

# GENESIS 15-22

## ABRAHAM & GOD'S COVENANT PROMISES

In three major chapters (Genesis 15, 17, 22) we see the formalization, conditions, and proof of the covenant between God and Abraham (and his descendants to come). As we saw in Genesis 12, the Abrahamic covenant centers around three promises from God: 1) land promise, 2) offspring promise, 3) blessing promise—that will then extend from Israel to coming generations. All of these are tightly intertwined in these chapters. In Genesis 15, Abraham begins with the big question: how will I have many offspring if I don't even have one offspring, and Sarah and I can't conceive? (See Genesis 15:1-3). God answers him by saying that the number of stars in the sky will be similar to how many offspring he will have. As a result, Abraham believes in God and it is counted to him as righteousness. This tells us how Abraham was saved: just like us, by believing in God and the means he has provided for our salvation (the same point that Paul makes in Romans 4). The formalization, or covenant initiation ceremony comes next. God has Abraham split animals in half. This was a normal act to initiate a covenant—hence the term cut a covenant. The two parties would then walk between the split halves of the animals in order to signify let such a thing be done to me if I break my end of the covenant. As Abraham is asleep, God (as represented in a smoking fire pot and flaming torch) passes through the split halves, signifying his commitment to the covenant. What was he affirming? His wholehearted commitment to 1) give his people a land, 2) multiply their offspring greatly, and 3) bless them in order that they would serve as an instrument of blessing to the nations.

The covenant is further explained in Genesis 17. God changes now calls Abram Abraham, and reaffirms that he will be the father of a multitude of nations (17:4), will be exceedingly fruitful (17:6), and will have a land from God as an everlasting possession (17:8). As a confirmation, or rite of the covenant, God institutes circumcision with Abraham and his coming descendants. This is meant to be a confirmation of those in the covenant. We don't have this as a rite in the new covenant today, for we have ultimately been circumcised in our heart through a spiritual work (Deuteronomy 30:6, Jeremiah 31:31-34). Chapter 17 ends with God promising the birth of Isaac—the promised son, the first step in fulfilling these promises to Abraham.

One of the early challenges to the Abrahamic covenant—and particularly the promise to Abraham that many offspring will come from him—comes in Genesis 22. There, God commands Abraham to go and offer Isaac—this promised son—as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah. At the last moment, God provides a sacrifice such that Isaac is spared. It may seem like a weird, if not cruel command from God. What is the purpose? God is ensuring that Abraham's faith stands in God to keep the covenant and keep his promises. Abraham learns the lesson of verse 14—that God will provide, both the substitute for sins, and the means to keep his promises. After this, God reaffirms his promises of the covenant to Abraham. "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice" (Genesis 22:17-18).

It is strong language from God, showing just how committed he is to bring his promises of the covenant (land, offspring, and blessing) to pass. And yet it also helps us realize: these promises to Abraham are not the ultimate thing. Verse 18 looks forward to one offspring (singular) who will possess the gate of his enemies and bless all the nations of the earth. Who is the one who will defeat all of his enemies and bless the nations? That is Jesus.

What is crucial for us to understand as we spend time in Genesis and re-hash these promises is this: all of the promises of God we find in Genesis are ultimately realized in Jesus. That is what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:20. Jesus is our true inheritance, our promised land, our entrance into rest as he satisfies us spiritually and gives us eternal inheritance in the new heaven and new earth. Jesus is the fulfillment of the offspring promise—the promised offspring who ushers us in as spiritual offspring of Abraham by faith, as was true of him (Galatians 3, Romans 4). Jesus fulfills the blessing promise as he blesses the nations by bringing them the truth of salvation. Look for God's faithfulness to his promises in Genesis, for it is there. But also allow your eyes to be lifted higher, to see how they are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ.