This joy is for all peoples—for all who believe God’s promise. For through God’s faithfulness to his promises, God still surprises his people with joy.

God’s Promises Are Dependable

In Genesis 21:1-2, we read, “The LORD visited¹ Sarah *as he had said* (אמר), and the LORD did to Sarah *as he had promised* (דבר). And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God *had spoken* (דבר) to him.” The author of Genesis employs the threefold combination of אִמַּר-דָּבַר-דָּבַר to emphasize that the birth of Isaac is consistent with and the product of God’s promised word.² This stress

¹ The verb פָּקַד is used frequently in the Old Testament. The verb is often used in reference to God and can mean for God “to look at, see to something,” especially as it relates to a “woman with no children.” Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and M. E. J. Richardson, eds., *HALOT*, Accordance electronic, 5 vols., The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (Leiden: Brill, 2000). Also see 1 Samuel 2:21: “Indeed the LORD visited (פָּקַד) Hannah, and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. And the boy Samuel grew in the presence of the LORD.”

² Kenneth A. Mathews draws from 21:4 to argue for a chiastic structure:

- v. 1a as he had said (*amar*)
- v. 1b as he had promised (*dibber*)
- v. 2b God had promised (*dibber*)
- v. 4b as God commanded (*siwwa*)

However, the verb in 21:4 is too far removed, both grammatically and conceptually, from the verbs in 21:1-2 to justify Mathew's chiasm. In 21:1-2, God is acting in fulfillment of what he had previously pledged. In 21:4, God's previous commandment requires Abraham's action, namely Abraham's circumcision of Isaac.

upon the certain fulfillment of God's word takes us back to Genesis 1 where God speaks and without fail God's spoken word is realized in the creation of all things both great and small (Gen 1:1, 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). In the birth of Isaac, the author of Genesis wants us to know that God always fulfills his Word. Therefore, we can trust God's promises because his Word, which contains his promises, is always true and dependable.

However, Abraham and Sarah often struggle to trust the dependability of God's promises. In Genesis 15, Abraham questions God's faithfulness to fulfill his promise. Abraham inquires, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus" (15:2)? In response, God reasserts the promise: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir" (15:4).

In Genesis 16, Sarah becomes impatient. After all, approximately ten years has passed since God first issued his promise, and Sarah still longs for a child. Sarah is convinced that she has devised a quicker, more efficient, more practical plan than God. Sarah suggests that Abraham father a child by Hagar, her maidservant: "Behold, now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her" (16:2). Abraham complies, and Hagar gives birth to Ishmael. In time, Sarah's plan proves disastrous resulting in marital strife, family turmoil, and generational conflict. Still, the promise remains. God will bless Abraham and Sarah with their own child.

Again, in Genesis 17, Abraham doubts God's promise. At this time, approximately fifteen years have passed since God originally announced his promise. Abraham and Sarah are still without a child. Abraham and his family receive the mark of circumcision, and God reiterates his promise to Abraham. Abraham cannot hide his

Therefore, a more precise reading of the text appreciates the literary and thematic connection between the three verbs in 21:1-2 without extending the same association to 21:4. See Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 265.

incredulity: “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, ‘Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’” (17:17)? Again, Abraham attempts to rescue God from his overly ambitious plans by offering an alternate proposal: “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” Once again, God refuses Abraham’s assistance and reaffirms the promise: “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him” (17:18).

In Genesis 21, we see that despite Abraham and Sarah’s repeated uncertainties and deviations from God’s way, God’s plan for Abraham and Sarah’s lives unfolds just “as (God) had said,” and just “as he has promised,” and just as he “had spoken.” To further emphasize the point, in Genesis 21:3, the author records, “Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, *whom Sarah bore him*, Isaac.” Notice the redundancy: Isaac is not merely Abraham’s son; Isaac is Abraham’s son “whom Sarah bore him.” The author is underscoring that this son is not Eliezer, who was born from another woman and presumably from another father; neither is this son Ishmael, who was born from Hagar. This is important because Abraham and Sarah previously suggested that these men fulfill the role of heir. In contrast, the author insists that this son is the son “*whom Sarah bore him*.”³ Therefore, the promise is fulfilled just as God foretold. As John Calvin memorably contends,

There is also a great emphasis in the repetition, ‘The Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken.’ For he thus retains his readers, as by laying his hand upon them, that they may pause in the consideration of so great a miracle. Meanwhile, Moses commends the faithfulness of God; as if he had said, he never feeds men with empty promises, nor is he less true in granting what he has promised, than he is liberal, and willing, in making the promise.⁴

³ The new testament authors recognize and reiterate the significance of this theme. For example, the author of Hebrews asserts, “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named’” (Heb 11:7. Also see Rom 9:7-10; Gal 4:28).

⁴ John Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. Calvin Translation Society, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 538.

For God's Word is true. God always does what he says. Therefore, we can trust God's promises.

Some people attempt to try out God's Word like one would try out a diet plan or an investment strategy. They commit for a few weeks, a few months, or maybe a few years. However, when they don't get the results expected, they try something else out. One might testify, "I tried Christianity out for a while. I read my Bible. I prayed. I attended church. But I didn't get the return that I had hoped for, and so I have moved on from that for now." Genesis reveals that Abraham and Sarah did not just take God's promises out for a spin around the block to see if they were a good fit or not. Rather, Abraham and Sarah clung to God's promises for twenty-five years! No doubt, at times, their grasp weakened, but they never stopped clinging. And at the end of twenty-five years, God did just "as he had said," just "as he has promised," and just as he "had spoken."

Abraham and Sarah illustrate why Jesus says there really are only two types of people in this world: those who build their lives on the certain rock of God's Word and those who build their lives on the shifting sands of their own wisdom, cultural trends, or popular philosophies (Matt 7:24-27). Jesus reassures us that when the misguided philosophies of this world are all washed out to sea, God will still be doing just "as he had said," just "as he had promised," and just as he "had spoken." Therefore, we can and should build our lives on the true, certain, and dependable promises of God.

God's Promises Are on Time

Not only does God promise Abraham and Sarah that he will bless them with a child. Later, God reveals to Abraham and Sarah the specific time when he will bless them with a child. In Genesis 17:1, God appears to Abraham when he is ninety-nine years old. God repeats his promise to Abraham and instructs Abraham to be circumcised as a sign of his covenant with Abraham. Then, God reaffirms the covenant and pinpoints the

specific time when he will fulfill his promise to provide Abraham and Sarah with an heir: “But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you *at this time next year*” (17:21).⁵ In Genesis 18, again God appears to Abraham. This time, the LORD vows to Abraham, “I will surely return to you *about this time next year*, and Sarah your wife will have a son” (18:10).⁶ A few verses later, the LORD again promises, “Is anything too hard for the LORD? *At the appointed time* I will return to you, *about this time next year*, and Sarah shall have a son” (18:14).⁷

Now, with these prophetic words in mind, we read the fulfillment of God’s promise in Genesis 21:1-2: “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.”⁸ Therefore, God is not only faithful to fulfill his promise. God fulfills his promise at the exact time that he planned and at the exact time that he promised. Twenty-five years may seem like a long time to you and to me, but for God it was not a second too late. God is always punctual! We may suspect that God is slow, but he is not. God always fulfills his promise right on time.

God’s people do well to remember God’s perfect timing. When we first encounter one of God’s promises in Scripture, we may be inclined to believe it. What often proves so difficult is the responsibility to wait for the Lord to fulfill his promise in his way and on his timetable. In these times, we must preach to ourselves the words of the psalmist: “Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the

⁵ In Hebrew, the temporal phrase reads *למורד הזה בשנה האחרת*.

⁶ In Hebrew, the temporal phrase reads *כעת חיה*. On rare occasions, *חיה* connotes time, such as “*at the time* (when it is) *reviving*, the spring.” Francis Brown et al., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1906; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 312. See also Gen 18:14; 2 Kgs 4:16; 4:17.

⁷ In Genesis 18:14, the temporal statements of Genesis 17:21 and Genesis 18:10 are brought together in one statement: *למורד ... כעת חיה*.

⁸ In Hebrew, the temporal phrase reads *למורד*. Therefore, Genesis 21:2 repeats the language of the Genesis 17:21 and Genesis 18:14 promise. It is apparent both conceptually and linguistically that the time-specific promises of Genesis 17 and Genesis 18 are fulfilled in Genesis 21.

LORD” (Ps 27:14).

As we have seen in previous chapters, Abraham’s seed, Isaac, is intended to point us to Abraham’s greater seed, the Lord Jesus. Consequently, a comparison of the birth of Isaac and the birth of Jesus reveals a number of striking parallels.⁹ For example, both births require the people of God to be patient, and at the same time both births demonstrate God’s impeccable timing.¹⁰ God requires Abraham and Sarah to wait twenty-five years before Isaac is born, but Isaac arrives “at the time of which God had spoken” (Gen 21:2). Likewise, from the time that God originally issued his promise to Abraham, God’s people must wait approximately two thousand years before Jesus is born. However, the Apostle Paul assures us that Jesus’ birth is right on time: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4-5). Like Isaac’s birth, Jesus’ birth occurred “at the time of which God had spoken.” So whether it is twenty-five minutes, or twenty-five years, or two thousand years, God is never late. God is always fulfills his promises at the time he has planned and at the time he has promised.

⁹ James Montgomery Boice identifies seven parallels between the birth of Isaac and the birth of Jesus: “First, Isaac and Jesus were both the promised seed and son. ...Second, there was a period of delay between the promises and their fulfillment.” Third, God’s response to Sarah’s doubt mirrors his response to Mary’s doubt (Gen 18:14; Lk 1:37). “Fourth, the names of the children were symbolic and were given before either was born. ...Fifth, the births occurred at God’s appointed time. ...Sixth, the birth of Jesus, like the birth of Isaac, required a miracle. ...Finally, there is the matter of laughter or joy.” James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 657-658. It is unclear whether Luke intends for his readers to make all of these connections between the birth of Isaac and the birth of Jesus. However, it is clear that beginning with Isaac, Jesus’ birth parallels a series of miraculous births in the Bible, each of which demonstrates God’s power and results in the salvation of God’s people (e.g. Jacob, Joseph, Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist). These birth narratives constitute a type, a pattern, of salvation through a miraculous seed. Surely, the human author, Luke, recognized this biblical pattern (Lk 24:27, 44-45). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the first miraculous birth, Isaac, shares so much in common with the last and ultimate miraculous birth, Jesus. Whether or not the human author, Luke, discerned all of these parallels is debatable; however, the full knowledge and intentional design of a greater divine author seems more certain.

¹⁰ Acknowledging the parallels between the birth of Isaac and the birth of Jesus, Iain M. Duguid asserts, “Few events in the Bible, apart from the birth of Jesus, were so anticipated.” Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2015), 132.

God's Promises Are Powerful

God promises to make Abraham a great nation. Yet throughout the Abrahamic narrative the author of Genesis reminds us that Abraham is an old man and Sarah is barren. The author returns to this theme in Genesis 21. In the opening verses of Genesis 21, the author highlights Abraham's age by making reference to it three times. In Genesis 21:2, we read, "And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age." Again, in Genesis 21:5, we are told: "Abraham was a hundred years old when his son was born to him." And, finally, in Genesis 21:7, the account of Isaac's birth closes with these words: "And she (Sarah) said, 'Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.'"¹¹

Why all these repeated reminders of Abraham's age? Well, the author is determined to convey that the birth of Isaac is not Abraham's doing. Sarah conceives and gives birth to Isaac in spite of Abraham's age because the birth of Isaac is the result of the powerful and miraculous working of God.¹²

This truth is symbolized in the act of circumcision. In Genesis 17, God reaffirms his covenant with Abraham and requires that Abraham and his descendants be circumcised. We might wonder why God chose circumcision as a sign for his covenant with Abraham? Some might complain that circumcision is an archaic and uncouth practice. They might conclude that the sign of circumcision seems random and detached from the real meaning or significance of God's covenant with Abraham. Modern people might suggest that a more visible symbol like a tattoo would be more fitting—perhaps

¹¹ The author employs an A-B-A pattern to emphasis Abraham's age:

A	21:2	בן לזקניו
B	21:5	בן מאת שנה
C	21:7	בן לזקניו

The effect is to communicate that when Isaac was born Abraham was an elderly man—a hundred-year-old elderly man!

¹² Commenting on Abraham's age in verse 5, Calvin observes, "Moses again records the age of Abraham, the better to excite the minds of his readers to a consideration of the miracle." Calvin, *Genesis*, 539.

Abraham's name or one of the promises of the Abrahamic covenant tattooed on the arm of Abraham's descendants.

However, further reflection reveals that the sign of circumcision is immediately relevant to the specific promise that God made to Abraham. God promises to make Abraham a great nation, but before Abraham is able to become a great nation Abraham must possess an offspring, a son, to perpetuate his lineage. The seemingly insurmountable dilemma is that Sarah is barren and Abraham is old.

For twenty-four years, Abraham and Sarah attempt without success to conceive a child. One can imagine how frustrating and how demoralizing this experience must have been for Abraham and Sarah. Then, at ninety-nine years of age, God commands Abraham to be circumcised. In circumcision, Abraham's reproductive organ receives the mark of God. It is only after Abraham is circumcised that Sarah conceives. Within a year of Abraham's circumcision, Sarah gives birth to Isaac. The mark of God on Abraham's reproductive organ serves as a perpetual reminder that the birth of Isaac is not Abraham's doing. Abraham's potency is not the cause for Sarah conceiving. Rather the cause is God, who works through Abraham to give life to Sarah's barren womb. And God requires that Abraham's descendants also be circumcised so that as the nation of Israel grows they will be reminded that their existence is the product of the powerful, miraculous working of God.

All of this is good news! It is good news because we do not have to live long to discover that so many of the challenges we face in this life are just too much—too complicated, too messy, and too heartbreaking for us to manage on our own. But to the those who are overwhelmed and distressed God says, "I am strong and powerful. Nothing is impossible for me. I am able to fulfill my promises in your life."

Even better, the truth that God is able to fulfill his promises extends beyond our immediate circumstances and difficulties to God's eternal plan to accomplish our redemption and the redemption of the world. We recall that the birth of Isaac points us to

the birth of Jesus. Previously, we noted that both births occur at the precise time God planned. Now, we consider the miraculous nature of both births. The supernatural birth of Abraham's seed, Isaac, portends the supernatural birth of Abraham's greater Son, Jesus. In this way, the births are similar.

At the same time, the dissimilarities between the two births are just as telling. Isaac is born to an elderly couple and a previously barren mother.¹³ In contrast, Jesus is born not to an old man and an infertile mother. Even more dramatic, Jesus is born of a virgin! When Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive and give birth to a son, Mary is perplexed. Mary inquires, "How will this be, since I am a virgin" (Lk 1:34)? Gabriel assures Mary that God will accomplish his promise by his miraculous power. Gabriel declares, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. . . . For nothing will be impossible with God" (Lk 2:35, 37). Both births are miraculous and therefore attest that Isaac and Jesus represent Abraham's promised seed. At the same time, the supernatural nature of Jesus' birth exceeds Isaac's birth, bearing witness that Jesus is the greater Son in whom all the promises of the covenant will be fulfilled.

In addition, the supernatural conception of Isaac in Sarah's womb points us to the truth that we cannot save ourselves, and therefore we are utterly dependent upon God and his power to accomplish the salvation of our souls.¹⁴ When Abraham believes God for an heir, Abraham is trusting that God is able to create something out of nothing, to

¹³ Based on parentage, the more immediate parallel to Isaac's birth is the birth of John the Baptist. John was also born to an elderly father, Zechariah, and a barren mother, Elizabeth (Lk 1:7). In Luke's Gospel, John's miraculous birth is followed and eclipsed by the greater miracle of Jesus' birth. So, both Isaac and John's births fit the biblical pattern of salvation through a miraculous seed, and both are superseded by the greater birth of Jesus and the ultimate deliverance realized in Jesus.

¹⁴ Calvin discerns, "Therefore Moses here commends that secret and unwonted power of God, which is superior to the law of nature; and not improperly, since it is of great consequence for us to know that the gratuitous kindness of God reigned, as well in the origin, as in the progress of the Church; and that the sons of God were not otherwise born, than from his mere mercy. And this is the reason why he did not make Abraham a father, till his body was nearly withered." Calvin, *Genesis*, 537.

bring life out of death. According to the Apostle Paul, Abraham chose to trust in God, “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom 4:17). Paul reinforces the point a few verse later, “He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb... fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness” (Rom 4:19, 21-22).

Paul continues by likening the faith of Abraham to the believer’s faith in the resurrection of Jesus: “It (righteousness) will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4:24-25). Paul recognizes that Abraham could not produce a child from Sarah’s barren womb. But Abraham trusted God who creates life out of nothing, and God counted his faith as righteousness. Likewise, Paul perceives that we cannot escape the inevitable doom of the grave or impart spiritual life to our unregenerate hearts. But by the resurrection power that raised Jesus from the dead, God works the miracle of regeneration in our dead hearts; he allows us to share in the benefits of Christ’s resurrection; and he counts our faith in the resurrected Jesus as righteousness and declares us justified. Brueggemann aptly relates the supernatural birth of Isaac to God’s miraculous work of redemption in Jesus:

Paul... must link the birth of Isaac to (a) the creation of the world *ex nihilo* and (b) the resurrection of the dead. ...They bear witness to the peculiar power of God to evoke new life by his graciousness, not out of a ‘life-potential,’ but in a situation where there is nothing on which to base hope. Like the Pauline presentation of justification, the birth of Isaac drives us away from ourselves to total and singular reliance upon God who is found faithful.¹⁵

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 181-182.

God's Promises Are a Source of Joy

Laughter is a pronounced theme in the birth narrative of Isaac.¹⁶ In Genesis 17:5, God changes Abram's name to Abraham. Abram (אַבְרָם) means "exalted father." Abraham (אַבְרָהָם) means "father of a multitude." In Genesis 17:15, God changes Sarai's name to Sarah. Sarah (שָׂרָה) is an alternate pronunciation of Sarai (שָׂרַי), and both mean "princess." These name changes represent God's covenant promise to Abraham and Sarah. God offers this explanation for Abraham's new name: "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" (Gen 17:5-6). God offers a similar explanation for Sarah's new name: "I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her" (Gen 17:16).

When God issues new names to Abraham and Sarah, it seems that God is asking Abraham and Sarah to assume an identity and to fulfill a role which they both desire but are altogether incapable of satisfying. God's expectations seem inconceivable. God's promises seem too good to be true. Abraham cannot hide his skepticism. Abraham laughs. In Genesis 17:17, we read, "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed (יִצְחָק) and said to himself, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah who is ninety years old, bear a child?'" In response, God assigns Abraham and Sarah's son a name. Abraham's son will be named Isaac (יִצְחָק), which means "he laughs" (Gen 17:19). Abraham and Sarah's names are bold and symbolic of divine omnipotence. Isaac's name is ambiguous and a symbolic of human skepticism. And this is not the last time that Abraham and Sarah will have a laugh at the expense of the integrity of God's promise.

¹⁶ If we exclude the rest of the birth narrative and limit our examination to Genesis 21:1-7, we discover that יִצְחָק is used five times in only seven verses. Three times the word appears in reference to Isaac's name and twice in Sarah's poetical response to Isaac's birth.

In Genesis 18, once again, the LORD reiterates his promise to Abraham. The LORD pledges, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son” (Gen 18:10). Sarah is eavesdropping and overhears God’s spectacular promise. In a moment of vulnerability, Sarah’s true feelings surface: “So Sarah laughed (תצחק) to herself, saying, ‘After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?’” (Gen 18:12). But the LORD speaks to Abraham and challenges Sarah’s unbelief: “Why did Sarah laugh (צחק) and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old? Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah will have a son’” (Gen 18:13-14). Embarrassed, Sarah denies her incredulity: “But Sarah denied it, saying, ‘I did not laugh (צחקתי),’ for she was afraid” (Gen 18:15). Yet, on this occasion, the LORD will have the last word: “He said, ‘No, but you did laugh (צחקת)’” (Gen 18:15).

In Genesis 17 and 18, Abraham and Sarah laugh with skepticism, essentially mocking the credibility of God’s promises. But, in Genesis 21, they laugh again. Only this time, they do not laugh in unbelief. Instead, they laugh with surprise—with spontaneous joy!¹⁷ In response to Isaac’s birth, Sarah joyfully confesses, “God has made laughter (קצח) for me; everyone who hears will laugh (יצחק) over me. . . . Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age” (Gen 21:6-7). In one sense, Abraham and Sarah should not have been shocked by Isaac’s birth. Everything happened just as God said it would. But they were shocked. They were delightfully shocked. And they laughed; they laughed with joy! Consequently, Isaac’s name bears double significance. On the one hand, Isaac’s name represents our

¹⁷ There is yet another play on Isaac’s name. After the birth narrative of Isaac, the author records a clash between Isaac and his half-brother, Ishmael. In Genesis 21:8-9, we read, “And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had born to Abraham, laughing (מצחק).” Given the context, some translations opt for “mocking” rather than “laughing.” See the KJV, NASB, and NIV. Undoubtedly, this is the sense. Sarah’s visceral and harsh response confirms that Ishmael’s intentions were not playful but scornful. We read, “So she said to Abraham, ‘Cast out the slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.’” See Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 266-267.

unbelief and distrust of God's extraordinary promises. On the other hand, Isaac's name represents God's surprising goodness and the joy of promises fulfilled.

Once again, we discern a striking parallel between the birth of Isaac and the birth of the Jesus. The realization of the seed-promise in Isaac's birth fills his mother with joy. In similar fashion, the ultimate fulfillment of the seed-promise in Jesus' birth delights Jesus' mother. Mary exclaims, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit *rejoices* in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ...He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever" (Lk 1:46-49, 54-55). Furthermore, the joy derived from Jesus' birth is not limited to Mary. In Luke's nativity narrative, the joy of Jesus' birth spreads to the angelic hosts, the shepherds, Simeon, and Anna (Lk 2:8-38).

Later, Jesus draws an even more striking connection between the joy of Isaac's birth and the joy of his own birth. In John 8:56, Jesus declares to the Jews, "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." Sidney Greidanus argues that the "day" Abraham "saw" is the day of Isaac's birth.¹⁸ That "day" brought Abraham joy because it marked the fulfillment of God's promise that Abraham and Sarah would bear a child. But on a larger scale, Isaac's birth brought Abraham joy because it marked the initial stage in the fulfillment of God's promise to make Abraham the "father of a multitude of nations." Initially fulfilled in Isaac, this promise attains fuller meaning in the rise of the nation of Israel. And, finally, this promise is realized in the birth of Abraham's greater Son, Jesus, who commands his disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations." Therefore, Abraham rejoices at Isaac's birth, knowing that Isaac represents

¹⁸ The following argument derives from Sidney Greidanus' insight in *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 193.

the greater promise that Abraham will be a “father of a multitude of nations,” which is ultimately fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus.

Conclusion

As Christians, we often speak about the role of suffering in the Christian life. We are right to do so. Peter warns, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pet 4:12). Likewise, Paul assures us, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). According to the apostles, trials and persecutions are a normal part of the Christian life. And when Christians face the inevitable difficulties of being a Christian, they are tempted to be discouraged—to lose hope.

However, do you know what else is part of the Christian life? The surprising goodness of God! God often surprises his people with his goodness and fills them with joy. I have started to pray for members in my own congregation, “Lord, would you surprise them with your goodness?” I might pray, “Lord, she’s been praying and hoping for a godly spouse. Would you surprise her with your goodness?” Or I might ask, “Lord, she’s been praying that she would get some answers—some type of relief—from the physical pain she’s been enduring for months. Would you surprise her with your goodness?” Or perhaps I might plead, “They’ve been praying for the salvation of their father for years, Lord. Would you surprise them with your goodness?”

Have you ever been surprised by the goodness of the Lord? Have you ever been so surprised by his goodness that you unconsciously burst into joyful laughter? I have! Perhaps the Lord provides you with a job that you and your family need, or perhaps the Lord allows you to purchase a home for which you have been praying, or perhaps God blesses your family with an adopted child for whom you have been longing, or perhaps the Lord provides you with a unique ministry opportunity which you have been dreaming of for years. There are so many examples we could give because the Lord is so

often kind to surprise his people with his goodness.

We live in a world that is increasingly cynical. So many have lost hope. It is a shame when people of God start to lose hope and imbibe the cynicism of our age. Subtly, our confidence in the promises of God wanes. We start to lose hope. We stop believing that God might surprise us with his goodness. In these moments, we need to pray for ourselves what Paul prayed for the church in Rome: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Rom 15:13).

We are not foolish to trust in the promises of God. We are not naïve to hope that God might surprise us with his goodness. As Christians, we do not have to be dull, sad, and hopeless. In fact, God expects us to be otherwise. God intends for us to hope in his goodness. The psalmist testifies, “Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning. ... You have turned for me my mourning into dancing, you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness” (Ps 30:5, 11).

This is not to say that everything in this life will work out just as we plan and hope. Although God often surprises his people with his goodness, we recognize that circumstances in this life do not always work out the way we want. Yet, if we trust in God’s promises, we can be assured, based upon the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, that although we may not laugh with joy now, one day we will. “Happily ever after” is not just for Hollywood. We must reject the cynicism of our age. Happy endings are real. God has already filled our hearts with joy by sending his promised Son to redeem our souls. But this is not the end of the story; the story continues. And how does the story end? What is God’s last promise to his people? “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev 21:5). One day God in Christ will fulfill all his promises. And, in that day, we will laugh. We will laugh with joy!

CHAPTER 8

GOD'S PROMISE AND GOD'S PROVISION

“The account of the sacrifice of Isaac constitutes the aesthetic and theological summit of the whole story of Abraham... No other story in Genesis, indeed in the whole OT, can match the sacrifice of Isaac for its haunting beauty and its theological depth.”¹ Accordingly, the narrative of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac is one of the most well-known accounts in the Bible. This epic narrative plays a significant role in all three of the major monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Yet, as we will see, it is only Christianity that unlocks the mystery of this story; it is only Christianity that reveals the fuller meaning of this story; for it is only Christianity that allows us to see the significance of the this story in God’s greater plan of redemption for all the peoples of the world.

In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the authors of Scripture present Abraham as an example of faith, as a man who trusts God’s provision and as a result follows God in obedience. Abraham’s exemplary faith is nowhere more evident than in Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. And, at the same time, God’s gracious provision for Abraham and his descendants is nowhere more evident than in God’s salvation of Isaac. In Genesis 22, God tests Abraham so that he might prove Abraham’s faith, provide redemption for Isaac and Isaac’s offspring, and reaffirm his covenant promises to Abraham.

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 99, 112.

The Lord Tests

In Genesis 22:1-2, God puts Abraham to the test: “After these things God tested Abraham.” One commentator notes that it is near impossible to identify the specific antecedent to “After these things.”² Most likely, the temporal clause is a reference to the events of Genesis 21, especially the miraculous birth of Isaac (Gen 21:1-7) and the expulsion of Ishmael (Gen 21:8-21). Both events provide the historical and existential context in which God presents the ultimate challenge to Abraham’s faith.

It is in this context, that God authors and initiates Abraham’s trial. The text asserts, “God tested Abraham” (והאלהים נסה את־אברהם). Not only is “God” the subject of the sentence; the author reverses normal word order in Hebrew, namely verb-subject-object, and places the subject, אלהים, before the verb in order to emphasize God as the primary cause for Abraham’s trial. God’s sovereign action over Abraham’s testing is further illustrated by God summoning Abraham by name. Notice, it is God—not the devil nor circumstances—who arrests Abraham’s attention by calling out his name, “Abraham!” (Gen 22:1). In response, Abraham willing presents himself to God: “Here I am” (Gen 22:1).³ The divine command which follows is both shocking and dreadful. God instructs Abraham, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you” (Gen 22:2).

God’s request for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac proves to be God’s ultimate test for Abraham for at least two reasons. First, this is the climatic test of Abraham’s faith because of Abraham’s great love for his son. Many parallels exist between God’s original call of Abraham in Genesis 12 and God’s testing of Abraham in Genesis 22. For

² Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 100.

³ The phrase, “here I am,” is repeated three times in the narrative and marks Abraham’s voluntary submission to God’s will:

22:1	הנני
22:7	הנני
22:11	הנני

example, in Genesis 12:1, God commands Abraham: “Go⁴ from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” As God calls Abraham to “go,” God identifies three treasured possessions that Abraham must leave behind. Notice, as the list progresses, each item in the list intensifies in personal worth and attachment: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house.” One can imagine that it might be difficult for Abraham to leave his country, more difficult for Abraham to say goodbye to his relatives, and even more difficult for Abraham to part with his immediate family.

Likewise, in Genesis 22, when God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God acknowledges how difficult it will be for Abraham to do so. God affirms Abraham’s great affection for Isaac by once again utilizing a list containing three items; this time the list contains three descriptors of Isaac, each descriptor intensifying and expressing with greater sentiment Abraham’s love for his son. God declares, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love” (Gen 22:2). When God refers to Isaac as “your son,” God recognizes that unlike Eliezer (Gen 15:2-7) or Ishmael (Gen 17:18-19), Isaac is Abraham and Sarah’s biological son, a son for whom they waited for twenty-five years. “Your only son Isaac” acknowledges that given Sarah’s banishment of Ishmael from the family (Gen 21:8-21), not only is Isaac Abraham’s son, now Isaac really is Abraham’s “*only* son.” And, finally, “whom you love,” affirms Abraham’s great paternal fervor and devotion for Isaac.

This theme continues throughout the narrative; the author reminds us again and again of the father-son relationship between Abraham and Isaac. In fact, “father” appears twice in Genesis 22, and “son” appears thirteen times. In this way, the author will not permit the reader to forget the familial love Abraham has for his son, Isaac. God’s

⁴ The prominent use of הָלַךְ constitutes another parallel between Gen 12 and Gen 22. In Gen 12:1, God commands Abraham to “go” (הָלַךְ). In Gen 12:4, we read that Abraham “went” (הָלַךְ). In like manner, in Gen 22:2, God instructs Abraham to “go” (הָלַךְ) to the land of Moriah and to sacrifice Isaac.

command to sacrifice Isaac tests Abraham's faith unlike any other trial in his life because Isaac is his "son," his "only son," the son "whom (Abraham) loves."

Second, this test qualifies as the ultimate test for Abraham's faith because Abraham understood that the fulfillment of all of God's promises requires the preservation and propagation of his heir, Isaac. Brueggeman articulates the devastating consequences of a premature death of Isaac: "The *promise* of God is that through Isaac your descendants will be named (12:12; cf. Rom 9:7). The *command* of God is that Isaac must be killed. It follows that there will be no descendants, no future. We are back to barrenness. ...Can the same God who promises life also command death?"⁵ In a very real sense, the death of Isaac means the death of God's promises. Therefore, if Abraham slays Isaac, the promises of God will die along with Isaac. This qualifies as the ultimate test because it seems that when God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son God is asking Abraham to relinquish his hope that the promises will be fulfilled.

Since Abraham rightly loved Isaac so much and since Abraham understood Isaac's essential role in the fulfillment of God's promises, Abraham may have been tempted to put his hope in Isaac rather than in God. Perhaps Abraham was tempted to treasure Isaac more than God. God's test functions to expose the true disposition of Abraham's heart. The Scriptures teach us that one of the reasons God "tests" (נסה) his people is to reveal the inward character of the heart. On the plains of Moab, Moses declares to the people of Israel, "And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 188. John Calvin presses this point at length: "For the great source of grief to him was not his own bereavement, not that he was commanded to slay his own heir, the hope of future memorial and of name, the glory and support of his family; but that, in the person of his son, the whole salvation of the world seemed to be extinguished and to perish. ... Whatever favor he could hope for from God, was included in this single promise, 'In Isaac shall thy seed be called.' Whence he necessarily inferred, that his own salvation, and that of the whole human race, would perish, unless Isaac remained in safety. ... The matter had come to this; that God would appear to have done nothing but mock him. Yet not only is the death of his son announced to him, but he is commanded with his own hand to slay him; as if he were required, not only to throw aside, but to cut in pieces, or cast into the fire, the charter of his salvation, and to have nothing left to himself, but death and hell." John Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. Calvin Translation Society, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 560, 563.

your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing (הסה) you to know what was in your heart, whether you should keep his commandments or not” (Deut 8:2). God tests Abraham to determine whether Abraham’s faith for the future rests in God or in Isaac, whether Abraham’s hope for the fulfillment of divine promises resides in God or in Isaac, and whether Abraham’s greatest love and devotion is directed towards God or towards Isaac. On this occasion, Abraham passes the test. The extremity of the trial reveals that Abraham truly “fears” (איר) God (Gen 22:12).⁶

The Bible contends that humanity is deeply religious.⁷ We are created to worship, and we do worship. All the time. We cannot help ourselves. On the one hand, God commands that our greatest love be reserved for him and that he and he alone be object of our worship. On the other hand, idolatry is loving something or someone more than we love and worship God. Idolatry is trusting that thing or person to do for us what only God can do, namely, to redeem us, to satisfy us, and to make us whole. Idols can be “bad” things like illegal drugs, lust, greed, or unforgiveness. Idols can also be “good” things—really “good” things, which God wants us to enjoy—like work, health, education, or a child. God’s blessings make for wonderful gifts, but they make for terrible idols. God’s gifts are intended to bring us joy and lead us to worship. Idols control us, rob us of our joy, and finally disappoint because we are expecting idols to do for us what only God can do. Is there something in your life for which you would say, “Lord, I will surrender control over anything in my life, but not that.” Then, “that” is your idol. “That” is what you ultimately love, trust, and worship. As we will see, Abraham models for us what it means to be a man who truly worships God and genuinely enjoys God’s gifts.

⁶ In Gen 22, God “tests” (נסה) Abraham, and Abraham responds with an appropriate “fear” (איר) for God. Exod 20:20 also combines these two themes of testing and fear: “Moses said to the people, ‘Do not fear (איר), for God has come to test (נסה) you, that the fear (איר) of him may be before you, that you may not sin.’”

⁷ For an excellent pastoral and practical diagnosis of idolatry see David Powlison, “Idols of the Heart and ‘Vanity Fair,’” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 13, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 35–50.

Abraham fiercely “loves” Isaac, and at the same time Abraham ultimately “fears” God in such a way that his delight in Isaac is not diminished and his love for God is not compromised.

The Lord Proves

In Genesis 22:3-8, God works through the testing of Abraham to prove Abraham’s faith. Abraham’s initial reaction is striking. Abraham responds to God’s instructions with immediate obedience. In Genesis 22:2, God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son. Directly following God’s command, we read, “So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.” Calvin marvels at Abraham’s zeal to obey: “Other men, prostrated by a message so dire and terrible, would have fainted, and have lain torpid, as if deprived of life; but the first dawn of morning was scarcely early enough for Abraham’s haste.”⁸ Once again, the narrative bears a remarkable resemblance to the scene of God’s original call of Abraham. In Genesis 12:1, God directs Abraham to “Go” (הלך), and in Genesis 12:4, we read that Abraham “went” (הלך). In this way, Abraham’s relationship with the Lord is marked from beginning to the end by a prompt and earnest obedience.

When faced with the test of sacrificing his son, Isaac, Abraham could choose to believe one of two things about God: either God is fickle, or God is faithful. If God is fickle, then after blessing Abraham and Sarah with a miracle child, God is now renegeing on his promise and will permit Isaac to die and for the promise to die with him. On the other hand, if God is faithful, then despite God’s demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac, God will finish what he has begun and will fulfill his promise to Abraham. Although Abraham is unable to figure out how God will resolve this seemingly insoluble dilemma,

⁸ Calvin, *Genesis*, 567.

Abraham chooses to believe that God is faithful and to respond in obedience.

In Genesis 22:4, we read, “On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.” It is worth noting that immediate obedience still requires Abraham to endure three agonizing days in which he must contemplate his personal responsibility to slaughter his own son. And yet three days of travel and reflection does not seem to weaken Abraham’s faith but rather to steel it. In Genesis 22:5, Abraham declares to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.”

Wenham suggests three possible interpretations of Abraham’s statement that “I and the boy will... come again to you.”⁹ First, Abraham’s words may be taken as a “white lie.” Abraham deceives Isaac in an attempt to delay Isaac’s personal horror, but, in reality, Abraham knows that Isaac will soon be sacrificed and therefore will not return. Second, Abraham’s declaration may reveal that Abraham does not intend to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham will go through the motions, but he knows that he can never bring himself to slaughter his son. Third, Abraham’s statement might be an “affirmation of faith.” Abraham believes that despite God’s command to slay Isaac, God will work out a way to fulfill his promise that “through Isaac shall your offspring be named” (Gen 21:12).

Wenham resolves the difficulty by suggesting “that none of these rival interpretations need to be ruled out. White lie, prophecy, hope, even disobedience, can surely coexist in the believer, especially in times of acute crisis.”¹⁰ Existentially, Wenham’s solution is possible; it is feasible that a believer might experience all of these conflicting realities simultaneously. Textually, Wenham’s suggestion is implausible. Abraham’s willingness to follow through on God’s command is undeniable. In fact,

⁹ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 107.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

Abraham is so resolved to follow through in fulfilling God’s command that the angel of the LORD must emphatically intervene to prevent Abraham from doing so (Gen 12:11-12). One of the central points of the narrative is that even when God’s directive makes no human sense Abraham is willing to obey— “now I know that you fear God” (Gen 22:12).

Furthermore, the verses following Abraham’s statement that “I and the boy will... come to you again” clarify and reinforce that Abraham’s statement, far from being a lie or a subtle refusal to follow God’s instructions, is a bold declaration of faith. Isaac inquires of Abraham, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering” (Gen 22:7)? In response, Abraham declares, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Abraham does not fully comprehend how God will provide, but few things are more apparent in the narrative than that Abraham is resolved to obey God’s command because he believes that God *will* provide, and therefore he and Isaac *will* return from the mountain.

The author of Hebrews reflects on the text and offers unique insight into Abraham’s rationale. In Hebrews 11:17-19, we read, “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac.... He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.” The word translated “considered” is λογίζομαι, which means “to determine by mathematical process, *reckon, calculate*” or “to give careful thought to a matter, *think (about), consider, ponder, let one’s mind dwell on.*”¹¹ Abraham’s “faith” is not at odds with reason and logic. Abraham uses his logical faculties and through reason “considers” his options: either God is fickle and will abandon his promises or God is faithful and will fulfill his promises. Abraham’s rational abilities are not able to comprehend how God will resolve this seemingly impossible predicament. Rather Abraham reasons from God’s character, God’s word, and

¹¹ W. Bauer et al., eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Accordance Bible Software.

God's past faithfulness that, despite his personal inability to discern a solution, God is fully able to fulfill his promises—even if that means that God must raise Isaac from the dead!

Of course, at this point in the history of the world, no recorded resurrection from the dead existed. This does not deter Abraham's faith—not because Abraham's faith is detached from reason but because Abraham's faith is based upon his personal knowledge of God, which leads him to conclude that God is able to do the impossible. As Hamilton observes, "Abraham went beyond Job's 'the Lord gives, and the Lord takes away' (Job 1:21) with his own 'the Lord gives, the Lord takes away, and the Lord gives back.'"¹² In this way, Abraham expresses resurrection faith before a known record of resurrection existed.

In Hebrews 11:6, the author of Hebrews asserts, "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Abraham's faith challenges us. Like Abraham, can we trust God with the questions for which we do not have answers, with the challenges for which we do not have solutions, with the mysteries of life which we cannot untangle and resolve? Faith reasons, "I do not possess all the answers, but I know enough about God, about his character, and about his Word that I choose to trust him with those things which I cannot finally resolve or control."¹³

As we have seen previously, Abraham is justified by faith. Abraham believes God. In particular, Abraham believes that God will fulfill his covenantal promises, and

¹² Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, 108.

¹³ Calvin counsels, "This example is proposed for our imitation. Whenever the Lord gives a command, many things are perpetually occurring to enfeeble our purpose: means fail, we are destitute of counsel, all avenues seemed closed. In such straits, the only remedy against despondency is to leave the event to God, in order that he may open a way for us when there is none. For as we act unjustly towards God, when we hope for nothing from him but what our senses can perceive, so we pay him the highest honor, when, in affairs of perplexity, we nevertheless entirely acquiesce in his providence." Calvin, *Genesis*, 568.

God declares Abraham righteous on the basis of Abraham's faith. In Genesis 22, God proves the reality of Abraham's faith in the promise. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac demonstrates that Abraham's faith amounts to more than mere intellectual assent. Abraham believes God will fulfill the promise even if faithfulness to God means sacrificing his only heir and even if realization of the promise requires that God raise the dead. No wonder the apostle James asserts, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the alter? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'—and he was called a friend of God" (2:21-23). Derek Kidner aptly concludes, "The test, instead of breaking him, brings him to the summit of his lifelong walk with God."¹⁴

Believers should derive immense encouragement from the recognition that God nurtured, preserved, and matured Abraham's faith over the span of his life. In Genesis 12, Abraham answers God's call with remarkable faith. Abraham parts with his home, his friends, and his family in order to follow God in obedience. Unfortunately, thereafter, Abraham's record of faith is a mixed bag. At times, Abraham exhibits fearless confidence in God like in his exploits to deliver Lot from the captivity of foreign kings (Gen 14:11-16). And, at other times, Abraham manifests appalling lapses of faith like when he pimps out Sarah to Pharaoh in order to protect himself (Gen 12:10-20). But here, at the end of Abraham's life, when he arguably faces the greatest test of his life, the genuineness of Abraham's faith shines through and the maturation of Abraham's faith is apparent. The Apostle Paul reassures the church in Philippi, "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). God fulfilled this promise for Abraham by nurturing and preserving

¹⁴ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 153.

Abraham's faith over his lifetime. And if we belong to God, he will do the same for us. God really does grow, mature, and prove the faith of his own.

The Lord Provides

On the journey to the place of sacrifice, Abraham assures a bewildered Isaac of God's provision: "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (Gen 22:8). The following verses, Genesis 22:9-14, record the LORD's provision. In Genesis 22:9, the pace of the narrative slows as the narrator chronicles each successive step Abraham performs in preparation of obeying God's command: "When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood." Each action—the erecting of the altar, the placing of the wood, the binding of Isaac, the placement of Isaac on the altar—further confirms Abraham's determination to fully execute God's instructions. The most dreaded and supreme act of submission to God's will is recorded in Genesis 22:10: "The Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son."

In a dramatic moment of relief, God intervenes. In Genesis 22:11, we read, "But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham! Abraham!'" Prior to this moment of divine intervention God is referenced four times in Genesis 22, and each time he is identified as "God" (אלהים). But now, at the moment of deliverance, the covenantal name for God, "LORD" (יהוה), is introduced to the narrative. From this point forward, "LORD" (יהוה), appears four more times.¹⁵

Once again, Abraham responds to the divine summons with humble submission: "Here I am" (Gen 22:11). Whereupon, God issues a word of immeasurable

¹⁵ Wenham offers the fascinating comparison that "in Genesis 2-3, the covenant creator is consistently termed 'the LORD God,' but in the temptation scene, where alienation between deity and humanity becomes evident, the word 'God' appears by itself (3:1-5)." Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 103.

relief: “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Gen 22:12). This divine word is critical to understanding the significance of the events recorded in Genesis 22. First, God’s word pardons Isaac assuring the preservation of his life and the continuation of the promise. Second, it reveals the purpose of God’s test and acknowledges that Abraham has passed the test by demonstrating in his actions that he truly “fears” God. And, third, it further develops the type-antitype connection between Isaac and Jesus thereby foreshadowing God’s future plan in Christ to accomplish the blessing of redemption for all the peoples of the world.

The LORD’s statement “you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” recalls God’s original instructions to Abraham in Genesis 22:2, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love....” Table 2 demonstrates the parallels between the wording of Genesis 22:2 and 22:12.

Table 2. Comparison of “son” language in Genesis 22:2 and 22:12

<i>Text</i>	<i>Phrase 1</i>	<i>Phrase 2</i>	<i>Phrase 3</i>
Gen 22:2	“your son” / בִּנְךָ	“your only son” / אֶת־יְחִידְךָ	“whom you love, Isaac” / אֲשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָק
Gen 22:12	“your son” / בִּנְךָ	“your only son” / אֶת־יְחִידְךָ	

In the New Testament, God uses similar language to describe the father-son relationship which exists between himself and Jesus. For example, Genesis 22:2 and 22:12 draws attention to the unique status that Isaac enjoys as Abraham’s son. Isaac is Abraham’s “only” son. In like fashion, John 3:16 stresses that Jesus is God’s “only” son. In John 3:16, the word translated “only” is μονογενής, which may convey the notion of “only

begotten” or “only one of its/his kind.”¹⁶

Furthermore, in Genesis 22:2 and 22:12, Isaac is identified as Abraham’s son, “your son,” while stressing Abraham’s great love for his son, “whom you love, Isaac.” At Jesus’ baptism, God speaks an analogous affirmation over Jesus: “This is *my beloved* Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17. Also Mk 1:11; Lk 3:22). And God repeats his paternal approval at Jesus’ Transfiguration: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 17:5. Also 2 Pet 1:17).

These parallels assume an even greater import when we consider the specific action Abraham prepares to take against Isaac in spite of Abraham’s great love for Isaac. In Genesis 22:12, the LORD declares, “I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” The word translated “withheld” is ָשׁוּן , which can also be translated “to keep back, to save, spare, to hold off.”¹⁷ The Septuagint translates ָשׁוּן as φειδομαι which means “to save from loss or discomfort, *spare*.”¹⁸ In Romans 8:32, the Apostle Paul may very well have Genesis 22 in mind when he contemplates the sacrifice of the Son and glories in the love of the Father: “He who *did not spare* (φειδομαι) *his own Son* but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” Paul’s declaration of God’s sacrifice of Jesus contains both the language of sonship and of sacrifice (φειδομαι) that we witness in Genesis 22:12.

Of course, the parallels between Isaac and Jesus are not exact. Abraham is

¹⁶ See Charles Lee Irons, “A Lexical Defense of the Johannine ‘Only Begotten,’” in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott R Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 98–116. Irons seems to argue persuasively for a return to the classical translation of “only begotten,” which both affirms the unique status of the Son as well as the Son’s eternal generation from the Father.

¹⁷ Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and M. E. J. Richardson, eds., *HALOT*, Accordance electronic, 5 vols., The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

¹⁸ Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. In Genesis 22:16, the same language of sonship and sacrifice is repeated, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not *withheld your son, your only son*....” Again, the LXX translates ָשׁוּן with φειδομαι .

prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac, but divine intervention prevents him from doing so. In contrast, at the cross, when God the Father raises his hand to strike his Son, there is no voice from heaven demanding, “Stop!” Rather God the Father did not spare (φειδομαι) his beloved Son but gave him up so that in the death of his Son all the sins of all his people might be forever atoned and his people redeemed.

In Genesis 22:13, not only is Isaac spared, God also provides an alternate sacrifice: “And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns.” Earlier, Abraham professed his confidence that “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering” (Gen 22:7). This ram is the provision for which Abraham hoped. In this ram, God provides the necessary means for Abraham and Isaac to satisfy their original intent to worship God (Gen 22:5).

In the LORD’s provision, the concept of substitution is undeniable: “And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering *instead of his son*” (Gen 22:13). The Hebrew phrase translated “instead of his son” is תחת בנו. The preposition תחת may be rendered “in place of” or “instead of.”¹⁹ The NAS opts for “in the place of his son.” Either way, as Kenneth A. Mathews asserts, “The death of the discovered ram... epitomizes the idea of substitutionary atonement, which characterized the Levitical system.”²⁰ This idea of substitution is vital to the Old Testament sacrificial system and supplies the necessary framework for understanding the sacrificial death of Jesus. Jesus dies for us—in our place—so that we might live and experience the joy of knowing and worshipping God (Matt 20:28; Rom 3:21-26; 4:25; Gal 3:10-13; 1 Pet 2:21-

¹⁹ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906). Accordance Bible Software.

²⁰ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 297; Joyce G. Baldwin adds, “The Lord did provide; the ram was released from its predicament, Isaac was released from the altar, and he experienced the wonder of substitutionary salvation. No one had to tell Abraham to substitute the animal for his son; the principle of substitution was so well established as to be taken for granted.” Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50: From Abraham to Joseph*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 91.

25; 3:18). In this way, the ram represents a type of Christ, dying in Isaac's stead and thereby preserving Isaac's life and the life of his descendants.

Christian scholars debate whether Isaac or the ram functions as a type of Christ in Genesis 22. The father-son relationship between Abraham and Isaac mirrors that of God the Father and God the Son. Like God the Father, Abraham demonstrates his willingness to sacrifice his beloved son. And, like God the Son, Isaac demonstrates his willingness to relinquish his life in obedience to his father. On the other hand, Abraham does not finally slay Isaac. Isaac's life is preserved, and another, the ram, dies in his place. In this way, the ram symbolizes Jesus, "the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Instead of insisting that either Isaac or the ram function as a type of Christ, interpreters should appreciate the complexity and aesthetic beauty of the narrative, which challenges us to resign an either-or approach and revel in the mystery of both Isaac and the ram as symbols of Christ. Earlier interpreters, like Melito of Sardis, who wrote in the late second century, did not attempt to negate the mystery but rather gloried in it. Melito of Sardis is worth quoting at length:

As a ram he was bound,
he says concerning our Lord Jesus Christ,
and as a lamb he was shorn,
and as a sheep he was led to slaughter,
and as a lamb he was crucified,
And he bore the wood on his shoulders,
going up to slaughter like Isaac at the hand of his father.
But Christ suffered.
Isaac did not suffer,
for he was a type of the passion of Christ which was to come.
Yet even the type caused fear and astonishment to come
upon people.
For it was a strange mystery to behold:
the son led up a mountain by his father, for slaughter,
whose feet he bound onto the wood of the offering,
preparing with haste for the slaughter to come.
Isaac was silent whilst bound like a ram,
not opening his mouth nor uttering a word.
He did not fear the knife,
nor did he panic at the fire,
nor did he grieve at his suffering.

The type of the Lord he bore bravely.
 In the midst was Isaac offered,
 like a ram bound at his feet.
 And Abraham was present and held the knife unsheathed,
 not ashamed to put his son to death.
 ...On behalf of Isaac, the righteous one, there appeared a
 ram for slaughter
 so that Isaac could be set free from his bounds.
 The ram was slaughtered and ransomed Isaac:
 in the same way the Lord was slaughtered and saved us,
 and freed us from our bonds,
 and ransomed us through his sacrifice.²¹

In a final act of worship, Abraham names Mount Moriah (מריה) (12:2) “The LORD will provide” (יהוה יראה) and “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided” (בהר יהוה יראה) (12:14). The word translated “provide” is ראה, which is most often translated “to see,” but in certain contexts is rendered “to provide.”²² The qal and niphil imperfect forms, which are used in Genesis 22, create יראה. Therefore, many conclude that a wordplay is at hand.²³

In Genesis 12:8, Abraham expresses his faith in God by professing, “God will see / provide (יראה) for himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” Later, in Genesis 22:12, the LORD commends Abraham for his faith by declaring, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear (ירא) God.” The form for “to see” or “to provide” (יראה) sounds very similar to the root for “to fear” (ירא). Hence, the naming of the mount seems to indicate that Mount Moriah is the place where Abraham “feared” (ירא) God, and where God “saw” and therefore “provided” (יראה) for Abraham. At the same time, the unmistakable emphasis in the renaming of the mount is upon the

²¹ Melito, *On Pascha: With the Fragments of Melito and Other Material Related to the Quartodecimans*, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press “Popular Patristics” Series (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 76-77. Sidney Greidanus argues that the ram, and not Isaac, is a type of Christ. However, see Greidanus’ fascinating discussion in which he cites Chrysostom, Augustine, and Spurgeon, all of whom advocate that both Isaac and the ram function as types of Christ, Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 202-203.

²² Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*.

²³ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, 112-113.

LORD's provision (הַיְיָ) and only secondarily on Abraham's fearful obedience (אִיִּיר). Therefore, Hamilton is right to conclude that the narrative is finally about God and not Abraham for the mount is not finally designated "Abraham Obeys" but rather "God Provides."²⁴

Some still object to the message of Genesis 22, questioning how a morally just God could request that a father sacrifice his son. However, we must recognize that God never finally requires Abraham to sacrifice his son. Just the opposite, God forbids Abraham from doing so, insisting, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him" (Gen 22:12). In actuality, this prohibition distinguishes the God of the Bible from the other gods whom the pagans worshipped in Abraham's day. Other gods of the Ancient Near East did in fact require child sacrifice as an act of worship and devotion. In contrast, Abraham's God disallows it. As a result, God's termination of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac sets the stage for the future revelation of God's Law, which explicitly forbids child sacrifice. So, in Deuteronomy 18:10, Moses instructs the people, "There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer" (Also see Lev 18:21; 20:1-5; Deut 12:29-31). God censors human sacrifice in the strongest terms equating such practices with the demonic activity of witchcraft and sorcery.

When understood rightly, Genesis 22 does not establish the cruelty of God but rather bears witness to the love of God. Far from promoting, child sacrifice, Genesis 22 reveals that the God of the Bible will always provide a sacrifice for the sins of his people.

²⁴ Ibid., 113; Also see Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2015), 141; It should also be noted that some scholars call attention to the reference to Mount Moriah in Gen 22 and the future mention of Mount Moriah in 2 Chr 3:1 as the location for Solomon's Temple. For example, see Calvin, *Genesis*, 566. Others go a step further and see an additional link to Mount Calvary, the place of Jesus' crucifixion. For example, see James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 691; Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 154. The exact geographical location of each of these sites is unknown, which leads others to dismiss these connections as tenuous. For example, Greidanus insists that "Moriah is a weak link for preaching Christ," Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis*, 206.

The narrative stands in direct contrast to the pagan gods. The God of the Bible does not require that his people sacrifice their children; he provides a sacrifice for them. In the New Testament, the death of Jesus reveals just how far God will go to provide a sacrifice for his people and to accomplish their salvation at his expense, and not theirs. At this point, only Christianity adequately discloses the mysterious beauty, theological depth, and redemptive purpose of the narrative.

The Lord Promises

God first announces his promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. God repeats the promise on a number of occasions throughout Abraham's life, and often a new rehearsal of the promise reveals a novel insight into the promise (Gen 15:1-20; 17:1-27). In Genesis 22:15-18, in response to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, God presents Abraham with his final proclamation of the promise. This iteration "intensifies the promise."²⁵

God intensifies the promise by pledging an oath—the only divine oath recorded in the patriarchal period.²⁶ God vows, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD" (Gen 22:16). The author of Hebrews offers the best commentary explaining how God's vow punctuates the absolute certainty of God's promise:

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, 'Surely I will bless you and multiply you.' And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us (6:13-18).

Then, repeating the promise from Genesis 15:5, God declares, "I will surely bless you,

²⁵ Boice, *Genesis*, 707.

²⁶ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 111.

and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven” (Gen 22:17). God further intensifies the promise, by adding the unique superlative, “and as the sand that is on the seashore,” and by including a fresh promise: “And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies” (Gen 22:17). Finally, recalling the original promise of Genesis 12:3, God concludes: “and in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Gen 22:18).

In Genesis 22, not only does God intensify his final proclamation of the promise, God also further reveals the unconditional-conditional nature of his covenant with Abraham. God’s first announcement of the promise stresses the unconditional nature of the promise: “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” (Gen 12:2-3). On the other hand, God’s final articulation of the promise emphasizes the conditional nature of the promise so that God acknowledges Abrahams’ obedience as a condition upon which he actualizes the covenantal promises. In Genesis 22:16-17, God states, “*Because* you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you.” And, again, in Genesis 22:18, God says, “In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, *because* you have obeyed my voice.” Many have been perplexed by the dual nature of the covenant, embarking on a quest to discern whether the nature of the covenant is either unconditional or conditional. As noted in earlier chapters, it is both. Brian Vickers explains how a proper conception of the unconditional-conditional nature of the covenant clarifies the symbiotic relationship between faith and works:

God’s promises are sealed with an oath, and he will keep his word, but God plans on keeping his word with a particular kind of people—those who follow him in obedience. The promises will be kept unconditionally, and their fulfillment is not contingent on obedience; the fulfillment of the promises is concurrent, or parallel, with obedience. This does not make faith and works identical, but it shows the inseparability of the two. God’s people, who are his through faith and who have received new hearts through the Spirit, will act like God’s people, and what he says

about them will be shown to be true. Both God and his justified people will be vindicated.²⁷

Conclusion

The Scriptures consistently identify Abraham as a “friend” of God, which is especially noteworthy given that Abraham is the only individual in the Bible with whom God specifically bestows this honor.²⁸ When Jehoshaphat prays in the temple, he inquires, “Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham *your friend*” (2 Chron 20:7)? Furthermore, God himself, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, claims Abraham as his friend: “But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, *my friend*” (Isa 41:8). Consequently, James picks up on this theme in James 2:23 and observes, “The Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’—and he was called a *friend of God*.”

The James passage is especially important because James not only identifies Abraham as God’s friend, James also offers insight into why Abraham is considered a friend of God. In short, Abraham is a friend of God because the God of promise invites Abraham to live in covenantal relationship with him. As James asserts, “Abraham believed God.” God initiates a relationship with Abraham by confronting Abraham with a series of covenantal promises. In response, Abraham entrusts himself to God by believing God’s promises. Consequently, God declares Abraham to be right, to be justified, before him, which establishes the spiritual, moral, and relational foundation upon which the friendship is established.

²⁷ Brian Vickers, *Justification by Grace through Faith: Finding Freedom from Legalism, Lawlessness, Pride, and Despair*, Explorations in Biblical Theology (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2013), 152.

²⁸ The only exception might be Moses. In Exodus 33:11, we read, “Thus the LORD use to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.” Therefore, one could rightly regard Moses to be a friend of God, but although Moses spoke to God “*as a man speaks to his friend*,” he is never directly identified as a “friend of God” like Abraham.

Thereafter, Abraham's biography is a record of Abraham living in a dynamic friendship with the living God. The covenant upon which this friendship is established demands fidelity. Tragically, Abraham's faithfulness is often inconsistent. But, gloriously, God's commitment to Abraham never wavers. Whenever Abraham comes up short, God steps forward to meet Abraham's covenantal obligations. And, at the same time, through trials, testing, and ongoing provision God nurtures Abraham's faith so that Abraham matures into a faithful covenant partner—a faithful friend. Therefore, one of the reasons Abraham's story is so valuable to the believer is that Abraham's life illustrates for us what it looks like to live in covenantal relationship with the God of promise.

As Christians, this is our calling, our identity. It almost seems too good to be true, but Jesus calls us, like God called Abraham, his friends: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:13-14). We are unfaithful partners; therefore, Jesus lays down his life for us. Jesus suffers the curse of our broken promises (Gen 15) and willingly offers himself as a sacrifice in our place (Gen 22) to meet our covenantal obligations. In this way, Jesus not only initiates but also ensures our friendship with him. At the same time, through a relationship characterized by forgiveness, provision, trial, and testing, Jesus matures our faith so that we really do trust and obey him more and more thereby demonstrating that we are truly his friends.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

Faithful pastors long for their people to know and love the Scriptures. Yet, many parishioners are intimidated by the volume and complexity of the Bible. Thankfully, pastors may use a number of different methods and tools to assist their congregants in gaining a better grasp of the overall structure and message of the Bible. One approach that is inherently biblical and practically effective is the method of identifying and teaching the biblical covenants. Unfortunately, this approach is often overlooked. However, Christians benefit greatly when they understand that the Bible itself presents the covenants as the fundamental framework for the biblical narrative and are therefore familiar with the basic content of the covenants. Ideally, over time, a pastor will expose his congregation to all of the biblical covenants, but for the purposes of this project I have focused on the Abrahamic covenant. In my estimation, God's covenant with Abraham provides the best material for both introducing the biblical concept of covenant and for serving as a paradigm through which to view and understand all the other biblical covenants.

This project is a collection of expositional sermons entitled "Abraham and the God of Promise." Through these expositional sermons, I have set out to demonstrate that God's covenantal relationship with Abraham is established by grace, experienced through faith, vindicated by works, and finally realized in Abraham's greater son, the Lord Jesus. As a result, I have applied the discipline of biblical theology in the crafting of each sermon. In other words, I have evaluated each text in light of the story of God's progressive revelation of redemption in Christ. This required that I seek to interpret each text in light of the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors, both Old Testament and

New, examining each passage along its contextual, covenantal, canonical, and contemporary horizons.

In Genesis 12, God establishes his covenant with Abraham on the basis of grace. The book of Genesis opens with God's creation of the world. Thereafter, the first eleven chapters are characterized by cursing, as humanity spirals downward from Adam and Eve's initial rebellion to the chaos of Babel. After generations of human failure and divine curse, God graciously initiates a relationship with Abraham and promises to exchange the curse of sin with the blessing of his grace. Abraham is a willing partner, but time reveals that Abraham, like his forefathers, is also an unfaithful partner. Abraham's repeated failures threaten the promise, like when Abraham surrenders Sarah to Pharaoh's harem in order to protect his own life or like when Abraham yields to Sarah's impatience with God's timing and willingly participates in Sarah's plan to produce an offspring through Hagar. Yet, divine grace ensures that Abraham consistently receives what he does not deserve and what he has not earned. This truth is perhaps best captured in Abraham's and Sarah's departure from Egypt. In Abraham's interactions with Pharaoh, Abraham plays the scoundrel. Abraham lies to Pharaoh by assuring Pharaoh that Sarah is his sister thereby inviting Pharaoh to pursue Sarah as a possible addition to his harem. Once Pharaoh determines that Sarah is Abraham's wife, Pharaoh acts honorably and returns Sarah to Abraham. However, when Abraham leaves Egypt, it is not Abraham that is cursed and Pharaoh who is blessed. Rather, it is just the opposite. Abraham, who acted like a scoundrel, is blessed. Pharaoh, who acted honorably, is cursed. Despite Abraham's moral cowardice, Pharaoh's court is afflicted with plagues, and Abraham departs Egypt wealthier than when he arrived. Why? Because God established his covenant with Abraham not on the basis of Abraham's obedience but on the basis of his divine grace. Divine grace, not human obedience, ensures that God fulfills his promise to bless Abraham and to curse Abraham's enemies.

In accordance with God's covenant with Abraham being established by grace,

Abraham experiences the promises of God's covenant through faith. As Genesis 15:6 clearly demonstrates, it is not by Abraham's obedience but by Abraham's faith that Abraham is declared righteous before God. At the same time, Abraham's faith is not perfect. For example, in Genesis 17 and 18, God's promise of a seed seems so preposterous to an aging Abraham and Sarah that they laugh at the angel's announcement that the promise will soon be fulfilled. Despite Abraham's momentary doubts and embarrassing failures, Abraham fundamentally continues to trust the promise. Abraham's faith is imperfect, but it is genuine. As a result, God rewards Abraham's faith with the miraculous blessing of a child. When Isaac is born, Abraham and Sarah's laugh of incredulity is replaced with a laugh of surprise and joy. Furthermore, God rewards Abraham's faith with the eternal blessing of justification. Abraham's faith is counted to him as righteousness, and thereby Abraham is declared right before God. Significantly, God's declaration of Abraham's justification takes place both before Abraham's circumcision (Rom 4:9-12) and before Moses' pronouncement of the law (Gal 3:17-18), further validating that Abraham is saved not by works or by his obedience, but by faith.

Although Abraham's faith is often weak and imperfect, it is genuine, and the authenticity of Abraham's faith is repeatedly validated by Abraham's obedience. In fact, the author of Genesis bookends the Abrahamic narrative with two accounts of Abraham's obedient faith. In Genesis 12, God promises to make Abraham a great nation, which includes the promises of blessing, seed, and land. At this point in the narrative, the author does not tell us explicitly that Abraham believes God's promise, but the reader perceives Abraham's faith based on Abraham's actions. Abraham immediately obeys God's command to leave his home in pursuit of the land God promised. Furthermore, when Abraham arrives in the promised land, Canaan, Abraham surveys the land, pausing at various points along the way to offer sacrifices to God and to worship him. Each stop along the way is an expression of Abraham's faith that one day God will fulfill his promise and on that day Abraham and his descendants will worship God in God's

promised land. Near the end of the Abrahamic narrative, in Genesis 22, God presents Abraham with the most challenging test of Abraham's life. God instructs Abraham to sacrifice his only son, the promised son, Isaac. Paralleling Abraham's actions in Genesis 12, Abraham immediately obeys. In the excruciating three-day journey to the site where Isaac is to be sacrificed, Abraham makes it clear that he is willing to obey God's command to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham is willing to do so because he believes that, if necessary, God will raise Isaac from the dead in order to fulfill his promise to produce a great nation through Isaac. The sincerity of Abraham's imperfect faith is vindicated through these two significant acts of obedience, which bookend Abraham's life. Abraham's faith, like every true believer, is an odd mixture of both regrettable failures and glorious victories.

Finally, all the promises and blessings of the Abrahamic covenant are dependent upon the promised seed of Abraham, initially fulfilled in Isaac and finally realized in Jesus Christ. He is the seed of the woman, who will finally crush the serpent (Gen 3:15). In Genesis 15, God pledged to accept the curse of the covenant in order to ensure that Abraham and his descendants receive the blessings of the covenant. In this act, God foreshadows that the chosen seed will fulfill God's promise by sacrificially bearing the curse for the sake of God's covenant people. Genesis 22 contains one of the most beautiful illustrations of the seed's substitutionary role in God's work of redemption. Abraham prepares to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, and Isaac willingly complies before God miraculously intervenes and provides a ram as a substitute. In this event, Abraham serves as a type of God the father, who is willing to sacrifice his one and only Son. At the same time, Isaac serves both as a type of Jesus, who is willing to lay down his life in obedience to his father, and as a type of the people of God, who are finally saved when God provides a substitutionary sacrifice, who will suffer the curse of the covenant, death, so that they might experience the blessing of the covenant, life. At times, Abraham and Sarah are tempted to lose hope that there will ever be a promised seed. There are

moments when other alternatives seem more attractive, more practical, or more efficient—such as Eliezar or Ishmael. But God never ceases to insist that the promise will be realized in only one seed, and it is only through faith in this promise and ultimately through faith in the one true seed, Jesus Christ, that Abraham and his descendants receive the blessings of God's covenant.

Consequently, God's covenantal relationship with Abraham is established by grace, experienced through faith, vindicated by works, and finally realized in Abraham's greater son, the Lord Jesus. With this fundamental understanding of the Abrahamic covenant a believer is much better equipped to navigate the twists and turns of the Bible and to understand all the various stories of the Bible in light of God's greater story of redemption in Christ.

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ABSTRACT

A CHRIST-CENTERED PROCLAMATION OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

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This project is a collection of seven expositional sermons on the life of Abraham with an emphasis on God's covenant with Abraham. The sermon series is entitled "Abraham & the God of Promise," which captures both the biographical and covenantal focus of the series. Theologically, these sermons explain the role of Abraham in the biblical story and the pivotal role of the Abrahamic Covenant in God's purpose of redemption. Spiritually, these sermons trace the relational dynamics between God and Abraham in order to illustrate a life in covenantal relationship with the God of the Bible. Through these sermons, I seek to demonstrate that God's covenantal relationship with Abraham is established by grace, experienced through faith, vindicated by works, and finally realized in Abraham's greater Son, the Lord Jesus.

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