

ABRAHAM'S SHADOW: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ABRAHAM IN THE BIBLE

INTRODUCTION

Our world has produced many influential people. I could write a long list of historical and contemporary figures such as kings, emperors, generals, presidents, philosophers, authors, celebrities and even athletes who have wielded great influence over the masses. We also have our own list of “hero’s” who have significantly influenced our own lives and who we personally admire. Then there are those who think they are important and will do whatever it takes to have others feel the same. However, when it comes to the pages of Scripture there are also important figures who God uses as major players in the “grand story” of the Bible and serve to unify and accomplish the plans and purposes of God in redemptive history. I would like to consider one man who has tremendous influence on the pages of Scripture and that man is the patriarch Abraham. In fact, as one Christian writer contends, “Of the human characters in Genesis, Abraham is by far the most important. This is reflected both in the length of the narrative devoted to him, and in the key theological concepts associated with him.”¹ Or as another Christian writer points out, “Abraham is one of the most important men in all history and, next to our Savior himself, he is one of the most significant individuals in all of Scripture.”² I would like to demonstrate more clearly and specifically how Abraham, for the Christian, “casts a shadow which extends across the whole Bible.”³ Bruce Waltke puts it this way, “God’s call of Abraham and his covenant with Abraham present blueprints for the rest of Genesis, the

¹T. Desmond Alexander, “Abraham,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian Rosner, D. A. Carson and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 367.

²John G. Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 1998), 1.

³Alexander, “Abraham,” 367.

Pentateuch, and indeed, the Bible.”⁴ More specifically, I am going to highlight the themes of offspring, land and faith in the life of Abraham and trace how they cast their shadow all the way to the NT and therefore have significance for us here this morning. My intent is not to exalt Abraham as much as I want you to see the greatness and graciousness of the God who used one man so comprehensively to bring greater glory to himself through Jesus Christ. May this cause our hearts to remain open to be used by God in our own generation for his glory.

Before I trace these shadows, I would like to briefly place them in the context of God’s relationship with Abraham recorded for us in the book of Genesis. I believe that the proper way to approach these three themes associated with Abraham is by first considering the stories in their original context and then broadening the scope to include what the rest of Scripture teaches, especially the NT, as it relates to Abraham. Having said that, I would like to point out the fact that there are four main episodes in the life of Abraham that are particularly significant to the rest of the Bible, which also clearly highlight the three themes of offspring, land and faith. These four episodes are found in Genesis 12, 15, 17, and 22. These particular episodes form the biblical foundation of God’s relationship with Abraham. Genesis 12 is where God makes the initial promises to Abraham, which were later enshrined in a covenant in Genesis 15, sealed or ratified by circumcision in chapter 17 and confirmed by an oath in Genesis 22.⁵ We can think of God’s relationship to Abraham as a marriage that spanned roughly forty years. “The promises in chapter 12 would then represent the betrothal or engagement. The covenant making in chapter 15 and confirmation in chapter 17 would correspond to the wedding vows of the marriage

⁴ Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 307.

⁵ Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (Illinois: Crossway, 2012), 228-229.

covenant. After testing Abraham, God reiterates his promises by a mighty oath.”⁶ This is the general framework of the Genesis narrative and the high points of God’s relationship with Abraham and is the impetus for the three shadows to extend across the whole Bible and specifically into the NT.

SHADOW #1 – Offspring

The story of Abraham can be viewed as being a light at the end of a very long tunnel, pardon the cliché. One Christian scholar describes the story of Abraham in commendatory terms by stating that, “Abraham emerges within the structure of Genesis as the answer to the plight of all humankind. The line of disaster and of the ‘curse’, from Adam, through Cain, through the Flood to Babel, begins to be reversed when God calls Abraham and says, ‘in you all the families of the earth will be blessed’.”⁷ Another Christian scholar goes as far as to say that, “Here, after Adam and Noah, God is making another new start. Abram and his family constitute another Adam.”⁸ This new start begins with God calling Abraham and making significant promises to him and his offspring, which, as we will see, graciously applies to you and me here this morning. This promise forms the backbone to our entire discussion about Abraham and casts a rather large shadow across the Scriptures.

Let’s take a closer look at the theme of offspring. This theme really begins in Genesis 11, where the author clearly points out the fact that, “Sari was barren; she had no children.”⁹ This results in the fact that, “Sarah’s barrenness prevents the continuation of the family line, and

⁶ Ibid., 230.

⁷ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 262.

⁸ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 224.

⁹ Genesis 11:30 (ESV). All Scripture quotations will be from the ESV.

considerable attention is paid to the resolution of the problem . . .the continuation of the line of ‘seed’ is attributed to God’s intervention.”¹⁰ Throughout chapters 12-20, God keeps repeating the promise of offspring coming from Abraham and Sarah in an effort to reassure Abraham’s faith and this is especially true in the four main episodes of the Genesis narrative where God promises, creates, confirms his covenant with Abraham.

The promise under consideration is clearly pronounced in Genesis 12:1-3. Here we see God speaking and commanding Abraham to leave the comforts of his family, home and surroundings and take a huge step of faith to go to the land that God will show him. More specifically, according to the literary structure of Genesis 12:1-3, we see God giving Abraham two commands along with three promises following each command.¹¹ Although I do not intend to trace all six promises throughout the Scriptures, I believe the major theme present in Genesis 12:2-3, which the story of Abraham and the rest of the Scripture highlight repeatedly, is namely, “offspring” or “seed”.¹² It is important to note two things concerning this theme. First, while the term “offspring” does not specifically appear in the initial promise in Genesis 12:2-3, it is definitely implied. Take for example the first promise in verse 2, where it was promised that Abraham would be made into a great nation. Obviously, Abraham cannot be made into a great nation without offspring. Second, virtually all the tension that arises in the story of Abraham is from the fact that Sarah is barren while God keeps promising offspring. I believe it is safe to say that this theme and how Abraham responds to the tension this theme creates is what drives the entire Genesis narrative from chapter twelve on.

¹⁰ Alexander, “Abraham”, 367.

¹¹ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 230. Gentry provides a great outline of how these verses are organized.

¹² I will be using the word “offspring” throughout this paper rather than “seed”, except when “seed” is used in a direct quote.

Let's also consider Genesis 15:1-6 for a moment, where this tension becomes increasingly clear. This is a very important chapter in any discussion concerning God's relationship with Abraham. The structure of the text is easy enough to discern. The chapter can be divided into two halves, with each half having an identical pattern and structure. More specifically, each half includes a tripartite structure where the first and the last parts match each other.¹³ The first part of the tripartite structure of the text, God appears to Abraham and reveals that he is his shield and promises him a great reward. But Abraham responds impatiently and questions God in the second part of the tripartite structure. He asks,

² But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"³ And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir."¹⁴

Obviously, this would have been a legitimate arrangement in patriarchal times. But this arrangement reveals the tension in the story. Offspring is needed for all of the promises, plans and purposes of God to come to fruition.

This tension is also clearly present when God confirms this covenant through circumcision. In fact, in Genesis 17:17-18 Abraham laughs to himself after he was told that Sarah will bear him a son. As we have seen, all of these reassurances must be understood in the light of the fact that Sarah was barren and that both Abraham and Sarah were getting to be well beyond the age of having their own children (18:11). Sarah even laughs at the Lord when she overheard the Lord reassuring Abraham that they would have a child within the year. She laughed and said to herself, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?"¹⁵ She has some serious questions about God's ability to do what he promised.

¹³ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 248.

¹⁴ Genesis 15:2-3 (ESV).

But all of this tension culminates in chapter 20 where, “The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.”¹⁶ God is able and does faithfully fulfill his promise to Abraham. This can be a great comfort for Christians today knowing that we serve a faithful God. The situations and circumstances in which we sometimes find ourselves do at times seem rather impossible. But we must remember the kind of God we serve. He is more than able to do what he has promised (Eph. 3:20).

But even after Isaac was born, God tested Abraham in Genesis 22, which we will look at more depth later on in this paper. But God confirms the promise of offspring when he says,

¹⁵And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven¹⁶ and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,¹⁷ 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,¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."¹⁷

This is the last time Abraham needed the promises of God concerning his offspring to be confirmed because Abraham has clearly demonstrated where his hope and trust lay. It is ultimately in God himself and not just his gifts.

However, as I am trying to argue, the story of Abraham’s offspring does not stop here in the pages of Genesis, for it is not the full picture of Biblical revelation. The best way to get the full picture is to think through how the whole canon of Scripture speaks of Abraham and his offspring and it is here that we see more clearly how this shadow extends across the pages of

¹⁵ Genesis 18:12.

¹⁶ Genesis 20:1-2.

¹⁷ Genesis 22:15-19 (ESV).

Scripture. There are four specific ways in which Scripture describes the offspring of Abraham.¹⁸ First of all, there is Abraham's natural offspring. The people that belong to this category of offspring are simply those who are physically descendent from Abraham. This includes Ishmael, Isaac, and the sons of Keturah.¹⁹ Now when exploring someone's offspring or developing someone's family tree, we would have to stop here, for our job concerning Abraham's offspring would be finished. But according to the full revelation of Scripture, there is a lot more to Abraham's offspring than just those who are physically descended from him.

The second way in which the bible describes the offspring of Abraham is to focus on the natural yet special offspring of Abraham. This particular offspring is, "tied to God's elective purposes, namely Isaac, and by extension Jacob and the entire nation of Israel."²⁰ This is why God was so adamant that all the promises, which he gave to Abraham, were going to be fulfilled, not through Ishmael, but through Isaac.²¹ We read in Genesis 17 where God changed Sari's name to Sarah and promised that it was through her God would give Abraham a son. And the author of Genesis describes the scene as Abraham falling on his face laughing.²² So the natural yet special offspring of Abraham is clearly seen as being worked through the line of Isaac and his son Jacob, who form the nucleus that will eventually establish the people of Israel as described in the book of Exodus.²³

The third category that Scripture refers to is the true or unique offspring of Abraham,

¹⁸ Gentry and Wellum, *Christ through Covenant*, 632; John G. Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds*, 20-22. Both of these books organize Abraham's offspring into these four categories.

¹⁹ Gentry and Wellum, *Christ through Covenant*, 632.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 632.

²¹ Romans 9:6-9.

²² Genesis 17:17-21.

²³ Exodus 1:1; 2:24; 3:6; 6:3-4; 33:1

which is surprisingly, Jesus Christ. This category is vital to understanding Christ's relationship to the OT and key to the underlying unity of God's Word. Let me highlight just two passages of Scripture that clearly testify to the fact that Jesus Christ is related to Abraham. The first text, interestingly, is the first verse in the New Testament. Matthew 1:1 says, "The book of genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." I know that genealogies are not all that exciting, but this one particularly is vitally important to the unity of the Scriptures. It shows how people, and themes related to those people, are intimately connected. This clearly tells us that Jesus Christ was physically descended from Abraham. The second passage that shows the relation between Jesus Christ and Abraham dives a little deeper into this relationship by way of typology.²⁴ Galatians 3:16 says, "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ." What this verse is claiming is when God promised offspring to Abraham, he was ultimately referring to Christ. "Paul states that the promises were spoken to Abraham and his *sperma*, "seed" or "offspring." Paul interprets the singular "seed" as a reference to the Messiah."²⁵ Paul is basing his argument on the fact that the word is in the singular, not the plural. Paul argues this way, not from direct exegesis of OT texts, "but rather from an interpretation of them in light of the Christ-event."²⁶ Paul's interpretation of this particular promise given to Abraham has huge implications. For one, Paul is arguing that this promise of offspring given in Genesis 12:7 is ultimately fulfilled through the birth of Christ. Paul must be. . .

²⁴ Gentry and Wellum, *Christ through Covenant*, 632. Typology rests upon the recognition that the way God spoke and acted in the OT was a preparation for and anticipation of the definitive word and act of God in Christ.

²⁵ Jason C. Meyer, *The End of the Law* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2009), 144.

²⁶ Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 155.

. . .picking up the promise theme from Genesis 3:15, traced through a distinctive line of seed, beginning with Adam, running through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Israel, David and eventually culminating in Christ. In Christ, we have the promised seed, the mediator of God's people who fulfills all of God's promises, not least the Abrahamic promises. . .in the truest sense he is the seed of Abraham, the true Israel, and David's greater Son. In this way, Jesus is the unique seed of Abraham both as a physical seed through a specific genealogical line and as the antitype of all the covenant mediators of the OT.²⁷

It is especially amazing to consider how the story of Abraham points to Christ and how the promises given to Abraham must be understood in light of Christ.²⁸

It is the fourth category that pertains more specifically and personally to you and me here this morning, namely the spiritual offspring of Abraham. This category includes all true believers in Christ Jesus throughout human history. There is one text of Scripture in particular that needs to be quoted in order to see how we as Christians can be referred to as Abraham's offspring. Galatians 3:29, which says, "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." Paul is saying that being a member of Abraham's family does not involve being linked to a specific genealogy, but being linked to Christ. According to Ephesians 2:11-22, this includes all believing Jews and Gentiles, which in turn is the fulfillment of the promise that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."²⁹ Isn't it a wonderful thing that you and I are included in the offspring of Abraham? Listen to this glorious truth being taught in Hebrews 2:14-16, which says,

¹⁴Since therefore the children share in the flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, ¹⁵and deliver all those who through the fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. ¹⁶For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham.

²⁷ Gentry and Wellum, *Christ through Covenant*, 630, 632-633.

²⁸ Acts 3:25-26. Peter seems to be identifying Jesus as the seed of Abraham through whom all the peoples will be blessed by God.

²⁹ Genesis 12:3.

It is we who believe that have been greatly helped by Christ. We must remember that this is all part of the purposes of God which he accomplished through Abraham, which indeed casts a large shadow across salvation history. And it is through the fulfillment of this promise that Abraham was a blessing to the nations. This is what the call of Abraham was all about. Kevin DeYoung concludes by writing, “The call of Abram is not about a community blessing program. It’s about God’s unilateral promise to bless fumbling Abraham and bless the nations through faith in the promised Seed that will come from his family tree.”³⁰

SHADOW #2 – Land

Secondly, let’s talk about the land promised to Abraham and how it casts a shadow across the Scriptures and gives us hope here this morning. This topic has been and is very controversial within evangelical Christianity. The issue of land in the Bible with regards to the nations of Israel has divided dispensationalists and covenant theologians for over a century. I do not want to enter into that debate here this morning, but I do want to show you how this aspect of God’s promise to Abraham casts a shadow not only within Genesis or even as it pertains to Israel as a nation, but how it also extends even beyond Israel and their small parcel of land in Palestine to the NT where we find out the land Abraham was really looking for.

Again, a specific land promise is not mentioned in the initial call of Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3. However, in order for these promises to come to fruition, there must be land. We are told in Genesis 12:1 God initially commanded Abraham to “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” It is with these vague directions that Abraham leaves the comforts of his own home and extended family and obeys God. And as he is travelling in the land of Canaan, God appeared to him and said, “To your

³⁰ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 33.

offspring I will give this land.”³¹

But just like the promise of offspring, the promise of the land would be something that seemed rather elusive while Abraham was alive. In the Genesis narrative we find Abraham wandering from place to place without any sense of stability. The main reason for his nomadic lifestyle could be that it was out of necessity. There was a severe famine in the land of Canaan soon after he arrived (Genesis 12:10) which led him to Egypt. Another reason was a family feud that was brewing between Abraham’s herdsmen and Lot’s herdsmen (Genesis 13:7), which resulted in Abraham and Lot separating and moving away from each other (Genesis 13:11). What is significant about this specific story is that God reassured Abraham about the land promise after he and Lot separated (Genesis 13:14-17). God outlines more specifically the land he and his offspring were going to inherit even though Lot, his nephew, had settled in the best part of the land. But as we see throughout the story Abraham is still wandering around with no permanent place of residence.

In Genesis 15:7 we read again how God repeated the land promise of Abraham. We read, “And he said to him, ‘I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.’” This verse reveals the fact that the very purpose for God calling Abraham was that he would possess that land of Canaan. But in order to establish the veracity of the promise, God “cuts a covenant” with Abraham. It says in verse 18, “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your offspring I give this land. . .’” This ceremony or ritual is rather strange to our minds, but scholars point out the fact that this is what is called a “self-maledictory oath”³² and was common in ancient times.³³ What this oath meant was that the

³¹ Genesis 12:7; 15:7; 17:8.

³² For an informative discussion of the validity of this self-maledictory oath in Genesis 15, see Gentry and Wellum, *Christ through Covenant*, 251-256.

covenant partners who walked between the animals brought the curse of death upon themselves if they did not keep their end of the covenant. It would be like saying, “May I become like these dead animals if I do not keep the promise(s) and oath.”³⁴ What is amazing is that Abraham fell asleep through this whole process and it is God, whose presence is manifested by a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, who passed through the animal carcasses. What this means is that the promise of land depends on God alone.³⁵ This is how serious God was about this promise.

The language gets even more interesting in chapter 17, where God confirms the covenant with the sign of circumcision. In verse 7-8 we read,

⁷And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojourning's, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."

What is particularly fascinating about these verses is the adjective “everlasting” in both verses.

The result of these verses is, as John Reisinger points out,

From Genesis 17 throughout the rest of the OT Scriptures, the land will occupy one of the central features of the covenant that God made with Abraham and his seed. Actually, it is the central feature. This fact makes it essential to ask, and clearly answer, the question, “Is the ‘land’ promise to be understood physically, and is this promise still awaiting a natural fulfillment in the future or is the land promise to be spiritualized and then understood as already fulfilled in Christ and the gospel?”³⁶

I do not have the time and space here this morning to explore all the arguments or ramifications of these loaded questions. But I do want to point out that the answer does in many ways hinge on what is meant by “everlasting” in Genesis 17:7-8. Here again, the conclusions came to

³³ Gentry and Wellum, *Christ through Covenant*, 250-251.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 251.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 251.

³⁶ John G. Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds*, 87.

Reisinger are helpful, in that he points out two things that could be meant by the word “everlasting”. First, “it may mean that something is given as a physical and temporary ‘type’ of something else that is spiritual and eternal. The thing promised becomes truly everlasting as it finds its fulfillment in its antitype” or, secondly, “the word everlasting may also mean that something will last as long

as the covenant lasts under which that something was instituted.”³⁷ Much more could be said concerning this and my intent in this paper is not to give a theology of the land but only trace it as it pertains to Abraham.

But as the story continues, it was not until Sarah dies that Abraham begins to own any property in Canaan. He bought some property for a burial place for Sarah (Genesis 23:1-20). This purchase might not seem as significant to us, but to the author of Genesis, it was important due to the fact that this purchase is mentioned four times in the Genesis narrative. The first time it is mentioned is here in connection with the burial of Sarah (Genesis 23), with the burial of Abraham (25:9-10), with Jacob’s will (49:29-32), and with Jacob’s burial (50:13). What is the significance of all this repetition? It is significant in that “God has given Abraham a foothold in the Promised Land. . .it was only a small part of the land, but God was beginning to fulfill his promise of land. . .In God’s time, Abraham’s offspring would possess all the land.”³⁸ And the pages of Scripture do testify, in Joshua 21:43-45, to the fact that God did in fact fulfill this promise to Abraham as the nation of Israel conquered the land. So, in a sense, this burial plot was a pledge of something that was far greater.³⁹ In fact, we read in Psalm 2:8 the author

³⁷ Ibid., 89. If you want to explore this more and follow his argumentation, please read chapter 9 of this book.

³⁸ Sydney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 214, 225.

³⁹ Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds*, 93.

inviting the readers to ask for more land. It says, “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.”

But, as mentioned already, the fulfillment of the land promise does not end with land in Palestine, for its shadow extends to the NT. Before we explore the NT for this shadow, there are three important issues that must be considered. First, we must first understand that there is no mention or repetition of the land promise given to Abraham anywhere in the NT. Second, the NT scriptures seem to spiritualize the land promises where one would expect to find them repeated.⁴⁰ Third, there is one text in the NT where it specifically mentions Abraham and the land. We read in Hebrews 11:8-10, 16,

⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. . . ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

These verses specifically highlight the fact that Abraham’s wandering was due to the fact that he was looking for something far greater than the land of Canaan, which he only saw at a distance.⁴¹ Abraham believed there was more to this promise; he believed there was a heavenly fulfillment.

There is more to this promise for you and I as well. This heavenly city and country Abraham was looking for is what we are seeking as well. In fact, this is part of the hope that we as Christians have for the future. In a sense we as Christians today are a lot like Abraham, namely that we are strangers and aliens on the earth as we are waiting for something far greater, which is the same city that Abraham was looking for. The apostle Peter highlights this fact as he

⁴⁰ For example, in Luke 1:68-79, the sermons in Acts, and the book Hebrews.

⁴¹ Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds*, 92-93.

consoles Christians suffering persecution with the fact that, “But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”⁴² But what is even more encouraging for us as Christians is the fact that Jesus is preparing this place for us now. He says to his disciples in John 14:3 “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” In fact, I believe the promise given to Abraham casts its shadow all the way to the new heavens and the new earth. This is what Abraham was really looking for and which I believe the land of Canaan typifies. But again, so much more could be said about the land. But the promise to Abraham and the hope that he had is shared by all those who are in Christ.

SHADOW # 3 – Faith

The last shadow I want for us to consider this morning is Abraham’s faith. This shadow also has particular application to us in that the NT clearly invites us to understand his faith as a paradigm for all those who have saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and for those who are walking by faith each and every day. And as we consider his faith, the question I want to answer is “what kind of faith did Abram have?” Let me show you at least four aspects to Abraham’s faith.

First of all, Abraham’s faith was an obedient faith. Although the vocabulary of faith is not present until Genesis 15:6, the action of faith is present in Genesis 12, where it is clear that Abraham is a paragon of faith and obedience.⁴³ The same voice that called the cosmos into being now calls Abraham to re-establish God’s kingdom on the earth. Abraham responds to this call of God by uprooting his family and taking them to an unknown land. What this meant for

⁴² 2 Peter 2:13 (ESV).

⁴³ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 376, 423.

Abraham was a complete break with the past as he was called to leave everything behind that was dear to him. Now in our highly mobile society, it is difficult for us to imagine the conflict that this created in Abraham's life. Sydney Greidanus puts it this way,

“Go from your country?” Very difficult. “And your kindred,” your more distant relatives? Almost impossible. “And your father's house?” How could the Lord possibly ask Abram to leave his father's house, his immediate family? That is his very identity. He is Abram *ben* Terah, son of Terah. His father's house is his house; his father's goods are his goods; his father's gods are his gods.⁴⁴

What this means is, “To leave home and to break ancestral bonds was to expect of an ancient man almost the impossible.”⁴⁵ In essence, “The call was to abandon all natural connections, to surrender all social customs and traditions, to leave land, clan and family. These were the areas of very strong attachment which in the ancient world would have been thought to provide ultimate personal security.”⁴⁶ Abraham's obedience was a huge deal in his life and proves that his obedient faith in God was genuine.

The NT highlights this obedient faith in Hebrews 11:8, where we read, “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.” I believe this is descriptive of what the apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:7, where he challenges his readers and all Christians to “...walk by faith, not by sight.” It is obvious that his obedience was evidence of real and genuine inward faith in God. F. F. Bruce points out, “Abraham's readiness was manifested first of all by the readiness with which he left his home at the call of God, for the promise of a new

⁴⁴ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis*, 151.

⁴⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: a commentary*, trans. John H. Marks. Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 161.

⁴⁶ William Drumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 57.

home...faith and obedience are inseparable in one's relation to God."⁴⁷ This is an important aspect of faith that is important for Christians today to understand. Obedience is a necessary part of our faith. However, an important distinction must be made. Obedience is not the cause of our faith, but it is the necessary outworking and the proper evidence of our faith.

The second aspect of Abraham's faith is that it was a wavering faith. As we consider the life of Abraham, we see that "...his life in particular focuses on his wavering faith towards God's ability to fulfill his promises...each of the main episodes of his life may be read as a reaction to God's promise."⁴⁸ For example, just after he arrives in Canaan in Genesis 12, there is a famine in the land that forced him to migrate down to Egypt. And as he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarah his wife, "...I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake."⁴⁹ Where was Abraham's strong faith? We see this wavering faith again and again throughout the Genesis narrative. The most significant episode of Abraham's wavering faith is in Genesis 16 where Sarah gives permission to Abraham to marry and to produce offspring by her Egyptian servant, Hagar. Abraham goes along with the plan and a son is born and in Genesis 17:18, Abraham laughs and said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" Again, where is Abraham's ardent faith?

What is even more surprising is that the NT consistently presents Abraham's faith as constant and uncompromising. For example, Hebrews 6:14-15 says, "For when God made a

⁴⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev. ed. NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 371.

⁴⁸ Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 54.

⁴⁹ Genesis 12:11-13 (ESV).

promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise." Here the author of Hebrews describes Abraham as "waiting patiently" to obtain the promise. But when one considers the episode with Hagar, it is difficult to reconcile this seeming contradiction between this statement and the reality that is presented in the Genesis narrative. Another NT statement concerning Abraham's faith is also somewhat confusing.

Romans 4:19-20 says,

¹⁹He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

Here it specifically says that "No distrust made him waver..." So what are we to make of this? It seems like there were times where he seemed to waver in his faith, but the NT consistently says that he did not. Douglas Moo is helpful here when he says, "When Paul says that Abraham did not 'doubt. . .because of unbelief,' he means not that Abraham never had momentary hesitations, but that he avoided a deep-seated and permanent attitude of distrust and inconsistency in relationship to God and his promises."⁵⁰ I believe this can be of great comfort for us as Christians because there are so many moments when we hesitate concerning the Word of God. Just like Abraham was confronted with obstacles to the fulfillment of the promises that God gave to him, we too struggle with what we perceive as obstacles to the promises of God and the truth found in his Word. And so Abraham is clearly presented as an example in order to support us as Christians in our struggle.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle of Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 284-285.

⁵¹ Dillard and Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 56.

The third, and probably the most important aspect of Abraham's faith, is that it was a righteous faith. The most quoted and talked about verse from the Abraham narrative in the NT is Genesis 15:6, which says, "And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." There are several things that need to be noted here before we move on. First of all, Abraham's trust was both personal and propositional. His trust was in the Lord, and the context shows, it was in response to the word of Lord.⁵² This verb can mean that he "relied on someone" or "gave credence to a message or considered it to be true" or "trusted in someone." This verbal form also indicates that it was a repeated or continuing action.⁵³ Secondly, the subject is God and the object is in reference to Abraham's faith. What this means is that Abraham believed, but it was God, not Abraham who counted it to him as righteousness.⁵⁴ Thirdly, the word for "faith", is most likely the delocutive form of the Hiphil verbal stem which means that Abraham is not giving just a mental response, but a verbal, confessional statement, to which Yahweh responds in the latter half of the verse.⁵⁵ Fourthly, the word for "counted" carries along with it the idea of "to reckon" or "to credit" or "to impute" something to someone's account.⁵⁶ Fifthly, the word for "righteous" is used most often in the OT as describing moral conduct. However, Abraham is not described as doing righteousness. As it turns out, this is the only place in the OT where someone's faith is counted as righteous. One commentator points out that "righteousness is a guarantee of salvation, of acquittal in the day of judgment. Here, however, faith counts for righteousness: it is the response of believing obedience to the word of

⁵² Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, TOTC (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1967), 135.

⁵³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1 (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 329.

⁵⁴ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 242.

⁵⁵ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 424.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 425-426.

God, not righteous deeds, that counted for righteousness.”⁵⁷ However, this very faith in the rest of the Biblical story, is what leads to righteous action.⁵⁸

With these preliminary issues aside, let consider the three chapters in the NT where this verse is quoted, namely Romans 4:3, 9, 22, Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23. For the sake of time and space, I will be treating Romans 4 and Galatians 3 together. The main reason for doing this is due to the fact that, “Paul’s references to Abraham’s faith in Gal. 3 and Rom. 4 are so close in spirit that the discussion of one will cover the other. In both instances the use of the Abraham precedent follows one, or several, rhetorical questions.”⁵⁹

In Romans 4 and Galatians 3, Paul is appealing to Abraham to support his thesis that righteousness can be obtained only through faith and not through works of the law.⁶⁰ Paul has been arguing in Romans 3 that it is through faith alone that one is justified before God (3:26). Paul here in Romans 4, which serves as a test case for the argument being made in 3:21-31, sets up two clear contrasts to show that Abraham was justified by faith. The first contrast is faith and works. He begins by asking the question of how Abraham gained righteousness before God. “In vv. 3-8, Paul shows that the “reckoning” of Abraham’s faith for righteousness is an entirely gracious act that by its nature excludes any appeal to works.”⁶¹ The second contrast is faith and circumcision. This is clearly seen in verse 9 where Paul moves to a temporal argument with regard to Abraham’s being counted righteous. He clearly points out that it was before Abraham

⁵⁷ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 335.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁵⁹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 438-439.

⁶⁰ Thomas R. Shreiner, *Romans*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 209. This is also what Paul is appealing to in Galatians 3. Fung writes, “...Abraham was considered to stand in right relationship (i.e., was given the status of being “right”) with God, simply by virtue of faith in God, and not by virtue of meritorious achievement before God” (135).

⁶¹ Moo, *The Epistle to Romans*, 255.

was circumcised that he was counted righteous and not before. This temporal argument proves that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works. And the purpose for this was, as it says in verses 11-12, “. . .to make him the father of all who believe. . .who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.” As it was with Abraham, so it is with you and me here this morning. We are counted righteous before God only if we “walk in the footsteps of faith”. This is further explored in the rest of Romans 4 where Paul describes the faith Abraham had in the promises that God made to him way back in Genesis and that through being, “fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised” (4:21), he was justified before God. The chapter ends by repeating the clear application to you and me when it says, “But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”⁶² This here is the very heart of our gospel. We are justified before God, not on the basis of anything we have done, but through faith in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ. This is what Abraham teaches us (Galatians 3:8) and this is how his faith casts a shadow on the entire Word of God.

The second reference to Abraham’s faith comes to us in James 2:20. This use of Genesis 15:6, teaches us that there is another important aspect to faith. James has been talking about faith and works and he argues that “. . .faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”⁶³ Then he asks the question in verse 20, “Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?” To answer this question, Paul brings Abraham into the picture. Paul makes a reference to two events in Abraham’s life, one in Genesis 22 and the other, Genesis

⁶² Romans 4:23-25 (ESV).

⁶³ James 2:17 (ESV).

15:6. Verse 21 asks a rather peculiar question. James asks, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?” It seems James is saying the opposite of Paul. But in verse 22, the answer that James gives is, “You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works.” Paul then in verse 23 quotes Genesis 15:6. The point that James is making is simply that faith and obedience are inseparable. “It is not possible for one person to have valid faith without works and for another to have genuine works without faith. . .faith then, is the means of obtaining justification, but by its very nature it is a faith that produces deeds.”⁶⁴ What James is saying is that the person is justified before God solely on the basis of faith. But this very faith must produce works, which is a sign that the original faith is real and genuine.

The fourth aspect of Abraham’s faith is that it is a tested faith. All throughout the Genesis narrative we see Abraham’s faith being tested. We see this clearly in Genesis 12:1-3, where he was not given specific land instructions, to Genesis 12:10-20, where there was a famine, to the incident with Hagar in Genesis 16, and to the incident with Abimelech in Genesis 20. All throughout the story we see Abraham’s faith being tested. The one episode in Abraham’s life where we see this testing more clearly and where the NT picks up on this testing theme is Genesis 22. In fact, the narrator of Genesis 22 reveals that it was a test, which tells us that God did not really require child sacrifice as the surrounding pagan gods.⁶⁵ But whether or not it was a test, God asks Abraham to do the unimaginable. And the way that Abraham responds to this test is almost unthinkable. However, “Testing shows what someone is really

⁶⁴ Donald W. Burdick, *James*, EBC 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 184.

⁶⁵ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis*, 196.

like, and it generally involved difficulty and hardship.”⁶⁶ Listen to how Sydney Greidanus describes the scene:

Abraham cannot believe his ears. In the quiet of the night he had heard God speak to him: “Take your only son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering...” Has he been dreaming? Would God ask him to sacrifice his son Isaac? Abraham and Sarah had waited a lifetime for God to give them this promised son. Finally, when they were too old to get children, God had given them this miracle child. Their whole future is tied up in this child. Through him God’s covenant blessings will be fulfilled: they will become a great nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through them. And now God asks him to burn his son on the altar? His only son Isaac, whom he loves? Impossible! It makes no sense at all! But Abraham still hears the words ringing in his ears: “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love...and offer him up as a burnt offering.” “God, this does not make any sense at all!” But early the next morning we find Abraham making preparations for the agonizing journey to offer his only son.⁶⁷

From this description, we clearly see how big this test really was. All the promises of God were on the line. And to think that he had three days to process what he was doing and to hear his son ask him in verse 7, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the Lamb for the burnt offering?” Any heart and mind would pause to reconsider the situation. But Abraham’s faith shines brightly as he seeks to obey the voice of God.

So, what is the purpose of this test? This test was to prove the reality of Abraham’s faith in God as the treasure of his heart (Genesis 22:15-18). Timothy Keller drives to the heart of the issue when he explains,

But the question now was--had he been waiting and sacrificing for God, or for the boy? Was God just a means to an end? To whom did Abraham ultimately give his heart? Did Abraham have the peace, humility, boldness, and unmovable poise that come to those who trust in God rather than in circumstances, public opinion, or in their own competence? Had he learned to trust God *alone*, to love God for himself, not just for what he could get out of God?⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, WBC 2 (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 103.

⁶⁷ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 317.

⁶⁸ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Dutton, 2009), 6.

That is why God tested him. And we see from the result of this test that Abraham did in fact love God for himself and not just what he could get out of God. This should cause us to search out our own hearts because there will be times when God will test our hearts to see who or what is the ultimate object of our affections. So much more could be said about this episode and how God provided and how that provision typifies the work of Christ on the cross. However, the focus of this shadow is Abraham's faith that was tested in such an incredible way.

As this shadow makes its way to the pages of the NT, the author of Hebrews uses this incident as an example of what true faith looks like (Hebrews 11:17-19). And the author of Hebrews emphasizes "Abraham's indomitable faith in the promises of God."⁶⁹ The author of Hebrews does this by pointing out in verse 19 the fact that Abraham "...considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead..." This was how ready Abraham was to obey the voice of God. This is what got him through as he was travelling for three days to the mountain in the land of Moriah and handle Isaac's questions about the lamb for the offering. Abraham is used by the author of Hebrews as a clear example of what genuine faith looks like.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by briefly summarizing a few more important thoughts for application from the story of Abraham and the shadows his life casts on the pages of Scripture. There are many applications I could make, but here are a few that stick out in my mind. First, we learn that God had a plan he was sovereignly working through Abraham which was fulfilled in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Abraham ultimately and purposefully points us to the Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot exegete Abraham's life without realizing how God fulfilled the promises in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. Secondly, we learn that Scripture must interpret

⁶⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Hebrews*, 303.

Scripture in order to arrive at a faithful understanding of any Biblical passage. Studying Abraham and how the NT authors view him helps us to interpret and understand the OT and interpret the story of Abraham. As a result, we come to a fuller understanding of Scripture by examining the life of Abraham. Thirdly, we learn from Abraham's story that there is an underlying unity to the story of the Bible. "Even though the Bible is strictly speaking a collection of books written over hundreds of years with widely varying contents, it does tell a unified story; the tale of creation, fall, judgement and redemption culminates with the gospel concerning Jesus Christ."⁷⁰ Because Abraham points to Christ we can discern this basic unity. The result of this unity is that the promises God gave to Abraham can and do apply to Christians today. Fourthly, we have a great hope due to the fact that we as Christians are connected to Abraham. Abraham teaches us that we who are connected to him have a heavenly city to look forward to, which is in the new heavens and the new earth. We can get so distracted with all the wealth and material blessing we have today, but he helps us to put our hope in the proper place, to live in light of eternity. Fifthly, Abraham helps us to understand what it means to have faith in God and to live consistently "by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). We can gain great encouragement as the NT invites us to imitate Abraham's faith in God. Abraham trusted in God's promises and in his provision. We too, as NT believers, trust in the promises of God and in his provision in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches that there is a specific continuity between his faith and ours.

Abraham is truly an important figure in the pages of Scripture. I hope and pray that as we have considered him this morning that we rejoice in our sovereign God who has an amazing

⁷⁰Brian S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian Rosner, D. A. Carson and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 9.

plan to redeem his people from the devastating effects of sin and death. May we grow in our love for all that God is for us in Christ Jesus and treasure him for who he is just like Abraham did. May God continue to carry out his plans and purposes and unify all things in Christ.