

# 3: The Plan of Salvation

'Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad' – **Jon Garvey** explains why

**T**he core message of the whole Bible is summed up in Genesis 12.1-3:

*The Lord had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.*

*'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. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'*

Abram was wicked, but 'believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteous

The Covenant with Noah leaves sin and death hanging over Adam's descendants. This is shown *after* the Flood by Noah's drunkenness<sup>1</sup>, the curse on Ham<sup>2</sup>, and the Tower of Babel<sup>3</sup>.

Then God makes a promise to one man from the culture of Babel, later restated as a Covenant<sup>4</sup> and guaranteed by divine oath<sup>5</sup>. This is the manifesto for God's plan of salvation, the subject of the rest of the Bible. **All other promises in Scripture depend on it, and because of it all of them are 'Yes' in Christ<sup>6</sup>.** It is 'the gospel announced in advance'<sup>7</sup>, truly the core message of the Bible.

## God who justifies the wicked

**W**hy did God choose Abram, of all people, as mediator? The rabbis recounted his righteousness when he lived in Ur, and Christians assume he must have done something to deserve inheriting the world. Genesis keeps silent, but the New Testament debunks these speculations.

Describing Abraham, Paul says, 'To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.'<sup>8</sup> So Abram was wicked, but 'believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.'<sup>9</sup> Yet faith was the *response* Abram made to the promise, so it cannot have been the *reason* for it. Paul again: 'Therefore the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace... God gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.'<sup>10</sup>

The Covenant God 'cut' (the derivation of Hebrew *berith*, covenant) in ch15 follows contemporary custom. Usually both parties divided a sacrifice and walked between the



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**Abraham – he's only your father if you share his faith**

pieces. But God puts Abram into a deep sleep – he alone, as 'a smoking brazier with a flaming torch', passes between the pieces. This is God's Covenant, and Abram cannot contribute to it, even though he will live in obedience to it. Like Noah, Abram was called for reasons known only to God to receive an undeserved promise.

## The third Covenant – with Abraham

**W**hat of the promise itself? 'I will make you a great nation', says God, 'and I will bless you'<sup>11</sup>. And 'Go to the land I will show you.'<sup>12</sup> Abram is unconditionally promised a *blessing*, a *people* and a *land* – echoing both previous Covenants.

The land is Canaan, defined geographically and by its tribes<sup>13</sup>. But Abram's blessing will spread to all peoples on earth. Far from being under the curse of Adam, God will curse those who curse Abram<sup>14</sup>. The promise is of a return to the blessing of Eden – salvation from sin and death.

But unlike the previous two, the Covenant Abram mediates is not for all mankind, but for him and his 'seed'. Abram is called *out* of Ur, the land of Babel where men try to make a name for themselves by climbing up to heaven's blessing. Abram has no permanent home – only the promise of the land – God will make his name great and bring blessing *down* to him. God will henceforth rescue people *out* of the world of sin *into* his blessing.

## The heirs of the promise

**G**od reveals an unexpected attitude to Abram's 'seed'. The Bible underlines that it does not mean 'all Abraham's descendants'. Initially, the promise passes through Isaac, not



# the covenants of God

Ishmael, the 'slave-woman's son'<sup>15</sup>, nor six other sons by Abraham's third wife Keturah. Then it favours the younger of Isaac's twins<sup>16</sup>, by God's sovereign choice, and not because Jacob was more righteous than Esau<sup>17</sup>. Yet all twelve of Jacob's sons are heirs, despite four being born to slaves.

God foretells the Egyptian captivity and the Exodus of Abraham's seed<sup>18</sup>, yet God was 'not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert'<sup>19</sup>. Later, in Elijah's time, only seven thousand in Israel were reserved by God<sup>20</sup>.

Again the New Testament explains this selectivity. 'Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel,' says Paul. 'Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children.'<sup>21</sup> He describes Elijah's seven thousand as 'a remnant chosen by grace'<sup>22</sup>, and the reason for the rejection of the rest as faithlessness<sup>23</sup>. Hebrews concurs about those Israelites who died in the desert<sup>24</sup>.

Several passages show that the true descendants of Abraham are those with his faith, not just those of his flesh<sup>25</sup>. So the heirs of the Covenant are those descendants chosen by grace and saved through faith. Even some not related by blood are counted Abraham's descendants through faith. Though not fully revealed until Peter's vision of the Gentile inclusion<sup>26</sup>, this was inherent in the promise<sup>27</sup> and in examples like Ruth, Naaman and the Ninevites in Jonah.

## The sign of circumcision

**T**he covenant sign of circumcision, in Genesis 17, appears to contradict this. Every male in Abraham's household, related or not, is to be circumcised for the promise. Ishmael is circumcised, even before Isaac's birth, though excluded from<sup>28</sup> the promise. Abraham's later children even became enemies of Israel. Even more puzzling is the New Testament teaching that Gentile believers need not<sup>29</sup> – must not<sup>30</sup> – be circumcised. Yet they are not excluded from the promise.

It must, then, be possible to be included in the Covenant – so receiving some of God's blessings – and yet not be an heir to the promise. This was true of Ishmael, Esau and those Israelites who, as Paul says, had many advantages without faith<sup>31</sup>. So all Abraham's genetic descendants were in some sense under the Covenant, but were distin-

guished as heirs of God by heart-circumcision<sup>32</sup>, not the outward sign.

## The seed of Abraham

**J**esus' generation claimed the promise because they were Abraham's seed. John said God could raise up children for Abraham from stones<sup>33</sup>. Jesus denied their legitimacy because they did not do as Abraham did. Paul showed from the Torah that not all Jews were heirs, whilst Gentile believers were.

The basis of this radical new understanding is a remarkably bold interpretation of Genesis. Through the Spirit, Paul notes the promises were made to Abraham and his *seed* – in the singular. So the Covenant promises actually apply to just *one* descendant – Jesus<sup>34</sup>.

Isaac then was not the child of the promise because of his father, but because he was the ancestor of Jesus, the true heir. He and all the members of the Covenant are only 'sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus...If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.'<sup>35</sup> In other words, inheriting the promise was *only ever* through faith in Jesus. He was perceived only dimly by the Old Testament saints, but their faith was in him nevertheless<sup>36</sup>. 'None of them received what had been promised – God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.'<sup>37</sup>

So Jesus is at the very heart of Abraham's Covenant! It applied forever, but was set in a form that hinted a future hope in Christ. For anyone actually to benefit, a more specific Covenant was needed. We will see next time how God applied Abraham's promise to a whole nation, Israel, through the Covenant he made with Moses.

1 Genesis 9.20-24

2 Genesis 9.24-28

3 Genesis 11.1-9

4 Genesis 15.8-21

5 Genesis 22.16-18

6 2 Corinthians 1.20

7 Galatians 3.8

8 Romans 4.5

9 Genesis 15.6

10 Romans 4.16-17

11 Genesis 12.2

12 Genesis 12.1

13 Genesis 15.18

14 Genesis 12.2-3

15 Genesis 17.19-21

16 Genesis 27.1-40; 28.13-15;

17 Romans 9.10-16

18 Genesis 13-14

19 1 Corinthians 10.5

20 1 Kings 19.18

21 Romans 9.6

22 Romans 11.5

23 Romans 9.32

24 Hebrews 3.16-4.2

25 Romans 4.11-17; 9.1-8;

Galatians 3.6-9; 3.29; 4.21-31

26 Acts 10

27 Genesis 12.3, Galatians 3.8-9

28 Genesis 17.20-21

29 Acts 15.28-29

30 Galatians 5.2

31 Romans 3.1-2

32 Deuteronomy 10.16;

Romans 2.29

33 Matthew 3.9

34 Galatians 3.16

35 Galatians 3.26-29

36 Romans 10.3-4, 17-18; 1

Corinthians 10.4;

Hebrews 11.26,

37 Hebrews 11.39-40

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plan of salvation

