

The Promise to Abraham

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[0 : 00] All right, yes, we are doing a series on the storyline of the Bible, as you may have heard if you were here last week. And I don't know what you think the whole Bible is about.

Is it about good advice? I hope as we'll see, and as you maybe heard last week, it is in a way about hope. Because people want hope, right? We need to believe in something that it will get better. You know, all those soldiers still fighting in Ukraine after two years. Why do they keep fighting? They hope that one day they will win, right? They look forward to that. If they know they will never win, well, why would they keep fighting, right?

There's no point. Maybe you're studying very hard for exams. You have this hope, right, that you will pass and you will get a good job and get the money you need to live here comfortably. If you know you would never get that, well, what's the point?

People need hope. It's what drives human history. It's what drives society. We plot on in hope. But where do we find hope? And what is the basis on which we can have hope?

[1 : 08] Because so often we just basically put the hope in ourselves, right? In our efforts and in what we can do. If I just work harder, then there will be hope.

Then things will get better for society. If we can just get people better educated. If we can just get along more. Maybe then society will be what it should be. The world will be what it should be.

Can we just overcome ignorance? Can we overcome our differences? Maybe there's people you feel, well, you know, these people are holding me back. But if they weren't there, then things would be better.

Then I'd have hope. Well, as we look at the storyline of the Bible, the Bible would say there is no hope in ourselves. And it doesn't just say that.

As we read the Bible, the Bible shows that. We've seen, if you were here last week, how the story starts, right? How does the world start? God makes this beautiful world.

[2 : 03] Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve living with God. Perfectly happy. But then they sin and reject God. And everything goes wrong. And now there's a world of suffering and sin and death and brokenness.

And our problem is just so big. And it gets worse and worse, right? Their sons, they murder each other. And then next chapter, everyone just dies.

And then the world is so messed up. Now, what do you think we need? What does such a world need? Many of us think, well, can we have a fresh start?

And in a way, that's what God gives us. Because if you know your Bible, after that, we get Noah's Ark, right? Famous story, the flood. What is that about? I think it's about a fresh start, right? The world was so messed up.

And so God has a great plan. You know, we take the most righteous person on earth, the best person and his family. And you wipe everything clean, everything beautiful again. And you put him there.

[2 : 59] And there's a new beginning, right? A new start, a beautiful, fresh beginning, a clean slate. I mean, you can see that if you've read, yeah, if you're reading, doing the Bible reading plan, you remember chapter one, right?

God makes humanity and God blessed him. And he said, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Well, after Noah and his sons come out of the ark, what does he say?

And God blessed Noah and his sons and said, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. I mean, you pick up on that, right? Here is a new beginning, a new start, a clean slate.

Everything is good again. The best person in the world. And now we're going to make things right.

Well, what's the result? Noah gets off the ark and he gets drunk.

And then his sons get even worse. And well, that leads to the Tower of Babel, right? All of humanity united in opposition against God. No hope, right?

[3 : 57] And what does that tell us? It tells us that this hasn't worked, right? Here is a fresh start for humanity and the result is unchanged. There's nothing. It's like there's no hope in us, right?

We humans can't make it better. Sometimes we think, you know, if we just had better circumstances. No. Noah had the best circumstances, right? Beautiful, clean world. Maybe if we get rid of all the bad people, right?

We put them in prison or we put them out of the country and then things will be better. Many countries think that. No, right? Because they got rid of everyone except the most righteous person. And that didn't work.

Now, the Bible says we will always mess up again. There is no hope in just being human. But that sounds pretty hopeless, right? If there's no hope in us, where is hope?

What can we do? If the best person on earth couldn't do it, what can we do? Well, that's why today's story come in. In this hopeless desperation, something happens.

[4 : 59] Hundreds of years later, somewhere in Mesopotamia, some guy is there, Abraham. 75 years old, probably an idolater, you know, worships the moon.

And then one day, God speaks to him. It sounds like such a small thing, right? Just God speaking to one old man in Mesopotamia. And yet, this is one of the most important moments in the Bible.

So, why don't we hear from Zoe, how, as she reads the scripture, what a goddess says. Feel free to follow along in your own Bibles, or on the bulletin, or on the screen as well.

Starting in chapter 12, in verse 1, we read, So, Abraham went as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him.

Abraham was 75 years old when he departed from Haran. And Abraham took Sarai, his wife, and Lot, his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered.

[6 : 27] And the people that had acquired in Haran, the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, Abraham passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh.

At that time, the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abraham and said, To your offspring I will give this land. So he built there an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him. We turn the page to Genesis chapter 15 for our second reading. Starting in verse 1, we read, After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision.

Fear not, Abraham. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great. But Abraham said, O Lord God, what will you give me? For I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eleazar of Damascus.

And Abraham said, Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him.

[7 : 34] This man shall not be your heir. Your very own son shall be your heir. And he brought him outside and said, Look toward heaven and the number of stars, if you are able to number them.

Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be. And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness. 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.

But he said, O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it? He said to him, Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle dove, and a young pigeon.

And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when the birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abraham drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abraham. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the Lord said to Abraham, Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be servants there.

[8 : 54] And they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve. And afterward, they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace.

You shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. When the sun had gone down, it was dark.

Behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On the day that the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, saying, To your offspring, I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.

This is the word of God. Thank you, Zoe. Yeah, this is such an important passage, because what is God saying here?

God is making a promise. He's making a huge promise. And not just for Abraham. It sounds like, hey, Abraham, I'm going to bless you. Actually, this is something much bigger.

[10:02] It's a promise to make things right. It's a promise to restore what went wrong. If you heard last week, this Bible story, you can explain it as the story of the kingdom of God.

What is the kingdom of God? It's like God's people living in God's place, under God's rule and blessing. That's what God wants, right? He wants to live with people. They're with him.

They're being blessed by him. That is the goal. And that's what was lost. But actually, if you look at these verses, that's exactly what we see, right? So, God's people, right?

Uh, it used to be Adam and Eve was lost, but what does God now say? Well, Abraham, I will make of you a great nation. A lot of people. And chapter 17, he says, uh, you know, they're going to be my people.

I will be their God, right? God will have a new people and they're going to live somewhere, right?

Because, uh, uh, they, God's place where they're going to live. Well, go to the land that I will show you.

[11:00] Uh, and then verse seven, uh, to your offspring, I will give this land. So we have, uh, God's people living in God's land. And of course, they're going to be blessed, right?

You couldn't miss it in the verse, uh, bless, blessing, right? I will bless you. And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. That repeated words.

So in a way, what is God saying? You know, I'm making things right again. He, I'm making the, bringing back the kingdom. I'm going to have people again, living with me, being blessed by me.

That's what I'm doing. And, and it's so strong, just strong sense that it is really reversing it. My, what is the word blessed? What is that the opposite of? It's the opposite of curse, right?

That's what we saw. Whenever in the past few chapters, people sinned. Well, the result was cursed. Are you right? And cursed is this. Blessing is only what you see in creation.

[11:57] We just saw that earlier. Well, here is blessing. Here is like a new beginning. And you know, five times it says bless, right? Bless, bless, bless, bless, bless. What have we seen in the past 11 chapters?

Five times curse, curse, curse, curse, curse. It's like an exact match, right? Five times curse and now five times bless. This is really, God is dealing with the past few chapters.

You know, what did we just saw in the previous chapter? The tower of Babel, right? Humanity, you know, united against God and being scattered. And now, well, in you, all the families of the earth will be blessed, right?

It's, it's dealing with what went wrong. And that is such good news, right? God is reversing. God is promising to make things better, right? It's a huge significance, right?

Humanity, they've messed up God's world. And God says, well, I'm going to make it right again. And you can see how important that is, right? So far, it's just been negative and going wrong.

[13:00] And God now promises, no, I'm going to make it right. It's like a change in direction, right? A 180 degree turn. And so early. I mean, I don't know if what you think of the old Testament, so much bad news.

And then, well, Jesus is good news. This is only the 12th chapter of the Bible. And God already promises, I'm going to make things right. And, and, and do you see the, you know, that's why the new Testament says, God preached the gospel here.

Yeah. Paul in Galatians, the scripture preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, and you will all the nations be blessed. Here is a promise to make things right. And, and do you see the grace?

I mean, this hope is amazing, right? It's amazing that God's going to change the thing, but the world, but who is he doing that for? Who are all the families of the earth who will be blessed?

Well, you see chapter 11, it's humanity that was so united against God, right? Why did they bring a tower, build a tower all the way up to heaven? Why did they want to do that?

[14:05] Well, wanting to take God's place. That's sin, right? You want to take God's place. Well, that's why you build a tower up to heaven because we don't need God. We can, right? And yet

those people, God says, all the families of the earth will be blessed, right?

That is amazing. That's not what we expect, right? After the tower of Babel, you'd expect more judgment, another flood. Well, God said he wouldn't do another one, but maybe fire, whatever. You'd expect judgment. Instead, God says, Hey, I'm going to make things better. I promise there'll be blessing. I promise it will be right. Isn't that especially when you need hope, right?

When you've messed up, when you've sinned and God says, I'm going to make it right. You expect judgment to come. And instead, the grace of God appears incredible, real grace, real mercy for a broken world.

Although you probably wonder, yeah, that's, that sounds great, but you know, maybe you have had some promises that were broken to you, right? So many people, they promise things and those promises aren't kept.

[15:12] Can we rely on this grace? I mean, it sounds great, right? God will make things right, but can we rely on it? I mean, Abraham had plenty of doubts, right? Chapter 15, as we heard, Hey, God says, don't worry.

I'll have fear not. I'm your shield. But Abraham, yeah, he had his doubts. Verse two, Oh Lord God, what will you give me? For I continue childless.

The thing is for Abraham to be a great nation, he needs to have lots of kids, right? The only thing is he was 75. His wife was 65 and they never had kids. They couldn't have them.

Makes it very hard to believe that God will really do this, right? And so, so he, he has his doubts and, you know, God, he reassures him. He takes him outside. Hey, Abraham, look at the stars.

Verse five, look toward heaven and number the stars. If you're able to number them. And he said to them, so shall your offspring be. He's just repeating the promise. But then, as he voices more doubt about the land, God does something special, right?

[16:20] So in verse eight, Oh Lord God, how am I to know that? I shall possess it. How do I know I'll get the land? And God does something special, this ritual. And, and it's not just a promise.

What is God doing? God is making a covenant, covenant. A covenant. You know, this sounds very strange, right? Very gruesome. Verse nine, God said to him, bring me a heifer, three years old, a female goat, three years old, a ram, three years old, a turtle dove, and a young pigeon.

And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. Seems very weird, right? Abraham takes all these animals, and cuts them in two, and spreads out the pieces.

Why is that? Well, I hope in verse 18, you can see the meaning, right? On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, saying to your offspring, I give this land.

A covenant. This is how they made covenants back then. Literally, the Bible says, not making a covenant, but cutting a covenant, because that's what you did.

[17:29] You cut animals. To promise to restore a kingdom is now a covenant. But what is a covenant? It's like a promise, but it's more, right? If you're married, you make loads of promises.

Can you buy some milk on the way home? Yes, I will, right? I'll be home by six. You make loads of little promises. But that's nothing compared to the big promise, right?

That one day, when you got married, and when you said, well, I do, right? I will love you, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, or in health, right?

That is the real promise. That's the foundation of the marriage. It's your big commitment. It's almost this one promise that, you know, that is why you make all these other little promises.

That's why you buy milk, and come home on time, because you've committed to this person, right?

That is a covenant. Well, do covenants last?

[18:30] Right? It is formal commitment. I mean, so many marriages don't last, right? They end in divorce. But the covenant is so much more than a promise. And you see that, especially from this ritual.

So, so what, what, what, why is, why this ritual, right? Abraham, he puts out these animals, and he, he cuts them in two, and then he kind of waits and falls asleep. God gives him a vision and says, you know, Hey, just so you know, it's going to take a long time.

You know, your offspring, they're going to be slaves for a few hundred years. But then he wakes up, and what does he see? Verse 17. When the sun had gone down, and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot, and a flaming torch, passed between these pieces.

So here are all these animals, and yeah, a torch, and a fire pot, passed between it. It's like they're, they're walking between these parts. We, we know from other places in the Bible, Jeremiah 34, it symbolizes something.

Basically, what you're saying, is that, okay, if I don't keep the covenant, may I be like this animal? It's like a curse. If I don't do, what I promised, then you can cut me in half.

[19 : 45] You can cut me in two. I don't know how you feel about it. I mean, it seems so gruesome, right? It's really, if I don't do that, maybe you're looking for a job, your next job contract, would you include this, right?

If I don't meet my targets, you can cut me in two. Right? Or, on your marriage day, right? If I don't keep my vows, then you can cut me in half. But the thing is, that sounds so utterly serious.

Right? If you make a promise, and you say, okay, if I don't do this, you can cut me in two. You can cut me in half. And that is what God is saying to Abraham. Abraham, you know, you're not sure.

Right? You have your doubts. Let me tell you, if I don't do this, you can cut me in two. That's what God is saying, by walking between these parts. If I don't make things better, if I don't make things right, you can cut me in two.

Can you imagine God Almighty just saying that, committing himself like this? I mean, how does it even work, right? Because God is immortal. How can he do that?

[20 : 48] But, you can feel it, right? If I don't do this, you can cut me in two. And the thing is, it is God who will do this as well, right?

Because often marriages fail, there's one person who does their best, but the other person just doesn't really do it, right? And you may wonder, how about Abraham? How about his commitment? Well, look again at this ritual. Who is passing between the pieces? Well, it's the fire torch, right? It's a symbol of God, like in the Exodus, the cloud of fire, right?

The pillar of cloud of fire. Where's Abraham? He's sleeping, right? He's just lying under a tree. Which is really, he has no part in the ceremony.

He has no part in the ritual. It's only God. God says, I'm going to do this. And Abraham does nothing. Again, imagine that at a wedding, right? Here is the groom making all these promises, you know, in sickness and in health for richer, for poorer, and the bride is just lying there on the pew.

[21 : 54] Right? She had a late night and got up early for the makeup and she's sleeping. What kind of wedding, right? Here comes the pastor. Okay, do you take him, will you love him and comfort him and honor and protect him?

What kind of wedding is that, right? You think very highly of the groom and not very well, sorry ladies, of the bride. Well, that is what God is doing.

The thing is, Abraham's commitment plays no part. God is taking full responsibility. He alone, he says, I'm going to do it and you're no part of it and that's a good thing, right?

Because Abraham would just mess up, which he does, right? If you've read the reading plan, Abraham, he keeps messing up. I mean, he kind of trusts God but then he goes to Egypt and I'm not sure if God will protect me, right?

So let me lie about my wife and guess what? He doesn't get judged, God just blesses him and a few chapters later he does the same thing and again, God gets him out and blesses him, right?

[23 : 01] Normally, you'd expect judgment. No, God says, it doesn't depend on you. I'm going to do this and you can just sleep, you can just watch while I make things better and that's what we need, right?

As we saw earlier, we can't make a world right. If we would take any part in God's plans, we would just mess it up and God says, that's why you're not part of it.

I'm going to do this. It's like a unilateral, I'm going to do this covenant that God is 100% committed to and that's the foundation of the Bible story, you know, the gospel.

Already in chapter 12, God promises that he will reverse the consequences of the fall. And we're going to see three big covenants over this series. You know, Abraham, what's the significance?

God will reverse the consequences of the fall. He's completely committed to it. He is, it doesn't depend on us, right? That's the thing. It doesn't mean everything's clear yet, you know, when is God going to do this?

[24 : 05] How is he going to do it? You know, is this really a full reversal? You know, who is part of it? You know, the Bible story isn't finished yet, but, you know, here is the foundation. God will make things better.

He will reverse it. And, and you read the Bible and that is what people keep coming back to. Israel is in the desert and, and they've sinned and they're going to be destroyed completely. And, and what does Moses pray? Oh Lord, remember your covenant with Abraham, right? You promised. There is hope and, yeah, God will do it. Or they're in exile, right? City's been destroyed, temple destroyed, they're slaves again in Babylon. What hope is there? And they remember, now God made a promise to Abraham and that promise still stands. God will do it, otherwise we can cut them in two. And so they have hope and it means we have hope, right? God will make it right. God will make things better.

[25 : 04] Now maybe you're here and you're visiting and, you know, you're not a Christian. I don't know how you feel, you know, you see your life. Maybe things are great, I hope so. But maybe you can feel that, yeah, life is a mess and I can't make it better.

Well, the Bible says that's right. We can't. And if we can make our life better, how about the whole world? How about climate change? How about all the economy, you know? We can't make life better.

Have you ever thought that there is someone greater? Someone so powerful that he actually can solve everything. Someone who said that he can do that by himself without you. But someone who loves you so much that you can share in that.

Come and talk to me if you want to know more. Because this is great hope. But we do need to respond. Right? If you want to share in it, that's great.

But you need to respond. Because God makes such an important promise. What should we do?

Well, the Bible says, well, be like Abraham. Which means, have faith. Abraham has faith.

[26 : 12] He trusts God's promise. Not perfectly. Far from perfect in many cases. But there's a basic trust there. Right? Where God has made this promise and so he believes it and builds his life on it.

Right? It's emphasized in verse 6 of chapter 15. Right? And he believed the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness. And he was accepted by God because of, well, his faith.

And Noah was a righteous man. Now Abraham, he's accepted by his faith, his trust. A trust that you can see in his life. Right? Because when God says, go to this land, what does he do?

Well, he backs up everything and he goes. He obeys out of faith. He, chapter 22 especially, right? God testing him with Isaac.

Abraham obeys. Which in a way is exactly the opposite of last week, right? Remember Adam and Eve? What did they do? They disobeyed. And why did they disobey? Well, they doubted, right?

[27 : 14] They doubted God's word. They doubted his power. They doubted his goodness. And so they disobeyed. Abraham, well, he trusts God. He trusts his goodness, his power, his promise. And so he obeys.

And that is what God wants us to do. We need to respond. God will fulfill this promise. He guarantees it. He will make things right. But if we want to be part of it, well, will you share in it?

Do you trust the promise? I mean, if Abraham, you know, God appears, go to the land and I'll bless you. And he said, nah, I'll stay here. Of course, right? The story would have gone differently.

We need to respond. But if we respond, there is real hope here. You need to respond. But if you're part of this, it will certainly happen. There's no doubt, which is great, right?

So many things we take part in and they won't happen. You know, great project at work and it gets canceled or this gets canceled. Here is something that will work and that you can therefore build your life on, right?

[28 : 16] Maybe tomorrow you're at work and things aren't great because you live in the world of Genesis 3, right? And colleagues fighting unfair treatment, you know, the world's economy affecting your company and layoffs and then your computer breaks down and, right?

That's the world we live in. You can say to yourself, this won't last forever. God will make it better. He's fully, completely committed to it. I can trust him.

Just keep going. And even when you mess up, when life isn't great basically because it's your fault, isn't it so good to know that, you know, God will make it better on his own, without you.

You know, you may have messed up your life now, but, you know, God won't let you mess up his plan. That's why he's doing it himself. And that is so reassuring, right? Any situation, illness, poverty, everything, one day, God will solve it and we can trust him.

And if we are not sure but have doubts like Abraham, I'll just let God reassure you. Right? When we go on in the wonderful work of God, actually, why is it such a long story?

[29 : 30] Why is it such a problem? Well, because of the problem of our sin, right? The biggest issue is ultimately that we need to be saved from our wrongdoing. But God has done that in Christ.

In a moment, we're going to take the Lord's Supper. Well, actually, just like Abraham, we have a covenant ritual to assure us. Abraham had his doubts and so God gave him this ritual to assure him.

Well, actually, that's what we'll be doing in the Lord's Supper. Jesus gave this to assure us of his love for us. I mean, if you think about it, it's actually so much deeper than we often think.

I mean, in Genesis, God said, if I don't keep this, you can cut me in two, right? Well, actually, for God to keep his promise to save us, that actually had to happen. Because, what are we thinking of? We're thinking of the body and blood of Christ, right? And normally, they are one, right? Normally, a person's blood is inside their body, is one. However, that's not what we do, right?

[30 : 31] We separate it between, you know, the bread and the juice. We separate it in two. Well, because that's what happens when you die, right? When someone gets a violent death and they get stabbed or pierced, well, your blood leaves your body, right?

This, the reason we take it in two things is because it shows Jesus really died. He died a violent death. That's why they poured out the blood from sacrifices. You know, separating body and blood. But it's like separating in two, right? Cutting in two. That is what Jesus did. He said, if I don't keep this, you can cut me in two. Well, in order to keep his promise, he had to be cut in two.

To, he had to be cut in two to pay for your sins. And that's what he did. And if you see that here, doesn't that assure you of his love, his commitment?

If he was willing to do this for you, you can be sure, right? He will make things right. He will not let you mess it up. He will reverse what went wrong. And we can trust that.