

Promises We Can Count On

Session 3

June 16, 2024

God's Promise of Blessing

The Point: God promised to bless all people through His chosen people.

Session Passages: Genesis 12:1-3; 15:5-7; 17:7-11

Genesis 12:1-3

Connection to the Point. God's covenant with Abram brings blessing to all of us through Jesus Christ.

Setting of Genesis 12. Abram was a descendant of Noah's son Shem (Gen. 11:10-26). Abram's father, Terah, and his family left Ur of the Chaldeans (in modern-day Iraq) headed for Canaan (v. 31). They stopped for an unspecified period in Haran (in modern-day Turkey). This area was associated with paganism, and Haran was a center of worship of the moon god Sin.

LORD (v. 1). This term is a substitution for the Hebrew *YHWH*, which is known as the Tetragrammaton (meaning four letters). Since ancient Hebrew does not have vowels, the exact pronunciation of the four consonants is unknown. It was thought by the Jews that God's name was too holy to pronounce, so the term *Adonai* ("Lord") was substituted in YHWH's place. Hebrew scholars believe the most likely pronunciation of YHWH is *Yahweh*. The name emphasizes God's eternality and self-sufficiency. It is God's covenant name He revealed to Moses at the burning bush and by which He made His covenant with the Israelites (Ex. 3:13-15).

Said to Abram (v. 1). In Haran, a land of pagan worship, the one true God supernaturally visited Abram. All that is indicated is that God spoke to Abram. Scripture does not identify if this was in a dream, a waking vision, or a literal visit.

Go from your land, your relatives, and your father's house (v. 1). God's call to Abram began with a demand for faith. God called Abram to leave behind everyone and everything he knew and journey to a place he did not know. God called Abram to leave his past, present, and future in the hands of God.

To the land that I will show you (v. 1). The phrase "I will" appears six times in verses 1-3 in relation to the covenant God was making with Abram. In the first blessing of the Abrahamic covenant, God provided Abram with direction. The Lord called Abram to leave his homeland, but for a purpose. Abram's journey would not be the aimless wandering of a nomad who somehow ended up in the land of promise but rather a journey God directed Himself.

I will make you into a great nation (v. 2). The second blessing of the covenant was a promise for Abram's future legacy. This promise is an essential feature of God's covenant with Abram. Abram would not become a great nation apart from God's intervention. This is especially significant in light of the fact that Abram's wife, Sarai, was unable to conceive a child (11:30).

I will bless you (v. 2). This is the third blessing. "Blessing" in the book of Genesis usually comes in the forms of descendants and material wealth. Material wealth came in the forms of precious metals, livestock, and numerous servants.¹ God would provide Abram with great wealth in the form of "flocks and herds, male and female donkeys, male and female slaves, and camels" (12:16; see 13:5-7).

I will make your name great (v. 2). The fourth blessing regards Abram's name. In Scripture, a name does not simply mean what someone is called. God would change Abram's name ("father is exalted") to Abraham ("father of a multitude) when He ratified the Abrahamic covenant (17:5). God promised, "I will make you extremely fruitful and will make nations and kings come from you" (v. 6). Abram's name would also be great due to his character as a man of faith (chap. 22), so much so that both the apostle Paul and James wrote of Abraham's faith (Rom. 4; Gal. 3; Jas. 2:21-23). The Jews of Jesus's day also identified themselves as "descendants of Abraham" (John 8:33) and called him "our father Abraham" (v. 53).

You will be a blessing (v. 2). In addition to being the father of the Jewish faith, Abraham is considered the father of the Jewish nation. It was through Abraham's line that the Messiah was born (Matt. 1:1-17). For Christians, he is the father of all who believe (Rom. 4:9-25).

I will bless . . . I will curse (v. 3). The fifth and sixth of the "I will" covenant promises are that God would honor those who honored Abram and his descendants and conversely curse those who did not honor them. How God would bless and curse is not specified. We do see this manifested during Abram's journey (12:10-20; 20:1-18). It is particularly evident in God's dealing with Pharaoh to bring Israel out of Egypt under Moses (Ex. 5–12). The covenant blessing/cursing also manifested during the exodus of the Israelites as God dealt with other nations along Israel's journey to the promised land.

All the peoples on earth (v. 3). Abram would not live to see the fulfillment of this promise. The ultimate blessing of the Abrahamic covenant was Abram's offspring Jesus the Messiah who offers us all a covenant relationship with God. All who repent and place their faith in Jesus Christ become children of the one true God (John 1:12-13; 3:16-18).

Genesis 15:5-7

Connection to the Point. Abram trusted and took God at His word that he would have descendants and be the conduit of God's blessing to all people.

Setting of Genesis 15. Genesis 14 describes how Lot, who settled in the plains of Sodom and Gomorrah, was taken captive by a coalition of kings. Abram defeated the kings and rescued Lot. After the victory, the king of Sodom went out to meet with Abram, as did Melchizedek the king of Salem and the priest of the God Most High. Melchizedek declared Abram to be blessed by God Most High, and blessed God for giving Abram the victory over the kings. Abram also refused any reward from the king of Sodom for his actions in defeating the coalition of kings. Genesis 15:1 notes, "After these events, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision."

He took him outside (v. 5). Abram was in his tent when he had this vision. In the Bible, a vision is a unique awareness of God's presence. It is different from a dream. A dream usually occurs when a person is asleep. Abram was not sleeping at this time (see v. 12). The purpose of visions is usually to provide direction concerning something to do, say, or where to go. This vision was meant to encourage Abram and served to renew God's covenant with him. God assured Abram of His divine protection, and He promised Abram that "your reward will be very great" (v. 1). In this case, the promise of reward refers to God's promise of offspring and the possession of the land of Canaan.² Abram's response was to remind God that he had no children and Eliezer of Damascus, his servant, was his heir (vv. 2-3). God responded by telling Abram, "This one will not be your heir; instead, one who comes from your own body will be your heir" (v. 4).

Look at the sky and count the stars, if you are able to count them (v. 5). The context suggests this event was part of Abram's visionary experience. It was still daytime (v. 12), so stars would not have been visible except in his vision. This vision calls attention to God's words previously spoken to Abram concerning the promise of the land. God had told Abram his offspring would be "like the dust of the earth" (13:16). God, who created man from the dust of the ground and formed the stars in the sky, was able to fulfill His promise to Abram to give him innumerable descendants. God would later repeat this promise to Abram (22:17) and to Abram's son Isaac (26:4). Moses would remind God of His promise after the golden calf incident when the Lord threatened to destroy the Israelites (Ex. 32:13).

Your offspring will be that numerous (v. 5). Abram fathered Ishmael with Sarai's handmaid, Hagar (chap. 16), and then later Isaac with his wife, Sarai (21:1-5). Abram also had six other sons by another wife, Keturah (25:1-2). However, only Isaac was the son of God's covenant with Abram (17:19-21). The nation of Israel would be born through the lineage of Isaac. Abram would not see all of God's promises fulfilled in his lifetime. Through his many sons, he would father many nations and innumerable descendants. Furthermore, the apostle Paul wrote that God's promise to Abram has a greater

fulfillment through Christ (Gal 3:7-9,14-18). All who repent and place their faith in Christ become part of the promised countless offspring of Abram (v. 29).

Abram believed the LORD (v. 6). This is one of the most significant verses in all Scripture and is a significant aspect of the gospel message. This is the first time the Hebrew verb for *believe* (*aman*) is used in Scripture. It has the meaning of to trust, having confidence in someone or something. Abram confidently trusted God to do what He said He would do. Despite the fact that at this time he did not have a son to be his heir, Abram accepted by faith what he could not see or understand. Abram had already exhibited faith or belief in God while in Ur (12:4, see 15:7). Abram's belief as recorded in 15:6 reaffirmed his initial act of trust in God.

Credited it to him as righteousness (v. 6). The Hebrew term for *righteousness* (*tsedaqah*) means rightness (abstractly), rectitude (subjectively), justice (objectively), virtue (morally), and prosperity (figuratively). The word *credited* (*chashab*) is an accounting term meaning to consider, credit, account, or impute. In reference to Abram's account before God, he was a sinner as we all are. But because of his faith, God credited righteousness (which he could never have earned) to his account. Abram could never have been perfectly righteous, but God declared him to be rightly related to Him because of Abram's faith. God demonstrated His grace and mercy in His dealings with Abram.

This verse is foundational for understanding the doctrine of justification by faith. We are all sinners, and because of our sins, we all stand condemned before God. Our only hope of salvation is through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Salvation has always been by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). At the moment a person places his or her faith in Jesus, God removes that person's sins from his or her account (sins that were paid for by Jesus's atoning work on the cross) and credits to that same account Christ's perfect righteousness (Rom. 3:21-26; 4:3,23-25; 5:17; 2 Cor. 5:21). Through justification, the believer is forever declared to be righteous before God in Christ and thereby permanently reconciled to God (Rom. 5:6-11). Paul compared Christian faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus to that of Abram (4:1-25).

I am the LORD (v. 7). Yahweh (*LORD*), the eternal, all-seeing, all-knowing, and all-powerful God, had made His covenant with Abram and therefore could be trusted to fulfill His covenantal promises. In this verse, God reaffirmed the covenant He had made with Abram when He called Abram to leave his homeland. Just as God had brought Abram to Canaan, He would fulfill His promise of giving Abram descendants who would possess the promised land. Genesis 15:6-7 are foundational for God's ratifying of the Abrahamic covenant in verses 9-21.

Genesis 17:7-11

Connection to the Point. God chose Abraham and his descendants to live distinct lives in obedience to Him. It would be through their distinct relationship with God that we would all receive blessing.

Setting for Genesis 17. After God had given Abram a vision and promised to give him innumerable descendants (chap. 15), Abram and his wife, Sarai, had sought to give Abram a descendant through Sarai's maidservant, Hagar. This led to the birth of Abram's son Ishmael (chap. 16). Now, when Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to him (17:1). Identifying Himself as God Almighty (*El Shaddai*; this name emphasizes God's divine power and majesty), He called upon Abram to live blamelessly in His presence. God then reaffirmed that He would give Abram many descendants; Abram would be the father of many nations (vv. 2-4). To further emphasize this point, God changed his name from Abram ("exalted father") to Abraham ("father of a multitude").

Confirm (v. 7). The Hebrew term (*qum*) means to set up, establish, or ratify. God was not making a new covenant, but rather reaffirming the covenant He had already made with Abraham (12:1-3; 15:1-19), adding the emphasis on obedience (17:1-2).

My covenant (v. 7). This phrase indicates that it was God who initiated the covenant with Abraham. God now confirmed the covenant as well.³

Permanent covenant (v. 7). The covenant is an everlasting covenant between God and Abraham and Abraham's future offspring (descendants).

To be your God and the God of your offspring after you (v. 7). *God* translates the Hebrew term *Elohim*. "It is a revelation of the infinite nature of God . . . God is the absolute, infinite Lord over creation and history."⁴ The covenant God was confirming with Abraham is relational. God is a personal God who would be in relationship with both Abraham and the following generations of his descendants. This relational aspect of the Abrahamic covenant lays the foundation for Christians to be Abraham's spiritual offspring through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, fulfilling God's divine promise (John 1:12-13; Rom. 4:16,23-25).

I will give (v. 8). God is the Creator and therefore the Owner of all that exists. In this instance, it is the land of Canaan that He was giving to Abraham.

The land where you are residing (v. 8). God had called Abraham to leave his homeland and go to the land to which God would lead him (12:1-5a). Once in Canaan, Abraham often moved from place to place (vv. 5b-9). He went down to Egypt during a famine (vv. 10-20). He traveled throughout the land of Canaan on God's command (13:14-18).

All the land of Canaan—as a permanent possession (v. 8). God promised to give to Abraham and his descendants the land "from the Brook of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates River" (15:18). Genesis 17:8 echoes that statement, this time in the context of the Lord being the personal God of Abraham and his descendants. The physical land of Canaan is the immediate object of God's promise. The book of Hebrews reveals the greater fulfillment of this promise. There Abraham is described as a foreigner or stranger in the land of promise, looking for a more excellent place—meaning heaven (Heb. 11:8-16). This promise was fulfilled through Christ, and all who trust in Jesus are Abraham's children according to the promise (Gal. 3:14-18,27-29).

Keep my covenant (v. 9). To *keep* (*shamar*) means to watch, observe, or guard. Verses 9-14 introduce the second covenant obligation to which Abraham and all his future descendants are to adhere. (The first covenant obligation was God's general command of obedience [v. 1]).

This is my covenant . . . every one . . . must be circumcised (v. 10). So closely is this stipulation associated with the covenant that God calls the act of circumcision "*my covenant*." Abraham and his offspring were to demonstrate their obedience to God's covenant by all the males being circumcised. This applied to all Abraham's descendants in every generation. God prescribed circumcision for all males when they were eight days old (v. 12). The practice included all males who were part of Abraham's household and those of his descendants, whether slave or free (vv. 12-13). Failure to be circumcised was breaking the covenant and those not circumcised were cut off from God's covenant people (v. 14).

As a sign of the covenant between me and you (v. 11). As the rainbow was the *sign* or symbol of the Noachic covenant (9:13-17), circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant—God's relationship with Abraham and his descendants. Circumcision was added to and symbolized a commitment to the first dimension of God's covenant relationship with Abraham in which God had commanded him, "Live in my presence and be blameless" (17:1). Later, Moses called the Israelites to circumcise their hearts, meaning repent and live holy lives before God (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; see Jer. 4:4; 9:26).

1. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, vol. 1B, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 113.

2. *Ibid.*, 163.

3. See also Stephen J. Wellum, "Covenants," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, rev. (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 355–360.

4. Brad Creed, "Names of God," in *ibid.*, 1144.