

Our LORD who Promises

(6/27/2021)

Scripture: (Genesis 12:1-8))

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

From there he 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.

Scripture: (Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-16)

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Sermon:

Exiled from God's Garden because of Adam's sinful disobedience, we fast forward in history to the beginning of Abraham's *{here called Abram}* story.

However, we should have a recap of what has gone on during the nine intervening chapters. I'll only give you the “Highlights” or “Cliff Notes” today, I promise.

Exiled from the Garden, Adam and Eve settled down and had kids somewhere east of Eden. But then their kids had “issues”, and the elder brother, Cain, murdered his younger brother, Abel. Rather than exercise divine vengeance upon Cain for his sin of murder, the LORD again showed Mercy by banishing Cain out even further into the world. The LORD commanded that he should live with the guilt of what he had done, as part of his punishment, and that if anyone were to kill him then they too would suffer God's curse. Sin compounds upon sin, always driving us further from the LORD's presence. Now, with two children lost, one murdered and another banished, Adam and Eve had another son, Seth, from whom the lines of all God's elect and the “*woman's offspring*” (3:15), Jesus Christ, would come.

So, the earth began to be populated by lots of people, who all continued to sin at an exponential rate, while a faithful few trying to do what was right in the “eyes of the LORD”. But, the sinners filled the world with such wickedness that the LORD washed it clean with a global flood, saving and preserving for Himself a faithful family of eight: Noah, his wife, and their three sons along with their wives; letting them “try again”, to start things over.

Now, we would hope that after such a drastic punishment and a terrifying enactment of God's judgment, and His mercy, that folks (mankind) would have been “scared straight”, right? Wrong.

Noah's kids had kids, who resumed living in sin *{although there are those of the line of Shem who are assumed to have remained faithful to the LORD}*. These kids and the generations of grand-kids founded cities and nations; like Nimrod (“*[Who] was a mighty hunter before the LORD*” (Gen. 10:9 ESV): he established Babel in the land of Shinar (modern day Iraq), as well as Ninevah, (modern day Syria). There at Babel, which is understood to eventually become Babylon the Great, the people decided to build a “tower into heaven” *{archaeological evidence tells us much about this “common” Middle Eastern practice of building “ziggurats” as sites of worship, where man could go up to meet the gods who would “come down” from heaven¹}*. We could think that it was merely in judgment against their cooperation for this sinful attempt to “invade” heaven, by forcing their way into God's presence, that the LORD “confused” their speech such that there became a multitude of diverse languages, so that they could not work together; however, I believe that this was the Mercy of God being again shown to man, preventing this self-destructive and ignorant attempt to defile His Holy place with our sinfulness, by foiling cooperation until the time, God's time (*kairos*), is right to bring us back into His Presence, covered by the blood of Christ.

Then, a few generations after this failed invasion of heaven, we come to Terah and his son Abram, living in the city of Ur of the Chaldeans *{mind you that the Chaldeans were not yet a people, with various extra-Biblical historical documents mentioning the people by name somewhere in the 9th century BC², but clearly this city existed and the land was populated}*. Terah moved himself, Abram, and his grandson Lot, with their respective households, to Charan (the region of Paddam-Aram³ in modern south-central Turkey).

1 <https://www.britannica.com/technology/ziggurat>

2 <https://www.britannica.com/place/Chaldea>

3 Gen 24:10 – Aram Naharaim; 25:20 - Paddam-Aram

Finally, we come to Abraham (Abram) who, at the tender age of seventy-five years young, received the Call of the LORD to leave his homeland, his extended family, and go away from his father Terah's home and influence. *{Terah would have been 145 years old by this time, and Scripture says he lived still another sixty years after Abram left home (Gen 11:26-32, 12:4).}*

But, before we get into what Abraham was Called to by God, I'd like to focus a moment on what he was Called from.

Scripture says quite a lot about what the lands of Charan and Chaldea would become in time: Charan would be a part of the Assyrian Empire that conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, took them into exile (2 Kings 15:29), and then erased ten of the Tribes of Jacob from all historical, and ancestral (familial) memory; Chaldea would become the Babylonian Empire which conquered and replaced Assyria as the major world power, and conquered the Southern Kingdom of Judah, under King Nebuchadnezzar, taking the best and brightest of Judah into exile and captivity for seventy years (2 Kings 24, 25). Both nations were full of practicing pagans and idolaters (2 Kings 16:10-18; Dan 3:1-6); users of sorcery and astrology (Dan 2:27; 4:7; 5:7-11; Is 47) practitioners of all different manners of vileness and wickedness; in short they were Satanists, devotees *{by practice, if not in name}* of the lord of this world, the “*prince of the power of the air*” (Eph 2:1-3) and those who would suffer the LORD's judgment and wrath in times to come.

But of Abraham specifically, Joshua speaking to the Children of Israel, (24:2b) tells us that, “...*Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.*” (Jos. 24:2 ESV). “...they served other gods...” Abraham's father's house was a house of idolatry. He lived in a city of idolaters, in a nation (and world) filled with pagan, false religions. Jewish tradition *{without Scriptural support or authority}* goes on to further claim that Terah was actually a “maker of idols”⁴, and that the righteous and faithful Abraham always opposed him in this work. Similarly expressed in the Quran (Suras: Koran 2:58; 6:74-83; 19:41-50; 21:51-71; 26:69-104; 29:16-27; 37:83-113; 60:4-5) is a pre divine revelation, monotheistic devotion being evidenced by Abraham, while still in the land of the Chaldeans. Yet, while both the Rabbinical Jewish tradition and Islamic Quranic verse greatly expand upon the “righteousness” of Abraham⁵ in stories not supported by Sacred Scripture, and are surely fictional, building up this flawed man (Gen 12:10-20; 21:8-21) into a hero deserving of God's favor; yet, the simple fact is: before he received the self-revelation from our Sovereign LORD (Gen 12:1; 17:1), Abraham was simply an idolater, a pagan living in his sin and depravity, and thus neither better nor worse than we are today. He was no more deserving *{perhaps he was less deserving}* of God's free gift of grace than we are.

All the extra things said about Abraham by the other so-called “Abrahamic religions” add nothing good or true to the faith; they add nothing but lies and pile heaps of false, undeserved glory onto a sinful man in need of grace. Their exemplary use of these stories demonstrate, in part, why those religions are wrong and false; because they distract the Jews and Muslims from the truth of the One who is far greater than Abraham: the Messiah, Jesus Christ; the God-man who has saved Abraham and all of Abraham's true heirs. They use the figure and name of Abraham to create a god of him, a god made in the image of Man (Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8-9; Luke 16:19-31; John 8:37-47), thus becoming an idol for their veneration.

Abraham was born and lived as a pagan, because his father was a pagan. *{Each descended from Noah, by his son Shem, who had been entrusted with the role of priest before the LORD (Gen 9:26), this is why it was also acceptable for Abraham, Issac, and Jacob to all build altars and offer sacrifices to YHVH before the foundation*

4 Genesis Rabbah 38:13

5 <https://korancontradiction.home.blog/genesis-rabbah-3813/>

of the Levitical priesthood (as Levi was still represented in them; Hebrews 7:9-10)}. They are the lineal ancestors of our precious Lord Jesus. The Patriarch of Israel: “Father Abraham”, [who] had many sons (and daughters)”; was a godless, sinful, satanic pagan who became Called by God and was redeemed by His Grace alone; so, like him, we (who trust in Christ Jesus) have also been called by God, and redeemed from our sin. Thus, Abraham and his heirs have all become “redeemed sinners, now saved by grace”, “...I am one of them and so are you, so let's all praise the LORD!”⁶

Before leaving Charan for Canaan, Abraham should have known better. All his life, Abraham should have been worshiping the only Living LORD, but he and his father's “*served other gods*”. Graciously, the LORD did not leave Abraham in his sin. He did not leave Abraham in his ignorance. Instead the LORD of Glory revealed Himself to him (Acts 7:1-4), giving Abraham the glorious promise, of which we are his heirs (Gal 3:29); and the LORD also gave Abraham the faith to believe God, with the strength and perseverance to obey Him.

Now as a pagan, Abraham may have known of the LORD, known about the LORD, may have heard stories about Him from his family's past; but, Abraham did not believe in the LORD. Not until God personally revealed Himself, and commanded Abraham to “Go!”, did he live in obedience. Abraham did not choose God, but the LORD chose him, despite all his past idolatry and sin; chosen according to God's eternal plan of redemption, from before the foundation of the world.

“Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”” (Gen. 12:1-3 ESV)

What an astonishing and wonderful promise! It is unbelievable to most folks today. This was not some wishy-washy, “IF you go, THEN I will” kind of promise; this was an imperative {*a divine imperative, as it were*} “GO!” or even “You WILL GO!”, the sort of command that brooks no argument or debate. Ordinarily, religion teaches man to try and make a deal with God, as if the LORD was a heavenly Monte Hall, “Ok, God...I'll do (or not do) XYZ for You, if You will just do (or not do) ABC for me. Deal?” All the onus of this promise is on what God will do for Abraham, by His Sovereign Will and Good Pleasure. God is the Promiser and the Doer, while we receive the promise, in faith, and believe.

This is a critical difference between Faith and Religion.

God Moves First! Then, we must respond.

God said to Abraham, {Abraham, you WILL go, leave everything and everyone who will not follow you, behind. You WILL go, until I tell you that you have gotten to where you are going.} I think we would each find this divine command personally difficult to swallow and obey; requiring full surrender; all that uncertainty, requiring absolute trust and faith in the LORD above; yet it should be enough for us to go and obey, because of the One who gave the command. AND THEN, the LORD “sweetened the deal” for Abraham with His promise.

After the command to go, God made Abraham three promises:

- I, the LORD, will make you a great nation.
- I, the LORD, will bless you and make your name great.

⁶ <https://youtu.be/UbLvdp9bUL4>: “Father Abraham, had many sons, and many sons had Father Abraham; and I am one of them, and so are you, so let's all praise the LORD”: {Right Arm, Left Arm, Right Foot, Left Foot, Chin Up, Turn Around, Sit Down}

- I, the LORD will bless those who bless you, and those who dishonor you (or curse you), I will curse.

Those are pretty awesome promises. Everyone wants that, I think, especially every selfish, self-serving individual believing that “it's all about me”; but what makes the Promise so special is the Why. Because of why the LORD made the Promise to Abraham.

God gives the Promise...”so that you will be a blessing...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

To bless, to be a blessing, and to be blessed (*barak*) was “to endue with power for success, prosperity, fecundity⁷ [meaning: fertility or an abundance of increase], longevity, etc...”⁸. Blessings are understood to flow from the greater to the lesser, with all blessings being sourced originally from the LORD. {*Praise God from whom all blessings flow...*}

Blessings in Scripture are particularly contrasted with cursing. All are under a curse in Adam, because of his sin and failure to obey God's Holy Law; but because of Abraham's faith, which was accounted to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6), “*all the families of the earth shall be blessed*” (Matt 28:18-20; Gal 3:7-14). Even though Abraham was not the promised “*offspring of the woman*” (Gen 3:15), it is through his offspring that her “offspring” would one day come to fulfill the promise as the ultimate blessing, Jesus.

All of sinful humanity is under a curse in Adam, but the blessing of Abraham's faith will reach into all the different families of the earth; which is not to say that all people or that everyone will receive this blessing, for it only belongs to the elect of God. This is not a promise of “universal salvation”, nor hope for mutual acceptability and tolerance between the three religions who claim Abraham as their forebear, because the Promise is for Jesus Christ, and the truth of the Promise is for those united together with Christ. As Paul writes, “*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.*” (Gal. 3:16 ESV)

“*So [Abraham] went, as the LORD had told him...*” (12:4). This seventy-five years “young” man packed up all his stuff, packed up his family (his wife, Sarah, and his nephew, Lot), and left his home. Leaving behind a comfortable life in Charan, he went into a self-imposed exile, for an uncertain (and certainly uncomfortable) life of wandering, living as a stranger in a strange land; a strange land that he did not know, but which the LORD had promised to him and his descendants.

Abraham left Charan, trusting the LORD; he embarked on this journey in faith. He had no human surety, he didn't even know where exactly he was going, and he had no children to inherit when he was dead and gone; but he obedient to the only sure Guarantor, the One who is “*faithful and true*” (Rev 19:11).

“*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.*” (Heb. 11:8 ESV)

Abraham was living the “good life” back up there in Charan. He had no personal reason or strong desire to just leave and go. He had all the comforts of home. But, when the LORD God revealed Himself, and commanded him to “Go!”, Abraham went.

Why? Because God. Because of God: God's Sovereignty and God's Promise.

7 2: fruitfulness or fertility, as of the earth.; 3: the capacity of abundant production:

<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/fecundity>

8 Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament p. 132, Strong's #285

God promised Abraham a home of his own. A better home. So, Abraham left because, Abraham believed: that God's promised home was better than the one he had; that the land he would go to was better than the land he was in; that it was better to be a blessing to others than to not be. God's Promise is always far greater than anything the world could offer.

Now, his wife Sarah, had to think he was crazy to pick up and go, just “because God said to...”. { *who among ya'll wouldn't think your spouse was crazy, if they came home one day and told you, “God said, we're going to Timbuktu...”*. } I feared getting that “crazy” label, when I told my folks that I was going to go to seminary (even though my dad had done the same), but my mom's response was simply “It's about time!”. But Sarah went with her husband because “...*she considered him faithful who had promised.*” (Heb. 11:11 ESV). Sarah, the woman who laughed and doubted God's power to give her a son, still trusted her husband, and so by his faith eventually came to believe God herself (1 Cor 7:16).

Despite finding the promised land settled by hostile peoples, Abraham dwelt there and worshiped the LORD. Later, his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob also worshiped and dwelt there, as fellow sojourners, as visitors, and not as lords of the land. Three (plus) generations living in the “land of promise” in tents, as nomads, as transients without permanence {*except for the “Tomb of the Patriarchs” in Hebron*}, without a home of their own; yet, they were satisfied.

Why? “*For he [Abraham] was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.*” (Heb. 11:10 ESV)

They had a taste of the promise. They experienced the promised land and lived there for a time, but although they did not receive the fullness of God's promise in their lifetimes, still they trusted the LORD. They lived as strangers in a land meant to be theirs. They lived as exiles, looking for a home of their own. They lived and died “in faith”. If they did not believe or have faith in the LORD, then they could have returned to Charan at any time.

How does the book of Hebrews define “faith”? “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” (Heb. 11:1 ESV)

Faith is being sure of what we hope for, because of this divine Promise and our trust in the Promise-Giver, and then living out that conviction, with the certainty of truth, for what we cannot see, hear, smell, taste, or touch but know that we possess even now, and will receive in God's time.

We who trust in Jesus are called to live by faith. We are the children and heirs of the Promise given to Abraham. We are the recipients of the blessing, which he did not know in life, yet still possessed: salvation in Christ Jesus. Then as now, the faithful saints of the LORD died and were buried, and they too were called up in glory to their eternal, heavenly home, awaiting Christ and the resurrection to come.

History tells us that all of the Apostles (save John, the beloved disciple) and that many of the early believers and followers of Christ, died a martyr's death⁹. Please understand that a martyr's death is not necessarily the violent death or murder of a religious adherent: *martyr* (*martus*) is the Greek word meaning: a witness, as in one who gives a qualified and truthful testimony; so their deaths of martyrdom were testimonies to their faith in Christ Jesus. Not a one of these “eyewitnesses” to Jesus recanted of their faith and trust in Him. If they had recanted, then the world would have been shouting about it from the rooftops, all these past two thousand years! {*No one will die for a lie which they know to be false.*} All the Christian martyrs in history, all those who have died in

9 Foxe's Book of Martyrs

recent years, and are dying right this moment, have died testifying about their faith in God's Promise: given to His Elect, through Abraham, and is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

They all desired a better country and home. They did not count the things of this life as something of lasting value, but held out their hands to receive the good gifts of God. They saw, with the eyes of faith, the eternal Promised Land beyond the Jordan, the land of the Lord's Sabbath rest (Psalm 95; Hebrews 4).

Where are your eyes fixed? Are they fixed on the things of earth, or are they turned upwards to the cross of Christ and His Glory beyond? Do you trust God's Promise?

It has been said that it is “easier to die for Christ, than to live for Him”; yet remember we are commanded to “*deny [ourselves] and take us [our] cross daily and follow [Him]*” (Luke 9:23). Are you living a life of Christian martyrdom?

{These faithful saints, by their example, prove false the ancient maxim of, “a bird in the hand is better than two birds in a bush.” What we have is not greater than what we will receive!}

We should all be desiring and looking forward to that day of promise, when we receive the blessings of Christ Jesus, through the work and power of the Holy Spirit, in faith.

Today, we have the complete revelation of Christ in the Scriptures. Today, we have the freedom to worship our Holy LORD. Today, we have our families and our church family who love, support, and encourage us in our lives and our faith. Today, we see and know the joy of God's promise, better than the patriarchs of the faith did. They persevered and remained faithful with less evidence than we have; so, how can we believe, live, or worship less than they? We need God's Promise just as much as they did, if not more.

John Calvin wrote, “Though God gave to the fathers only a taste of that grace which is largely poured on us, though he shewed to them at a distance only an obscure representation of Christ, who is now set forth to us clearly before our eyes, yet they were satisfied and never fell away from their faith: how much greater reason then have we at this day to persevere? If we grow faint, we are doubly inexcusable.”¹⁰

Like Abraham, God has promised us a better home, we are called to be sojourners in this life and in the world (John 17:11, 14, 18). We are exiles in the land, because we await the final fulfillment of God's promise. This world is not our home.

So, keep your eyes on the prize, persevere in the faith, until we are all gathered together, at home in Christ's Kingdom. Stand upon the promises of our LORD, they cannot and will not fail. Believe in Him. Trust Him. He will bring you to your eternal home with Him according to His unailing Promise.

AMEN.

¹⁰ Calvin's Commentaries #12, p. 2406, HEBREWS XI 13