

Dr. Kenneth A. Mathews, Genesis, Session 10, Abraham's Calling and Promises of God (Gen. 11:27-12:3)

NotebookLM's 20-min. Podcast

Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome back, everybody. We're taking a deep dive today into the book of Genesis, specifically the story of Abraham. And I know what you might be thinking.

Oh, no, not another ancient travelogue. Well, you're in for a treat because it's anything but. Right.

This is about way more than just like miles traveled. We're talking about a spiritual journey, a journey of faith that's loaded with insights about God's covenants and the very idea of blessing. OK, so less about camels and deserts and more about the big questions of faith and destiny.

You got it. Now, just to get us started, I think most people have at least heard of Abraham. But did you know he wasn't actually born a Hebrew? He becomes one later on, which I think ties into some really cool themes we'll be unpacking.

Exactly. And that whole idea of transformation is huge in the story. I mean, think about it.

Abraham's journey is a bridge. It connects the early history of humanity. You know, Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, to the more specific narrative of the Israelites.

Yeah. It's like he's standing right at that pivotal point where the story narrows its focus. And speaking of connections, you can't ignore those massive genealogies in Genesis.

Those are important, right? They're not just there to make us sleepy. Oh, they are crucial. They trace Abraham's lineage all the way back to Adam, Seth, Noah, like he's carrying this torch, this legacy passed down through generations.

And that's why Abraham is so revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. He stands at the foundation of their shared spiritual heritage. But he's also key to understanding how God starts to address the problems introduced way back in the Garden of Eden.

Okay. So we've got this overarching story, humanity's journey, if you will. But we also have these very personal promises made to Abraham.

Land, offspring, blessing. These are things we all long for in some way, right? A place to call home, a future for our families, a sense that our lives have meaning and goodness in them. You're hitting on something really profound.

Those three promises, they run like threads through the entire story. They connect to those deep human desires you were just talking about. And it's not always a smooth ride, right? Right.

And here's where it gets really interesting. Those promises are often only partially fulfilled in Abraham's lifetime. It's like God's plan unfolds over generations, not all at once.

Partially fulfilled promises. Yeah. Waiting for things to come to fruition.

That can be tough. Yeah. But let's back up for a second because those promises aren't made in a vacuum, right? We've got this whole backdrop of curses hanging over humanity from those early chapters of Genesis.

Absolutely. You've got the serpent curse to crawl on its belly, the ground cursed with thorns and thistles. Then you've got Cain, cursed to wander, and of course the flood.

And the curse on Canaan. Wow. Five curses.

Five curses, each one impacting humanity's relationship with God, with each other, and even with the natural world. Okay. So five curses.

Yeah. Painting a pretty bleak picture so far. But those five blessings tied to Abraham, they're meant to counter those curses, right? That's the idea.

You got it. It's like God is setting in motion this plan to redeem and restore what has been broken. Each blessing pushes back against a specific curse, offering a glimmer of hope in this world marred by sin and brokenness.

I like that. A glimmer of hope. Okay.

So let's bring it back to Abraham. Where does his journey fit into all of this? Well, the journey itself is a huge part of the story. It all begins with a call.

God tells Abraham to leave his homeland, to travel to this new promised land. And that's where it gets interesting with the whole Hebrew thing, right? I mean, Abraham wasn't actually born a Hebrew. He becomes one later on.

Yeah. So what does it actually mean to be a Hebrew anyway? Oh, great question. The term Hebrew suggests someone who crosses boundaries.

In a way, Abraham embodies that. He's called to leave everything he knows, everything familiar, and venture into the unknown. He has to rely on faith to guide him.

So it's not just a physical journey. It's about stepping outside of his comfort zone, trusting that God will lead him to where he needs to be. Exactly.

And that journey, both literal and metaphorical, becomes a test. It forces Abraham to confront uncertainty, to cling to those promises even when things get tough. Which, let's be honest, they do.

We've talked about Abraham leaving both Ur and Haran. Which one was his actual starting point? Good catch. So the text initially mentions Ur, but it seems Haran was where his family actually settled for a while before continuing on to Canaan.

Okay, so Ur is the starting point, Haran is like a pit stop, and Canaan is the ultimate destination. And later in Acts, Stephen actually clarifies that Ur of the Chaldeans was Abraham's birthplace. But you know, when I said bookends before.

Yeah, you mentioned bookends. What did you mean by that? Think of it this way. We have Abraham leaving Haran in Genesis 12:1, like this decisive act of obedience.

And then, much later, there's the near sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah. Whoa, whoa, whoa. The sacrifice of Isaac.

We are skipping ahead. I mean, we haven't even gotten to Isaac being born yet. You're right.

Chronologically, it comes later. But Stephen, in Acts 7, he intentionally links those two events. He's emphasizing the arc of Abraham's faith journey.

You see, the call to sacrifice Isaac, it wasn't just a random test. It was the culmination of years of walking with God, of learning to trust him, even when it seemed impossible. Okay, I can see how those two events connect, even though they're separated by time in the story.

But wow, the near sacrifice of Isaac. That's a really, really intense story. It's hard to even imagine being asked to do something like that.

Oh, absolutely. Imagine being asked to give up the one thing, the one person that represents your entire future, everything you've hoped for. And in this case, it's a

son, right? A son who embodies that promise of descendants as numerous as the stars.

To be asked to offer him as a sacrifice- that's a level of trust that's hard to even fathom. It's a tough story, but it really gets to the heart of what faith means, doesn't it? Trusting God, even when we can't see the bigger picture, even when it hurts. I mean, we all face moments where we have to believe something good is coming, even when we're walking through darkness.

And Abraham's story gives us this powerful example of what that radical trust looks like. And remember, at this point in the story, Sarah is still barren. The question of inheritance, of who will carry on the lineage and fulfill the promise, it's still hanging in the air.

Right. That sets the stage for the miraculous birth of Isaac, which, if I recall correctly, doesn't exactly go smoothly either. You remember well: human impatience and divine timing often clash.

But before we get to all of that, let's dive into what happens after Abraham reaches Canaan. Okay. Sounds good.

Lead the way. I'm ready for the next part of this deep dive. So we're in Canaan, the promised land, but it's not exactly smooth sailing for Abraham and Sarah.

I mean, they're still dealing with this whole no-heir situation. It makes you wonder, you know, how they reconcile those human desires with God's promise. That tension is really at the heart of this next part of the story.

You see Sarah desperate for a child, feeling that pressure of this unfulfilled promise. She suggests a plan that, well, doesn't exactly line up with God's design. What does she suggest? She suggests that Abraham have a child with Hagar, her Egyptian maid servant.

Okay. So not exactly a conventional approach, but I guess when you're desperate, you grasp at straws. I can understand the human element of it, but it seems like this decision could create some complications down the road.

It definitely does. While Hagar does conceive and give birth to Ishmael, this act sets off this chain of events with some lasting consequences. See, this is what I find so fascinating about the Bible.

It doesn't shy away from the messiness of human choices. Yeah. Even when those choices are made by people we consider, you know, heroes of the faith.

Absolutely. And this choice really highlights that age-old struggle between trying to force God's hand and trusting in his timing. So what happens next? Does the birth of Ishmael fulfill the promise made to Abraham? Well, God acknowledges Ishmael as Abraham's son and promises to bless him, but he makes it clear that the covenant lineage, the line through which the promises will be fulfilled, will pass through a son born to Sarah.

Okay. So Ishmael is not the promised heir, but God still blesses him. It's like a family tree with two branches, each carrying its own significance.

A perfect analogy. But this division, as we'll see, creates a rift within the family and sets the stage for, well, centuries of conflict between the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael. Sadly, we still see echoes of that tension today.

It's a reminder that even within these grand narratives of, you know, faith and promise, human choices can have very real and sometimes very painful repercussions. It really makes you think about the choices we make and how they impact not just our own lives, but the lives of generations to come. Yeah, a sobering thought.

But in the midst of all this human drama, God reaffirms his covenant with Abraham in a very tangible way. He changes his name from Abram to Abraham. Wait, hold on.

A name change. That's significant, right? I mean, I've never really thought about names that way. In the ancient world, names were more than just labels.

They carried deep meaning. They often reflected a person's destiny or character. And by changing Abram's name to Abraham, which means father of many nations, God was essentially saying, I'm making you into something new, something bigger than you can even imagine.

Wow, that's pretty amazing. It's like God is giving him a new identity, a new purpose, one that aligns with the promises he has made. Exactly.

And Sarah's name is also changed from Sarai to Sarah. It's a further confirmation of the covenant. And the promise of a son through her, even though, well, she's past childbearing age.

Wait, even though Sarah is, let's say, mature, God is still promising them a child together. It seems like he loves to work outside the realm of what we consider humanly possible. It's a constant reminder that God operates outside the confines of our limited understanding.

His power transcends our expectations. And he challenges us to embrace the impossible. Okay, this is where I get curious.

Along with the name changes, there's this new element introduced as a sign of the covenant. Circumcision. What's the significance of that? In Genesis 17, God establishes circumcision as this physical mark of the covenant relationship between himself and Abraham's descendants.

It's like a visible sign of their unique connection to God and a tangible reminder of their commitment to the covenant. Why circumcision, though? What makes it so significant? That's a question that has fascinated scholars for centuries. Some see it as a symbol of purity, you know, setting Abraham and his descendants apart as wholly consecrated to God.

Others interpret it as a sign of submission, of obedience, like a physical representation of yielding to God's will. So, like most things in the Bible, there are layers of meaning. Yeah.

But it's clearly a central part of the covenant agreement. Absolutely. And Abraham's willingness to circumcise himself and all the males in his household, even at his advanced age, speaks volumes about his commitment.

It's a pretty bold statement of faith. But let's go back to Sarah and the promised child. How does that part of the story unfold? Well, after all the drama with Hagar and Ishmael, God fulfills his promise in a truly remarkable way.

Against all odds, Sarah conceives and gives birth to Isaac. Talk about a plot twist. It makes you wonder if Sarah ever looked back and thought, you know, maybe I should have just trusted God's timing in the first place.

It's a lesson for all of us, isn't it? God's ways are not always our ways, and his timing often defies our expectations. But even when we make mistakes, he remains faithful to his promises. It's reassuring to know that even when we mess things up, God is still working behind the scenes to bring about his purposes.

Speaking of messing things up, the tension between Sarah and Hagar doesn't just disappear with the birth of Isaac, does it? Unfortunately not. The arrival of Isaac, while a joyous occasion, actually makes the tension worse. Oh boy, here we go.

Family drama. Indeed. And this time, it leads to a heartbreaking separation.

Ooh, okay. I'm on the edge of my seat. Tell me more.

So we've got Sarah, finally a mother, to this long-awaited son, Isaac. And we've got Hagar, who also had a son with Abraham. You'd think there'd be this, I don't know, shared joy, family unity.

Something tells me it's not that simple. You're definitely picking up on the tension that's bubbling under the surface here. The birth of Isaac, it kind of shifts the dynamics, right? And Sarah may be feeling a little threatened, maybe a little insecure.

She demands that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. Wow, hold on. Send them away? After everything Hagar has gone through, I mean, after she had Abraham's first son, that seems really harsh.

It makes you wonder if these same dynamics, this struggle for power and belonging, you know, if they still play out in families today. That's a really good point. It's easy to judge Sarah's actions, right? But it's important to remember she's a product of her time, a woman in a patriarchal society where her status, her security, were often tied to producing an heir.

So her actions, as painful as they are, reflect a deeper struggle: this need for recognition, for belonging. I get that. It's like those primal fears and insecurities.

Sometimes they drive us to do things we might later regret. But what happens to Hagar and Ishmael? I mean, are they just abandoned? No, thankfully not. The story makes it clear that God sees their struggle and He intervenes.

He makes sure that they are protected, that they're provided for, even in their exile. It's a reminder that even when we make choices that seem hurtful, that seem unfair, God's compassion. It extends to everyone involved.

He doesn't just abandon those who are cast aside. Yeah, that's a powerful takeaway. But speaking of difficult choices, we need to circle back to a moment we've mentioned a few times already: the near sacrifice of Isaac.

Okay, yes, this is where things get really intense. I'm ready to unpack it. But to be honest, this story has always bothered me.

How could a loving God ask someone to sacrifice their own child? It just seems so cruel. It's a story that's troubled a lot of readers throughout history. And it's super important to remember that we're approaching this story with a modern lens.

We have different cultural understandings of sacrifice than they did back then. In the ancient world, sacrifices were like the ultimate act of devotion, a way to offer what was most valuable to show your commitment to a deity. Okay, that helps a little bit.

But still, sacrificing your child, even in that context, it's just next level. It makes you question everything you thought you knew about God. And the text really doesn't shy away from the emotional weight of the command.

We see Abraham's anguish, his struggle, but also his unwavering determination to obey what he believes is God's will, even if he doesn't understand it. It's like he's wrestling with this impossible dilemma. But ultimately, he chooses to trust that God knows something he doesn't.

Exactly. And the narrative emphasizes this trust by focusing on Abraham's actions. He doesn't argue.

He doesn't hesitate. He just sets out on the journey to Mount Moriah, prepared to do what he believes is required. That journey, the preparations, the building of the altar, the binding of Isaac, it's almost too much to bear.

It's a scene filled with tension and dread. And just when it reaches its peak, you know, when Abraham raises the knife, an angel intervenes and stops him at the very last second. Talk about a dramatic climax.

You're on the edge of your seat the whole time. It's a masterfully crafted narrative. It really conveys the weight of what's happening.

And in that moment of release, God provides a ram caught in a thicket, a substitute for Isaac. It's this powerful symbol of God's mercy and his willingness to provide. So it's a test on multiple levels.

It tests Abraham's obedience, but it also reveals God's faithfulness, his unwillingness to allow needless suffering. You got it. It really is.

It's a testament to both Abraham's unwavering faith and God's steadfast love. And it solidifies Abraham's place as a model of faith for all those seeking to follow God's will, even when it's difficult, even when it seems impossible. I'm starting to see how this story, even with its troubling parts, has resonated with people for centuries.

It speaks to that longing to trust in something bigger than ourselves, even when we don't have all the answers. But what does this mean for us today? You know, the listeners diving into this ancient text, what are we supposed to take away from all of this? That's the million-dollar question, right? I mean, Abraham's story, it's not just some historical account. It's an invitation to wrestle with the complexities of faith and obedience.

It asks us, are we willing to trust God, even when his demands don't make sense, even when they challenge our understanding of who he is? It makes me think about sacrifice. And what are we being called to surrender in our own lives? What ram caught in the thicket might God provide for us? Those are great questions to ponder. And as we wrestle with them, as we journey alongside Abraham through the highs and lows of his faith, I think we come face-to-face with something profound: the mystery of our own relationship with God.

We encounter that tension between human desire and divine will, and we discover that God is faithful. He provides, even in the darkest moments. Well, as we wrap up this deep dive, I'm left with a sense of awe and a whole lot more questions.

But maybe that's the point. Maybe the journey of faith isn't about having all the answers. Maybe it's about learning to trust the one who does.

Thanks for joining us, everyone, and keep seeking truth.