

April 25th, 2021

The Covenant of Grace: Abraham, the Covenant of Promise

Genesis 10-22

The summary sentence of all human history

If someone asked you to sum up all the whole Bible, and all of human history, into just one sentence, could you do it? Is there one sentence that we could point to that explains and interprets all other events? Yes. **Genesis 3:15**. God said to that ancient serpent the Devil: “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.” **Genesis 3:15** is not just the protoevangelium—the first gospel; it is not just the first appearance of the covenant of grace; it is the rosetta stone—the interpretative lens—that explains all things from the fall until final glory. Every verse in Scripture (post-fall) is an outworking of this one prophecy, this one promise. **Genesis 3:15** explained all the events in the **the first epoch** in redemptive history: the period between the fall and the flood. What was happening between the fall and the flood? Enmity raged between the line of Cain and the line of Seth until there was only 8 people left in the visible Church. God ended that epoch and rescued His people by sending an earth-destroying flood. The LORD then renewed the Covenant of Grace with Noah and amended it, promising to preserve the earth, and restore common grace to all peoples until the final judgment. This morning we are entering **the second epoch** in redemptive history: the period between the flood and the calling of Abraham. What is happening in this era? Two things: 1) Enmity between the offspring of the serpent and the woman, *and* 2) God remembering His Covenant and upholding His people so that they are not destroyed.

- ☆The World at the Time of Abraham
- ☆The Covenant God Made with Abraham
- ☆The Two Dimensions of Abrahamic Covenant

I. The World at the Time of Abraham

What was happening in Genesis 10?

As we said last time, the seed of the serpent survived the flood. This shows us how desperate our situation is—not even an global extinction event—can destroy the evil of sin that was introduced at the fall. Ham the son of Noah would be the new line through which the seed of the serpent would thrive. As I mentioned last time, the text cryptically suggests that Ham had an incestuous relationship with his mother. He saw the “nakedness of his father” **Genesis 9:22** records.¹ When Noah wakes up, **v.24** says that “he knew what his youngest son had done to him.” **Leviticus 18:7** helps interpret. “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness.” This “...is a euphemism for maternal incest. This...also suggests that Canaan [Ham’s fourth son] was the result of the illicit encounter *and* explains why Canaan was curse by Noah.”² Look at **9:25**, “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.” Enter **Genesis 10**. This chapter gives us the table of nations. From Noah’s three sons descended all the nations on the earth. Notice particularly that Ham’s line contains some the most fierce enemies the Church has ever seen: **v.6** “The sons of Ham: Cush, *Egypt*, Put, and *Canaan*.” **v.10** “The beginning of his [meaning Nimrod who was Ham’s grandson] kingdom was *Babel*”—that is, Babylon. It was Babylon that carried away the ancient Church into captivity (**2**

¹ That phrase is repeated in v.23 and v.24

² *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological and Historical Perspectives*, Ed. Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, & John R. Muether, (Wheaton, IL.,: Crossway, 2020), pg. 130

Chronicles 36:20), and it is spiritual Babylon “...the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations” (**Revelation 17:5**) that seeks to destroy the Church today. But there is more from Ham’s cursed line: the *Assyrians* descended from him (**v.11**), the *Sidonians* (**v.15**), the *Jebusites* and *Amorites* (**v.16**), the *Hivites* (**v.17**), the cities of *Sodom* and *Gomorrhah* (**v.19**) —in summary the seed of the serpent began to thrive immediately after the fall.

What was happening Genesis 11?

Enter Genesis 11 and the building of the tower of Babel. This is was around 2,000 years after the fall and 2,000 years before Christ came, so right in the middle of the ancient world. The very building of this city and tower was rebellion against God. God told Noah and his sons to be fruitful and multiply and spread over all the earth (**Gen. 9:7**). But look at **v.4** “Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.’” Jonathan Edwards says here:

“This city and tower was set up in opposition to the city of God [for] the god to whom they built it, was their pride...Forsaking the true God, the first idol they set up in His [place], was their own fame.”³

Had God not stopped the building of Babel, the Church would have been perished under it’s corruption, just like the Church before the flood would have perished if God had not sent the flood. Again the Church was in a deep state of apostasy. Where was the Church? Look at the end of **v.28** Abram (soon to become Abraham) and his family were in “...Ur of the Chaldeans.” Babel was the capitol city of of the land of Chaldea. In other words the city of God was once again mixing with the city of man. Turn quickly to **Joshua 24:2**. This is Joshua narrating to the people of Israel where Abraham originated from: “And

³ cf. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 1*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), pg. 542

Joshua said to all the people, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; *and they served other gods.*’” Abraham and his family served other gods. That is how far the corruption had once again spread into the Church. The enmity between the two offspring raged on, and it seems that the serpent’s offspring was about to swallow up the woman’s offspring. That’s our **first point**. The conditions in the world before Abraham were just as dire as they were before Noah. God’s people were in danger of becoming extinct.

II. The Covenant God Made with Abraham

God’s new method

Instead of destroying the world to save His people—like He did with Noah, which He promised not to do again—the Lord calls Abraham out of Babel “...to go and live separate from the rest of the world.”⁴ This is the principle that Paul repeats in **2 Corinthians 6:17** “Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them.” You see in order for the seed of the woman to remain uncorrupted, there had to be a separation. This is what the Lord does. Look at **Genesis 12:1-3** “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

⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 543

blessed.” Thus Abraham is singled out from all other peoples to be the root of not only Israel but of all the people of God.⁵

The third manifestation of the Covenant of Grace

Quickly, let’s make the connection between Adam, Noah, and Abraham. After the fall, God immediately covenanted Himself to Adam promising that He would send a Redeemer (**Genesis 3:15**). The after the flood, the Lord renewed this covenant with Noah, amending it to say that He would preserve the world until that promise is fulfilled (**Genesis 8:21-22**). Now with Abraham, that covenant is amended so that the community through which the Redeemer would could is formally created (**Genesis 12:1-3**). Therefore this covenant made with Abraham is the third chapter, as it were, of the one Covenant of Grace.

God promised **Adam** to send the Redeemer



God promised **Noah** to preserve the Earth for the Redeemer



God promised **Abraham** the Redeemer would come through him

⁵ “Abraham, being the person in whom this foundation is laid, is represented in Scripture as though he were the father of all the church, the father of all them that believe; a root whence the visible church rose as a tree, distinct from all other plants. Of this tree Christ was the branch of righteousness; and from it, after Christ came, the natural branches were broken off, and the Gentiles were grafted in. So that Abraham still remains the father, the root of the church. It is the same tree which, from that small beginning in Abraham’s time, has in these days of the gospel spread its branches over a great part of the earth, and will fill the whole in due time, and at the end of the world shall be transplanted from an earthly soil into the paradise of God.” *Ibid*

The light of the New Testament

How do we know this is the same Covenant of Grace that God made with Adam and Noah? The easy answer is that the New Testament tells us. Jesus who is the fulfillment of **Genesis 3:15** said in **John 8:56**, speaking to the Jews: “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” Likewise Paul said in **Galatians 3:8** “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’” Paul calls these words here in **Genesis 12:1-3** *the gospel*. All the nations—both Jew and Gentile—shall be blessed through Abraham. Why? Because through Abraham would come the Messiah—the seed of the woman—and He would rescue God’s elect from sin and Satan and death and hell. This is the very promise of **Genesis 3:15** which is the Covenant of Grace.⁶

The Abrahamic Covenant

There are four principle texts that unpack this covenant:

Genesis 12: God’s call and promises of the covenant

Genesis 15: the condition and curse of the covenant

Genesis 17: the parties and seal of the covenant

Genesis 22: a lively illustration of the covenant

1. God’s call and promise (Genesis 12)

Here in **Genesis 12:1-3**, God chooses Abraham out from the offspring of the serpent—out of the city of man—to be *the foundation* for the city of God throughout all redemptive history. What are the promises that God gives to

⁶ Genesis 3:17

WCF 7.3 Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.

Abraham here? They are found in v.2-3. 1) That He would make Abraham into a great nation; 2) That He would bless Abraham (presumably with power and prosperity) and make his name great so that in turn he could generously pour that blessing out on others. 3) That He protect Abraham—blessing those who bless him and cursing those who don't; 4) That all families of the earth shall be blessed through Abraham. Israel would be a blessing to all the families or nations in the OT *because* it was only through Israel that the covenants and the law, the worship and the promises came—they were the one light of the world in the OT (**Romans 9:4-5**). But ultimately through Israel came Christ who "...ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (**Revelation 5:9**), thus fulfilling this promise that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham.⁷

2. The condition and curse of the covenant (Genesis 15)

At this point Abraham and Sarah had no children, so it this promise that a great nation would come from them was exceedingly perplexing. Abrams suggests that perhaps the heir of his house would be Eliezer one of his servants. God tells him no. v.4 "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness." Abraham met the **condition** of the Covenant of Grace: he believed the Lord, and upon believing, the Lord imputed to Him the righteousness of the Redeemer. This is a monumental event. Paul's whole

⁷ "To the close reader of these stories, the education of Abram about the nature of the Deity whom he has fallen in with becomes apparent. This is no family deity or local god. Common belief would have held that a deity's jurisdiction would end at the borders of the land where he worshiped, and such a misconception is on display in the accounts of Abram's life. Abram seems to fear Pharaoh despite God's promises to protect him, but he learns that God is sovereign even in the land of the Egyptian gods. The question is not who will protect Abram from Pharaoh, but who will protect Pharaoh from the Lord. Pharaoh's desperate situation leaves him in a panic. "What is this you have done to me?" he cries, as if he is the one in the weaker position (12:18). The entire episode shows the reader that Abram's God is not a local family deity but a global superpower whose sovereignty extends across geopolitical boundaries." Covenant Theology, pg. 137

argument in **Romans 4** hangs on this one sentence. The blessing of the Covenant of Grace came to Abraham—namely the forgiveness of his sins, and the imputation of righteousness—when Abraham believed.

But God is even more gracious. He initiates the covenant cutting ceremony with Abraham so that he would be assured that God will not break His word. God has him bring all these animals in **v.9** and has him cut them in half. These cuttings and this blood illustrates the fate of either party if they break the covenant. Only Abraham doesn't walk through pieces, God overwhelms him and he loses consciousness (**v.12**), and the Lord Himself passes through the pieces mystically through these images of the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch (**v.17**). All this to signify the unconditional nature of the Covenant of Grace. Just as God freely elected Abraham out of Babylon though he was an idolator, so the Lord alone bears the **curse** of the Covenant of Grace. We'll see this in a moment.

In passing, let me just say that in between all these covenantal markers, God gives Abraham confirmation after confirmation that He bound Himself by oath to this man. Two quick examples: First, in **Gen. 12:10-20**, though Abraham feared Pharaoh in Egypt more than God thereby telling Pharaoh that Sarai was his sister, it was still the Lord who intervened and afflicted Pharaoh on Abraham's behalf. Second, in **Genesis 14:8-16**, though Abraham was a far inferior force against the emperor of Elam and all the kings who served under him and all their armies, God caused Abraham and his 318 men who were servants in his household to defeat them in battle thus enabling the rescue of Lot.⁸

3. The parties and seal of the covenant (Genesis 17)

God again reveals more of His gracious covenant. **First** by including Abraham's own children as part of the heirs of this covenant. Look at **v. 7** "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and

⁸ For more of these confirmations, see Edwards, pg. 543-544

to your offspring after you.” So the **parties** of the Covenant of Grace in this epoch of Redemptive History are very clearly the believing Abraham and his not-yet-believing children. We’ll come back to this in a future weeks, but it’s vital to see that this covenant is *not* the national covenant that God made with the nation of Israel (cf. **Jeremiah 31:31-32**). This covenant is the Covenant of Grace, a covenant that **Galatians 3:17** says has not been annulled. Paul says in **Galatians 3:17** “...the law [meaning, the national covenant God made with Israel], which came 430 years afterward [meaning, after the Abrahamic Covenant], does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.” Paul is saying the Abrahamic Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant are not identical covenants. So no one can say today: ‘...our children are not included in the Covenant of Grace because *that* was an Israel thing, that was part of the law.’ No it wasn’t. This inclusion of our children as one of the parties of the Covenant of Grace preceded the law by 430 years. And the law, Paul says, did not annul or invalidate this Covenant. Like I said, we’ll see more of this in future weeks, the point is here, that it is undisputedly clear that infants were **parties** of the Covenant of Grace in the OT. All of Abraham’s children.

And this is demonstrated by the sign that is given to the male children. Look at **v.9-11** And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: 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.” Now Paul unpacks circumcision a bit in **Romans 4:11** calling this sacrament a sign, seal of righteousness. It served as a visible pledge whether to adults or infants that God would invincibly uphold His covenant faithfulness and grant righteousness to all who believe.

4. A lively illustration of the covenant (Genesis 22)

In **Genesis 21** — Isaac the true son of Abraham, the one through whom the covenant promises would come was finally born. But now, God asks something unthinkable of Abraham. Look at **Genesis 22:1-2** “After these things God *tested* Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “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.” Now this test was not necessary because God didn’t know what would happen. This test was a gracious gift for Abraham’s sake so that he would really know whether or not he has owned God for himself *through a living faith* in this covenant. Does he love God more than his own son? And the answer is yes. And he was still able to believe that God would somehow make good on his covenant promises. **Hebrews 11:19** says “He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead.” So Abraham ascended the mountain, built the altar, gathered the wood, raised the knife to slay Isaac, and at the last moment (which is always how God delivers) the Lord speaks from Heaven—**v.22** “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, *seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.*” Why was Isaac spared? God did not choose Abraham out of the city of man because he was sinless. How could God overlook the sins of Abraham? He certainly wasn’t going to overlook the sins of the serpent’s offspring. Well God provided a ram as a substitute. But it wasn’t the ram’s blood that would cleanse Abraham and His family. 2,000 years later, in those very same mountains, God sent His own first born Son to be offered up as a sacrifice. But there was no voice from Heaven that spared Him. It was this Son who cleansed not only Abraham’s sin but everyone who trusts in Him. And just as God said to Abraham “Now I know that you love me, because you did not withhold your only son from me”⁹ so we can say to God with absolute certainty “Now, we know that You love us,

⁹ Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*, (New York, NY.: Penguin Books, 2016), pg. 18

For You did not withhold Your Son, Your only Son, whom You love from us.”¹⁰ That is the covenant God initiated and illustrated with Abraham. That He would be Abraham’s God and our God, thought it would cost Him His only Son.

III. The Two Dimensions of Abrahamic Covenant

Physical & Spiritual Israel

Before we close this morning we need to understand that there are two dimensions of the Abrahamic Covenant: the physical and the spiritual. There is a **physical Israel** after the flesh, and a **spiritual Israel** after the promise. The first is a type, and the second the antitype.

What the NT says about Abraham

So let’s first consider what the NT says about Abraham. First let’s turn to **John 8:37-39**. Jesus says “I know that you are offspring of Abraham [**physically**]; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.” They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham's children [**spiritually**], you would be doing the works Abraham did,”

Secondly, let’s turn to **Romans 9:6-8** “But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel [**physically**] belong to Israel [**spiritually**], and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring...[v.8] This means that it is not the children of the flesh [**physically**] who are the children of God, but the children of the promise [**spiritually**] are counted as offspring.”

¹⁰ *Ibid*

A double fulfillment

Now we have to understand the OT in light of these NT passages. We can see, now that we have the completed Word of God that God's promises to Abraham had a double fulfillment—one to natural Israel (type) and one to spiritual Israel (antitype). Paul Williamson says it like this: "...the N.T. takes the physical promises made to Abraham and makes them subservient to the 'spiritual promise' - the promise of a special relationship with God which will overflow into blessing for all nations. However, the physical dimensions of the promise are not only incorporated within the spiritual, but also reinterpreted in terms of something more magnificent and truly eternal."¹¹

The Covenant God made with Abraham	Physical Fulfillment (type)	Spiritual Fulfillment (antitype)
The Promise of Innumerable Posterity - Genesis 12:2	Deuteronomy 1:10-11	Revelation 7:9-10
The Promise of Global Prosperity - Genesis 22:17	1 Kings 4:20-21	Gal 3:14 Revelation 22:22-26
The Promise of National Territory - Genesis 15:18-21	Joshua 21:43-45	Romans 4:13 Hebrews 11:8-10

"...just as the promise of the multitudinous seed encompasses both Abraham's physical descendants (the nation of Israel) and his spiritual descendants (all God's elect), so the promise of physical territory encompasses both the historical inheritance (the land of Canaan) and the eschatological inheritance (the new Earth)."¹² What this is meant to help us see is that there are not two people of God. Physical Israel were children of Abraham. Believers today are also

¹¹Paul Williamson, pg.14-15, in his essay: *Abraham, Israel, and the Church* <http://beginningwithmoses.org/bt-articles/183/abraham-israel-and-the-church>

¹² *Ibid* pg.14

children of Abraham. The promises God made to Abraham encompasses both, because ultimately every believing Jew and every believing Gentile is true Israel. **Galatians 3:28-29** “There 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.”