



The Story Of Salvation

NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010

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6. Abraham and Sarah

Throughout the story of salvation we find time and again that, whilst everything God does in this history flows out of His character and being, and is in accord with His nature, it is always a story full of breath-taking twists and shock turns of events. God's work of grace is always a *new* thing in the earth, something outside the iron-clad law of expectation and what is deserved. What is more, as well as being an unexpected *outcome*, it always involves an unexpected *method* of working. Those He chooses, the situations that they find themselves in when chosen, what they are called to do—all these things run counter to human wisdom. Yet:

“‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.’” (Isa. 55:8-9)

If ever we think that we have got God worked out, predictable and safe, we can be sure that we have moved from the living God, the God of all grace, to a god of law. If so, undoubtedly all the joy of Christian living will be dimming in us, becoming a dimly burning wick.

The call to Abram (= *exalted father*, or *he loves the father*) comes out of the blue. From Gen. 11:27-32 we learn about Abram that:

- he is the first of three sons of Terah
- Abram married Sarai, but she was barren
- he is the uncle of Lot, whose father Haran had died. With his father, and Lot, Abram and Sarai set out from Ur of Chaldees (probably somewhere in modern Iraq or Turkey) to go to Canaan but settled at Haran. Ur was an area rife with idols—later Jeremiah would say of Babylon:

‘For it is a land of graven images, and they are mad upon their idols.’ (Jer. 50:38)

(In Acts 7:2 we learn that this migration was at the command of the LORD.)

Then again in Gen. 12:1 the LORD spoke again to Abram sending him on further. With the command was a great and gracious promise. To a man with no possibility of children, the LORD says,

‘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 people on earth will be blessed through you.’ (12:2-3)

What the peoples had all hoped to achieve for themselves at Babel—a great name—is promised to Abram here freely. The greatness of the name will be in being a blessing to others, not in the establishment of itself (cf. Phil. 2:6-11). The LORD takes

responsibility for Abram's future here. God's intention is clear: blessing will come to all the nations of the earth through this man and his descendants.

Abram here, as in many other places, responds with an *immediate* obedience to the word of the Lord. He is a man of faith—Heb. 11:8-10. The reality of faith is shown in doing what is willed by the one in whom you believe (see Matthew 21:28ff). The text in Genesis 12 implies what Hebrews 11 makes clear, that Abram was unaware of his destination when he set out. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that in this promise Abram saw something bigger, that God was actually building a city beyond all earthly human cities, and it was the vision of that city, that future that drew Abram onwards in obedience.

When this family—Abram, Sarai, Lot, and their possessions and servants—arrived in Canaan and had travelled through for some time, then the LORD appeared again to Abram and told him that this was the land promised, and that it would be given to his offspring. Abram's response was sacrificial worship (12:7—an altar was always a place for sacrifice of some kind to be offered.) Perhaps in his mind the question may have arisen, "What offspring?" but he laid aside the quibblings of reason and trusted the word of God to him.

Having been promised the land, the next event recorded is that Abram is driven from the land by famine. He goes down to Egypt. His wife Sarai attracts the attention of Pharaoh's officials, and she is taken to his palace. Abram, fearful of dying, has urged Sarai to lie and say she is his sister, not his wife. The LORD, by judgment of illness, rescues Sarai from Pharaoh's hands. [Abram's lie here may seem contrary to a man of faith. No judgment is passed in the text. Perhaps it is not so easy to pass a judgment. Is his lying from his certainty that God has intentions for him as expressed in the divine promise?]

A little later, after he has returned to Canaan, Lot, his nephew encounters trouble, and Abram rescues him (Gen. 14). The king of Sodom is involved and tries to strike an alliance, and also to inveigle Abram into his Nimrod-like kingdom building (14:21), but Abram places his trust in God alone, and not in human alliance:

"I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, 'I made Abram rich.'"

In Gen.15:1 the word of the LORD came again to Abram. It is a command to not be afraid, accompanied with promise of God's presence, protection and inheritance. Now Abram raises his concern about the lack of an heir. To this complaint the LORD makes clear that his heir will come from his own body. In fact,

"Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then the LORD said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

Abram again responded by faith to this promise. What he could not do, God would do. Faith meant then the stilling of all his anxieties and the accepting of a word that still had no visible means of fulfilment.

The LORD also reiterated His promise about the land, but Abram wanted to know how he could be sure that he would gain the land. The mysterious events that follow

indicate that the LORD was vowing according to His own glory and honour to ensure that the promise would be kept. More, the LORD spelled out (in vv. 13-15) just what the means would be that the land would come to Abram's offspring.

In Genesis 16 Sarai shows herself as also wanting children. She suggests to Abram that the family could be built through her maidservant, Hagar, who she urges on Abram as a concubine. A son, Ishmael is born, but this son is not the son of promise. In this event, Abram has resorted to human planning and ability to try to fulfil the promise of God. God needs no such help. The run of salvation history is the story of God always rolling up his sleeves and doing the thing that needs to be done.

In chapter 17, 13 years later, the LORD appears to Abram again, and reiterates His promise. The encounter with the glory and the promises of God makes a whole life claim on us:

“I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.” (17:1-2)

In this encounter, God promises that many nations will come from Abram, and so his name is changed from Abram to Abraham. God covenants that from that point on He will be the God of Abraham and of his descendants. This is a unilaterally established relationship, and so cannot be broken by Abraham or his descendants. (The meaning of the fire-pot and the flaming torch comes to the fore—that dream was about God making a covenant within Himself, regardless of Abraham.) There is the need for covenantal faithfulness (v. 9ff), and there will undoubtedly be consequences within that relationship for un-covenantal relationship on Abraham's family's part but not the rupturing of the relationship.

And then, the promise is given explicitly that Sarai will be the one to bear the son who will be the beginning of this great dynasty for the sake of the world. Sarai's name also is changed, to Sarah.