

Origin Stories: Father Abraham, Genesis 12-18, 4/28/24

One of the phrases that parents of elementary age children frequently hear is, “You promised!” “You promised I could have extra time on screens if I finished my homework.” “You promised you would take me to Rita’s if I finished my vegetables.” “You promised we would go to Disney World if I got all A’s this year.” “You promised!” And little kids might not remember to brush their teeth even though you say it every night, but they never forget a promise, even when you wish they did- when you made them a promise out of exhaustion or desperation that every parent is well acquainted with.

But as we get older, it’s easy to get jaded by empty promises. It seems today that lots of promises are made but few are kept. Certainly we could all think of a product that we bought that made a promise- regrow hair, lose weight, build muscle, reverse the aging process- that didn’t deliver what it promised? Any empty promises made by politicians? According to the internet, which you can always trust, our last three presidents kept less than half their promises they made to Americans during their campaign. For some of us the empty promises are much closer to home. Maybe growing up your mom or dad made promises that didn’t keep, or the job you were promised by corporate was eliminated or sent overseas. Or maybe you had your heart broken by someone who promised to be faithful to you for better or worse.

And sometimes this flows into how we think about God. What kind of God is the God of the Bible? Does He make promises? And if so, can we trust that He will keep His promises? What if I give Him my trust, do things His way and then He lets me down? These are the kinds of questions that we are seeking to answer today as we jump back into our series through Genesis called Origin Stories. What we are going to see today from **Genesis 12-18 God is a promise maker and promise keeper**. From the story of Abraham and Sarah, will learn why we can trust God’s promises for our lives and our future, even when the chips are down, the odds are stacked against us.

Let me remind you that the **first 11 chapters of Genesis tell the Origin story of primal history-** creation and the fallout of sin, and the question remains, “What will God do to deal with this problem- the beginning of the answer is Genesis 12, the hinge to the rest of Genesis which will narrow its focus on one family for the next 39 chapters, the family of Abraham.

The Amazing Promise

Genesis 12:1-3 *The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.”² “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.*

³*I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”* Genesis 12:1-3 establishes the trajectory of Biblical history in what is commonly called the **Abrahamic Covenant**, in which God makes a series of three promises to Abraham:

People- v.2 *"I will make you into a great nation."*

13: ¹⁶ *I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.*

17: ⁵ *No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.*

⁷ *I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.* Do you know anyone who says they are a Canaanite, a Philistine, a Hittite today? These ancient nations that were once powerful empires are long gone. But guess who isn't? The children of Abraham. If you grew up in evangelical churches in the 80-90s like me, you know Father Abraham...what did he have according to the song- many sons...Three groups of people trace their lineage to Father Abraham today- two ethnic groups- the Arab people (through Ishmael) and the Jewish people (through the son of promise which we will see in the coming weeks- Isaac) and spiritually, through the seed of promise- the Jewish Messiah Jesus from Abraham's line- Christians. That's half the world's population! How is it possible that all these other ancient people and kingdoms and empires are gone but half the world claims they are descendants of Abraham? Because **God is a promise maker and promise keeper.**

Blessing: 12:2 *and I will bless you;* and goes on to say

I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." And indeed God did bless Abraham materially- 13: ² *Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.* But not only materially, everywhere that Abraham went blessing flowed to the people who treated him well and showed him hospitality and just like God promised- cursing flowed to people who treated him poorly. This promise was not just to Abraham but carried through the Jewish line, and history could be told through the lens of how God kept his promise of what happens to those who bless and curse the Jewish people. But it wasn't just that God blessed Abraham and the Jewish people, it's that he used them to bless the world. **God used the Jewish people to give us knowledge and revelation of God, write the Bible, and ultimately bring about the seed of promise, the Messiah, Jesus Christ.**

Why? Because **God is a promise maker and a promise keeper**

Land: 12: ⁶ *Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land."*

13: ¹⁴ *The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, “Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. ¹⁵ All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.*

What is this land that God promised to Abraham’s descendants? The land of Canaan, you know the land with giants and heavily fortified walls and towers? And yet, somehow Joshua led a bunch of poorly armed, and undersized former slaves to conquer the land and establish a Jewish kingdom for centuries. Understand that even when the Jewish people were exiled from the land for the last time in 70AD by the Romans and scattered throughout the world for 1900 years, that God’s promise still remained true...he said I will give you this land forever! And as impossible as it looked for the Jewish people to return to promised land, especially as the Jewish people were facing their extermination during the Third Reich, in 1948 the impossible happened, the Jewish people returned to the land, and the state of Israel was reborn. Never before in history has something like this happened nor will it ever happen again. I’m convinced God did this, setting the stage for the events of Revelation to take place, and one day King Jesus will return- and reign over the whole world from the promised land forever. Why? Because **God is a promise maker and a promise keeper**

The Unlikely Recipient

One of the questions we should ask ourselves is “Why Abraham?”, what was it about him that made God choose this one man out of all the people on earth? Was he really talented? Not particularly, he was likely a common shepherd. Maybe it was because he was young and had a tremendous entrepreneurial spirit. Nope- he lived at home with his parents until he was 75...and you think your kids won’t leave. Oh, it must have been because he had good theology and never doubted. Actually, this might be the biggest surprise of all- Joshua 24 tells us that Abraham and his family, and in fact the city of Ur where he was from worshipped idols. Abraham wasn’t a monotheist when God called Him- he was more than likely sacrificing to the moon god of the Chaldeans. And even after God called him and God made these promises to him, we find twice in chapter 12 and again in chapter 20 out of fear while traveling through foreign lands Abraham tries to pass off his wife Sarah as his sister, so that jealous men do not kill him or take her as their own wife, putting her in harm’s way, to save his own skin. Abraham at times doubts God’s promise of a son, he and Sarah both laugh at the idea, considering how old he and Sarah were, you can understand why- in our day they would have been senior citizens with AARP cards playing pickleball by this point, not parenting! He and Sarah in Genesis 16 get impatient and even trying to take matters into their own hands to solve their childlessness, Sarah tells Abraham to have a son through her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar, which creates all kinds of family dysfunctions. These are not small indiscretions friends. Abraham is far from perfect, Abraham was a sinner, doubter and fellow struggler, the Bible makes no attempt to hide his flaws. So again I ask, “Why Abraham?”

Deuteronomy 7 ⁷ *The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸ But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath.*

The answer is unexplainable in human terms- it's sheer grace. God loves because he loves, he chooses because he chooses. And particularly, God glories in choosing and using the unlikely to display his glory and bless others. Not just Abraham, Paul **1 Corinthians 1: ²⁶ Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.**

²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. You may be here and feel unworthy, unlikely, maybe your past is filled with worship of self, or chasing everything but God. Maybe you feel like your time is past. But God calls you, and wants to bless you, and He offers a relationship with you through the promised seed of Abraham- Jesus Christ, that last forever. And he does this out of sheer grace and love- not because of any special quality in you. I am proof of that. It's available to you as a gift- the Bible says that anyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved.

You say, "We that seems too good to be true. How can I trust Him? How can I really know, and what happens if I mess up too much, won't he reject me?"

The Unconditional Covenant

In Genesis 15 God confirms his promise with a covenant. What is a covenant? Modern people have all but done away with covenants, the only traces of covenants today are observed in a marriage ceremony. Bride walks down the aisle with her father, meets the groom, the make promises better or worse to each other, confirm it with a ring and then the walk hand in hand down the aisle. Standard procedure. Well during the time of Abraham we know from archaeology about a standard procedure for a covenant. When two parties made a promise to each other, they "cut" a covenant. Why "cut"? Because what they would do to ratify the promise is cut animals in half and then they would walk together between the bloody pieces arm-in-arm. And the idea was that if either of us break this promise to each other, may we be cut in half just like these animals... this was the standard procedure. Any of you opting for that at your wedding?

And this is exactly what is happening in Genesis 15, God is cutting a covenant with Abraham to confirm the promises he made to him and his descendants of people, blessing and land. He tells Abraham to cut the animals in half which he does. Everything looks standard, except one significant difference.

¹² As the sun was setting, Abraham fell into a deep sleep...and while Abraham is asleep, ¹⁷ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. (This was the symbol of God's presence, remember Moses in the wilderness they followed the presence of the Lord seen by a smoky cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night?) **¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham.**

This is the only covenant recorded in history where only one covenant party walks the aisle. Do you see what God was up to? He's saying, "Abraham, this covenant is one-sided and

unconditional. It isn't based on your faithfulness, perfection, nor your ability to keep it, it's based on mine. And if and when, Abraham, you and your descendants fail to keep your side of the covenant, I will pay the price with my own blood." And God not only kept his covenant with Abraham, God cut a **new covenant**- a one-sided, unconditional covenant with us!

This covenant in Genesis 15 is one of the clearest pictures of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. While we were asleep, dead in our sins, Jesus walked down the aisle of death to the cross....and on that day he made a new covenant with humanity and to prove it Jesus shed his blood. Was God's Son dying because he hadn't kept up his side of the promise? No, he was dying because humanity failed to keep our promise, we've been unfaithful and rebellious against God. Like the hymn says, *He took my sins and his sorrow, and he made them his very own! He bore my burden to Calvary, and suffered and died alone! How Marvelous, how wonderful, and my song shall ever be.*

So, what kind of God is the God of the Bible? He is a **promise maker and a promise keeper**. He made promises to Abraham and his descendants, and if you are a Christian, you are included in those promises he made to Abraham. **2 Corinthians 1:20 For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.** If God did not spare his own Son for us, what makes you think he's going to break promises to you? What promises has God made to us?

Philippians 4:19 And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus

Isaiah 41:10 So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you", declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

John 1:12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Romans 8:39 No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Do you know the promises of God? Read them in God's Word, mark them as pillars in your life. But here's what's most important, not just knowing them. Trusting them! I have a friend that was going through tremendous life upheaval and uncertainty, and he was trying to control the outcomes, and getting frustrated, anxious, and he was listening to a sermon and heard the preacher quote John Calvin who summarized God's call and promises to Abraham here: **"Just close your eyes and take my hand."** And so any time he would start getting anxious, doubt God's good purposes, start to worry if God wasn't in control, he would close his eyes, and put out his hand. Are you trusting his promises? Regardless how unclear the path ahead may look, how many times you've messed up? How long you are waiting...Or how impossible the circumstances are....take his hand.

You say OK, Nate but what does this trust look like, we can't just "let go and let God", don't we have to do something in response? Don't we have a part to play? Yes we do! And next week we are going to see how the **faith of Abraham** becomes the model of what it looks like to live by faith for us today.