

SOTERIOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

PART 13

GALATIANS 3:8; THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO ABRAHAM

Galatians 3:1–9 ¹You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? ²This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? ³Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? ⁴Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? ⁵So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? ⁶Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. ⁷Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. ⁸The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand [προεναγγελίζομαι] to Abraham, saying, “ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU.” ⁹So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

The context here is that of Paul defending justification by faith including Gentile justification by faith. He is refuting the legalistic claims of the Jews who want to impose Mosaic Law commands on new believers in Christ Jesus. He refers back to Abraham's justification to make his case specifically referring to Genesis 15:6 but there are implications for Genesis 12:3 and 18:18 as well. In Genesis 15:6, the name is that used for Jehovah; there is no way it can be interpreted to be a reference to the Messiah.

Genesis 15:6 ⁶Then he believed in the LORD [יהוה]; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Genesis 12:3 ³And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

Genesis 18:18 ¹⁸since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed?

Προεραγγερίζομαι is a combination of προ meaning before and it is the aorist form of εὐαγγελίζω which means bringing good news which in turn comes from a word meaning to proclaim, tell. Therefore, Paul is using a word meaning to proclaim the gospel beforehand. The word translated gospel, εὐαγγέλιον means “good news.” The original word referred to giving a reward to the bearer of good news but changed over time to refer to the good news itself.

We have to remember that “gospel” simply means “good news.” It does not have to carry the completed gospel message as we think of it today based on having in our possession the completed revelatory canon of Scripture. In large measure, it is used in the New Testament to refer to the gospel message as we know it but context must be taken into account when determining meaning. In this case, Paul explicitly connects the gospel preached to Abraham with the blessing of the peoples of the world through the patriarch but it is being used by Paul in a Soteriological sense in this specific context in the New Testament letter to the Galatians. There is nothing in this verse to suggest that Abraham was told about the specific identity of the Messiah. Abraham may have known that there was a Savior to come based on the prophecy of Genesis 3:15 but even that is really unknown.

Genesis 3:15 ¹⁵And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel.”

1 Corinthians 15:3–4 ³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

Is Paul making the claim in the book of Galatians that this gospel message concerning the Christ was preached to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 and/or 15:6? Specifically, is the gospel, the good news, Abraham heard the same gospel that Paul proclaimed in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4? The answer has to be, “No.” What Abraham was told is that through him the world would be blessed which everyone now understands to be a promise of the Savior first promised to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and recorded for our edification in the Scriptures. Paul specifically relates the concept of blessing the world through Abraham to be a blessing of Gentile justification by faith (Gal. 3:8). Just how much of that Abraham totally understood at the time he was given the

Abrahamic Covenant, we don't know. This is a fine example of progressive revelation.

The Bible clearly makes the case that Abraham became a believer when he obeyed God and left his homeland for the land God was going to show him. The point is that Abraham was a believer long before he was given the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12 and its ratification in Genesis 15.

Acts 7:2–3²And he said, “Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³and said to him, ‘LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.’

Hebrews 11:8⁸By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.

Dr. Walvoord noted this concerning the content of the Abrahamic Covenant: “...it should be carefully noted what is left out of the covenant. While Abraham is personally justified by faith because of his trust in God's promise concerning his seed, it is obvious that the Abrahamic Covenant itself is not the gospel of salvation even though the promised blessing anticipated the gospel (cf. Gal 3:8). Those in the covenant are promised that God will be their God in the general and providential sense. It is true that Christ is the fulfillment of the promise of blessing to all nations. But the covenant does not contain the covenant of redemption, a revelation of the sacrifice of Christ, a promise of forgiveness of sin, a promise of eternal life, or any of the elements of salvation. The promise to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15 is, by way of example, a far clearer picture of the promise of redemption than any of the long passages dealing with the Abrahamic Covenant. While the Abrahamic Covenant is essentially gracious and promises blessings, it deals for the most part with physical blessings and with a physical seed. To make the covenant a phase or a statement of the covenant of redemption is hardly justified by the study of its precise provisions [John F. Walvoord, “Millennial Series: Part 12: The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism” in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 108, no. 432 (Oct. 1951): 417-418.

Who the Savior would be, when the Savior would appear, and where He would appear were specific pieces of information not revealed to Abraham. The prophets spoke to all these issues at a later time but that was long after Abraham's death. Unger is typical of the theologians attributing this blessing of

all the nations of the world to Christ: "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed, fulfilled in Christ, 'the son of David, the son of Abraham' (Matt. 1:1)" [Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, p. 55]. Dr. Ross states that the "third promise takes on its greatest fulfillment in the fact that Jesus Christ became the means of blessing to the world (Gal. 3:8...)" [Allen P. Ross, "Genesis" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 47]. These comments are made as a result of the hindsight we have in the revelation of prophetic fulfillment down through the corridors of time and they are correct. It also has to be said that we don't know whether or not Abraham was given any other revelation that wasn't recorded, but I doubt it, at least in Genesis 12 and 15.

In Galatians 3:1-9, Paul is making the case for justification by faith for everyone apart from the Law.

The question we are trying to answer is, "What did Paul mean when he said "...preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham..." in Galatians 3:8? The "good news" that was preached to Abraham beforehand was that all the nations would be blessed through him. Paul expounds on that and explains that it refers to Gentile justification by faith and that everyone who believes is, therefore, a son of Abraham. That is the context in Galatians 3. Paul also refers to the Abrahamic Covenant when he calls it the "blessing of Abraham" in Galatians 3:14.

Galatians 3:14 ¹⁴in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Paul is not saying that Abraham was preached to, heard, and understood the gospel as we know it today and as it is presented in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. He is saying that the justification of uncircumcised Gentiles was known and predicted in the announcement to Abraham that was, in fact, a gospel message, that is, good news concerning the salvation of the Gentiles.

The Louw Nida lexicon wants to restrict this reference to "good news" to Jesus Christ but that wasn't in the original proclamation of this good news to Abraham. Paul's use of Genesis 15:6 seems to be an example of his literal plus application use of the Old Testament. The blessing of the world promised in Genesis 15:6, which is the literal truth presented in the verse, Paul presented as

the application of justification to all the peoples of the world and not just to the Jews and that is the truth that Paul is expositing and applying in Galatians 3:8.

It was only later long after Abraham's death that the prophets specified this blessing to the peoples would be through the Messiah. Abraham didn't know the things these prophets later revealed. At least, we cannot know that he knew them because it is not revealed in Scripture that he knew them; therefore, we have no warrant for assuming that he did know any facts beyond what the Scriptures reveal. This is important because a lot of theologians make this unbiblical assumption about the depth of Abraham's knowledge.

Isaiah 42:1 ¹"Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations.

Isaiah 42:6 ⁶"I am the LORD, I have called You in righteousness, I will also hold You by the hand and watch over You, And I will appoint You as a covenant to the people, As a light to the nations,

Isaiah 49:5–6 ⁵And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, To bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him (For I am honored in the sight of the LORD, And My God is My strength), ⁶He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Amos 9:11–12 ¹¹"In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, And wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins And rebuild it as in the days of old; ¹²That they may possess the remnant of Edom And all the nations who are called by My name," Declares the LORD who does this.

One other issue related to the doctrine of justification in Galatians as it pertains to Abraham and Gentile salvation is that he was justified before the giving of the Law. Circumcision and other Law requirements have nothing to do with justification by faith. This is important because the Judaisers in Galatia likely made the argument that since all the peoples were to be blessed in Abraham, then the Gentiles in order to receive this blessing must also be in Abraham and in their mind that meant according to the Law and, in particular, through

circumcision. Paul denies that assertion and proves that those who are believers out of all the peoples of the world are sons of Abraham having been justified by faith apart from the Law just as Abraham was justified by faith apart from the Law. The content of faith is not an issue at this point.

Galatians 3:17–19 ¹⁷What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. ¹⁸For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. ¹⁹Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.

Having said all this, it is clear that we do not know exactly what God said to Abraham in total. We don't know all that Abraham knew and we don't know when he knew it. It seems that Jesus referenced this situation as did the author of Hebrews.

John 8:56 ⁵⁶“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.”

Hebrews 11:8–10 ⁸By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; ¹⁰for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Exactly what Jesus meant when He said these words in John is unknown. However, it means something and Jesus said that Abraham somehow saw His day. “Abraham rejoiced to see My day, that is, the messianic salvation which God promised ('all peoples on earth will be blessed through you;' Gen. 12:3). Abraham by faith was granted a son Isaac, through whom the Seed (Christ) would come. How much of the messianic times God revealed to His friend Abraham is unknown. But it is clear that he knew of the coming salvation and he rejoiced in knowing about it and expecting it” [Edwin A. Blum, “John” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 307]. Dr. Blum may be adding a bit too much to just what Abraham knew. Extra-biblically, many Jewish

rabbis speculated that through the Covenant, Abraham was given a vision of this age and of the age to come which, in Jewish thought, refers to the Messianic Kingdom. Other rabbis argued that Abraham was given a vision of his descendants [Gerald L. Borchert, *The New American Commentary: John 1-11*, p. 308]. This is Jewish rabbinical speculation and it has no basis in biblical revelation. But because of that speculation, it was probably not surprising to these Jewish religious authorities of Jesus' time that Abraham saw the Messiah as the Lord was possibly saying he did. The problem they had was believing that Jesus was the Messiah Abraham saw. All of this is, however, speculation; could Abraham have been given information that the Scriptures do not reveal he received? Yes, but we can't present that as truth because we simply do not know. We do know that the Lord spent some hours with Abraham at his tent in Genesis 18 because a meal was prepared and that takes time from beginning to end. With the exception of what is recorded in Scripture, we have no idea what was said during those hours. I doubt that there were any more appearances to Abraham by the Lord than the Bible records, but I doubt that every word said between them was recorded, at least in all instances.

We do know that God promised Abraham that the Covenant, meaning the Abrahamic Covenant, would be carried through Isaac and his descendants. The ultimate Messianic Seed would come from them.

Genesis 17:19 ¹⁹But God said, "No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.

Genesis 21:12 ¹²But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named.

Galatians 3:16 ¹⁶Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ.

The promises of the Covenant were passed on to Isaac (Gen. 26:1-5) and to Jacob (Gen. 28:10-14) and ultimately to the Messianic Seed, Jesus, as recorded in the genealogy of Matthew (Mt. 1:1-17) in which Jesus is named as a descendant of Abraham.

Genesis 26:1–5 ¹Now there was a famine in the land, besides the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. So Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines. ²The LORD appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land of which I shall tell you. ³“Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham. ⁴“I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; ⁵because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.”

Genesis 28:10–14 ¹⁰Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. ¹²He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. ¹⁴“Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

Matthew 1:1 ¹The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham:

It is also widely thought that Abraham received a picture of Jesus and His death and resurrection when God ordered him to sacrifice his son, his unique son, on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:2; see Genesis 22:1-18 for the complete pericope). Note the frequent use of the qualifying words “may” and “perhaps” in this commentary on John 8:56. “Jesus claimed that Abraham had a preview of his ministry and had rejoiced in it. This may refer to the promise God gave Abraham that his seed should become the channel of divine blessing to all the nations (Gen. 12:3). By ‘my day’ Jesus may have been referring to his redemptive work, which would summarize his career. Perhaps Isaac represented to Abraham the ‘seed’ through which God would fulfill his promise: the miraculous birth of the son, his unquestioning trust in his father, his willingness to become a sacrifice to

fulfill the command of God, and his deliverance from certain death. These may have spoken of the later Seed who cooperated in obedience to his Father, surrendered himself to the Father's will, and emerged victorious from death. Although this interpretation is not founded on any specific statement of Scripture, it would mean that Abraham's experience at the sacrifice of Isaac could have been an object lesson to him of the coming incarnation, death, and resurrection of the promised Seed (see Gen. 22:1-18; Heb. 11:7-10)" [Merrill C. Tenney, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, vol. 9, pp. 98-99, commenting on John 8:56].

Due to the progressive revelation we are privy to, we know that what happened between Abraham and Isaac was a type of what was to come between the God the Father and God the Son. To be fair, other theologians see this as only a type of the resurrection and not a type of Christ and His death and resurrection. But at the very least, there are some parallels here between Abraham, his unique son, Isaac, the sacrifice of the son, the lamb, the place on Mount Moriah where the Temple would eventually be built, the concept of the resurrection, and the Lord.

Hebrews 11:17–19 ¹⁷By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; ¹⁸it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." ¹⁹He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.

That this situation is a type is not an issue; Scripture says it is a type. The question is, what is this type prefiguring? Is it a type that prefigures the life and death of Christ or is it simply prefiguring the resurrection? Opinions are divided. My opinion is that there are too many parallels here between Abraham and Isaac on the one hand and the Lord on the other hand to restrict the type to only the resurrection.

To sum up, the gospel preached to Abraham beforehand as Paul used it in Galatians 3:8 refers to the good news that Gentiles would be justified by faith and thereby become sons of Abraham by virtue of that faith apart from the works of the Law. We must not read our complete understanding of the gospel as Paul expressed it in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 and other Scriptures to determine what Abraham did or did not know.