

**Dr. Kenneth A. Mathews, Genesis, Session 11,
Abraham's Journeys (Gen. 12:4-14:24)
NotebookLM's 20-min. Podcast
Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt**

If you're on a trip and you're not quite sure where you're going, well, that's kind of what we're looking at today. We're going deep into the story of Abraham, a life full of twists and turns and, ultimately, leaps of faith. We're using session 11 of Dr. Kenneth Mathews' lectures on Genesis as our guide.

If you've got your Bible handy, crack it open to Genesis 12; it's like a roadmap for understanding faith and obedience. Oh, wow. I like that roadmap analogy.

What's amazing is how Abraham's experiences actually kind of set the stage for what the Israelites would go through later. It's true. Centuries later.

It's like he's almost living out their destiny. In advance. Yeah, ahead of time.

Yeah. Foreshadowing. Okay, so we're in Genesis chapter 12.

Okay. God tells Abraham to leave his home, his family. His father's household.

Everything he knows. Everything. And travel to this land that God will show him.

What strikes you about that initial call? Well, I think the vagueness of the destination is fascinating. Right. It's a pure test of faith.

Yeah. To think about uprooting your entire life based on a promise. With no specifics.

Yeah. No 401k. And he doesn't even know where he's going.

Right. And remember, Abraham is not some young adventurer at this point. Oh, yeah.

He's 75. That's right. Years old.

75 years old. I mean, I think I would be asking for a detailed itinerary at that point. I'd want a brochure, at least, with some pictures.

But Abraham just goes, what does that tell us about the nature of faith? I think it suggests that faith isn't about having all the answers up front. Okay. It's about trusting God's guidance.

Right. Even when the path ahead is unclear. Even when you don't know the destination.

Yeah. But God doesn't leave him completely in the dark. Right.

He makes these incredible promises. He does. Descendants and blessings beyond measure.

Beyond measure. Which is pretty wild considering Sarah, his wife, is barren at this time. Yeah.

That promise of descendants is key there. It seems impossible from a human perspective, which highlights the power of God and God's intervention in this. So God's going to have to do something miraculous for this to come about.

And it really connects to this larger theme that we see throughout the Bible of God using Abraham's lineage to bless all nations. Okay. So it's not just about Abraham's personal gain.

It's about something much bigger. Absolutely. Something that will impact the world.

I mean, that kind of adds another layer to his willingness to just trust the process. I think that's right. You know? Yeah.

That's a big deal. It is. Yeah.

His obedience is rooted in that belief that God's plan is unfolding. Even if he can't see the full picture. Even if he can't see.

Okay. So he packs up. He hits the road.

Hits the road with his nephew, Lot. That's right. And starts this journey toward the unknown.

And what's interesting is he doesn't just passively travel. Right. He actively establishes his faith along the way.

Yes, he does. This is one of my favorite things about Abraham. Okay.

Is that we see him building altars. Yeah. Worshipping the Lord.

At each stop. At each stop. Yeah.

It's like he's marking his path. Yeah. With these physical expressions of his devotion.

I love that. Yeah. Like he's creating a spiritual map.

Yes. Not just for himself. But for those who might follow.

Yeah. For those who come behind him. Right.

But then, boom. What happened? He hits a roadblock. Uh-oh.

Famine in Canaan. Famine in the land. What's the significance of this challenge so early in his journey? Well, famine was a recurring theme in Genesis.

Okay. And it foreshadowed the hardships that the Israelites would later face. Okay.

So I think for Abraham, it forces him to make a tough decision. Okay. He has to leave the promised land and head to Egypt.

To survive. To survive. Yeah.

So even though he's following God's call. Right. The path isn't always smooth.

Right. He's still vulnerable. That's right.

To the harsh realities of the world. To the realities, yeah. And Egypt becomes a real testing ground for his faith.

It really does. Wouldn't you say? Absolutely. This is where things get a bit complicated.

Okay. Out of fear, Abraham tells Pharaoh that Sarah is his sister. Wait.

Hold on. Not his wife. I thought God promised to bless those who bless Abraham and curse those who curse him.

Right. What's going on here? This seems like a recipe for disaster. It does.

And I think it forces us to wrestle with the complexity of those promises and how they play out. Okay. They don't always unfold.

In a straight line. A straightforward tit-for-tat manner. Okay.

So Pharaoh Smitten, with Sarah, takes her into his harem. Right. Now, this isn't just about a love triangle.

No. It's about power. Power.

And legacy. Legacy. Right.

Explain that a little bit. Sure. Harems in the ancient world weren't just about pleasure.

Okay. They were about producing heirs. Yeah.

Solidifying alliances. Yeah. Expanding power.

Okay. So Sarah, being in Pharaoh's harem, is a direct threat to God's promise. Of descendants.

Of descendants through her. Okay. And Abraham.

It's like a ticking time bomb. It is. For the entire covenant.

Yeah. And this is where we see God's intervention. Right.

But in a way that's not exactly obvious at first. That's right. God inflicts Pharaoh and his household with these serious diseases.

Okay. But without revealing the cause. It's subtle but powerful.

Very much so. It makes you wonder how many times things are happening behind the scenes that we're completely unaware of. I think all the time.

Right. It really raises the question of divine providence. Yeah.

Of God working in ways that we may not fully understand. Okay. So Pharaoh figures out what's going on.

Right. Sends Abraham and Sarah packing. He does.

But not before showering them with gifts. Yeah. Isn't that interesting? Yeah.

He's trying to undo whatever curse he's brought upon himself. Yeah. Almost like a peace offering.

Yeah. That's right. So even in the midst of this deception and potential conflict, Abraham leaves Egypt wealthier than when he arrived.

That's right. It challenges our assumptions about how blessings and curses might operate. It does.

Doesn't it? I think it makes you think about the long game. Okay. And how God's purposes might unfold over generations.

Yeah. And speaking of long games, this whole experience with Pharaoh really highlights the tension between faith and human fallibility. It does.

Even Abraham, this giant of faith, makes some pretty questionable choices. Well, he does. But it reminds us that even the most faithful individuals are still human.

Right. They struggle. They make mistakes.

Yeah. And sometimes they take matters into their own hands. But what's remarkable is that God doesn't abandon them.

Right. He continues to work through their imperfections. Yes.

Guiding them toward his ultimate purpose. That's right. And that brings us to the next chapter in Abraham's journey, which involves a conflict a little closer to home.

All right. That's going to be good. Let's get into that.

So Abraham and Lot, they go back to Canaan. Yeah. But their newfound prosperity creates a whole new set of problems.

That's right. It's like they've traded one wilderness for another. Yeah.

It's interesting how abundance can become a source of tension. Yeah. Especially when you're thinking about a world where resources are scarce.

Yeah. So the land can only support so much. Right.

And we have these growing herds and flocks. Yeah. And it leads to conflict between their herdsman.

Okay. And plus, it's not like they're surrounded by friendly neighbors. Right.

They're in the heart of Canaanite territory. Exactly. You'd think they'd be banding together.

Right. Against a common enemy. You would think so.

But instead, they're squabbling among themselves. They are. This is like a key theme that we see through Genesis.

Yeah. The danger of internal strife. Right.

It's a reminder that even when we're facing external threats, our greatest challenges can come from within. Closer to home sometimes. So how does Abraham handle this conflict with Lot? Right.

I mean, does he pull rank? Lay down the law. He doesn't. He takes a very different approach.

Okay. He offers Lot the first choice of land. Okay.

So he's being super rigorous. Yeah. Yeah.

That's unexpected. It is, right. Especially after that whole Egypt thing.

Yeah. Where he wasn't exactly- not exactly a model of virtue. No, he wasn't.

It seems like he's learned something from that experience. Yeah. I think so.

What do you think? I think this moment reveals significant character development in Abraham. Okay. He's choosing peace.

Okay. He's choosing unity. Yeah.

Even if it means sacrificing his own preferences. It's powerful. Yeah.

Putting relationships above material gain. That's right. Okay.

So Lot. Yeah. He doesn't exactly follow suit.

He doesn't. He chooses the fertile Jordan plain. Which, spoiler alert, turns into Sodom and Gomorrah.

Yeah. That's not going to end well. Not at all.

Classic case of short-sightedness. Yeah. Prioritizing immediate gratification over long-term consequences.

Yeah. I mean, Dr. Mathews even compares Lot's choice to idolatry. He does.

Right. Like, focusing on what benefits himself rather than what aligns with God's will, he's trading his spiritual inheritance for a quick payoff. That's right.

And so this decision to separate, it's not just about land. It's not just about the physical. It's about resources.

Right. Right. It ties into this larger theme of purification, of setting the stage for God's ultimate plan.

God is working to establish a distinct lineage through which the promised deliverer will come. Okay. So a messiah.

A messiah. Yeah. And that involves separating those who are truly devoted to him from those who are not.

All right. So even though it's painful, the separation from Lot is actually a necessary step in fulfilling God's purpose. Absolutely.

It's about refining the line. Making sure that it's built on a foundation of faith and obedience. So let's talk about a rather dramatic shift in Abraham's story here.

He goes from shepherd. Yes. To warrior.

Warrior Abraham. Rescuing Lot from a coalition of kings. I love this part.

It's like watching a peaceful farmer suddenly transform into a battle-hardened hero. It really is. What's going on here? I thought he was all about tending flocks and building altars.

So Lot gets caught in the crossfire of this regional conflict between several kings. Abraham hears about it, gathers his men, and launches a daring rescue mission. Wow.

So he's not just passively accepting whatever fate throws at him. No. He's actively fighting for his family.

Absolutely. For what's right. For what's right.

I mean, this episode establishes his reputation as a man of action. Absolutely. Right.

A force to be reckoned with. Yeah. He's not just a man of faith.

He's also a leader. He's a protector. Protector.

A warrior. And it's here for the first time that he's referred to as a Hebrew. That's right.

What does that mean? It's a term that's debated. Okay. But possibly connected to his ancestry or the idea of crossing boundaries.

So it sets him apart from the surrounding cultures? It does. But what really stands out to me in this whole warrior episode is the appearance of this enigmatic figure. Oh yes.

Melchizedek. Melchizedek, king of Salem. Who is this guy? One of the most mysterious figures in the Bible.

Okay. He's a king and a priest. Okay.

Who worships the same God as Abraham. Okay. Wait a minute.

A priest-king who worships the God of Abraham. I know, right? In the middle of all this paganism. And all these warring kings.

Yeah. And warring kingdoms. It's like this hidden oasis in the desert.

It is. A beacon of light in a world drowning in darkness. And this encounter.

Yeah. It's not just a chance meeting. No, it's not.

Melchizedek blesses Abraham. He does. And Abraham, in turn, gives him a tithe.

A tenth of his spoils. This is a huge deal, right? Yeah. What does that tell us? I think it's an acknowledgment of Melchizedek's spiritual authority.

Oh, okay. And it suggests that even in this ancient world, there were those outside of Abraham's direct lineage who recognized and worshipped the one true God. Okay.

But then just as quickly as he appears, he vanishes from the story. It's like this tantalizing glimpse into this larger spiritual reality that we don't fully understand. But the writer of Hebrews, centuries later, draws a direct connection between Melchizedek and Jesus.

Okay. So this seemingly minor character plays a major role in shaping our understanding of God's plan. He really does.

Okay. So we've got to shift our focus back to the heart of Abraham's story. Okay.

Let's do that. The warrior episode is over. He's back in Canaan.

Yeah. The focus returns to those promises that God made to him. Yes, it does.

He promises that, despite all he's been through, they still haven't come to fruition. Right. He still doesn't have a son.

That's right. And he's starting to wonder how God will possibly fulfill his word. Understandably so.

And this is where we enter into the heart of the covenant. Yes. That God makes with Abraham a covenant that will shape the destiny of his descendants.

For generations. For generations to come. That's right.

And that's where we're going to pick up in part three of our deep dive into Abraham's journeys. All right. I'm ready.

Welcome back. Welcome back. Okay.

We're picking up right where we left off with Abraham wrestling with doubt. Okay. Wondering how God's going to fulfill his promises.

Yeah. Especially that one about having a son. Right.

And this is where things take a turn for the ... Bizarre. Bizarre. Yeah.

Dr. Mathews describes this scene in Genesis 15 as a covenant ceremony. Okay. But it's unlike anything I've ever read before.

It's a powerful visual. Okay. Imagine a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passing between animal carcasses.

Okay. Wait a minute. This sounds more like a scene from a horror movie than a sacred ritual.

It's pretty intense. It's intense. But I think it's important to understand the cultural context here.

Okay. This was rooted in the ancient Near Eastern culture. Okay.

Can you explain the symbolism a little bit? So by walking between those divided animal pieces, God is essentially taking on the full weight of the covenant. He's saying, I'm all in. Yeah.

I'm all in on this promise. I'm committed. Yeah.

But even with this incredible display, Abraham still has doubts. He asks God. How can I be sure? Yeah.

How can I be sure that I will inherit this land? Right. Here we see the human side of faith. Right.

Even Abraham, who has demonstrated incredible obedience, still struggles with uncertainty. It's actually comforting to see that. It is.

That even the father of faith has these moments of doubt. It makes the story feel more relatable. Yeah.

More human. Right. Faith isn't about never having questions or fears.

No. It's about choosing to trust God. Even when we don't have all the answers? Even when we don't want to.

And God responds to Abraham's doubts with such patience. Yeah. He reaffirms that promise of descendants as numerous as the stars.

It's beautiful. It's a beautiful image. Look up at the night sky, Abraham.

That's how vast your family will be. I mean... A promise that goes beyond human comprehension. Beyond our ability to even grasp.

Absolute. And it's not just about quantity. Right.

But about a specific land. Yes. The land of Canaan.

The land of Canaan. God outlines those boundaries. That territory that will become so central.

To the identity and destiny? To the identity and destiny of Abraham's descendants. That's right. But there's a catch.

There is. This land is already occupied. It is.

By various Canaanite tribes. Not an empty welcome mat. It's not an empty welcome mat.

No. So this foreshadows the challenges and conflicts that are to come, right? That will shape the history of Israel. Yeah.

The promise is there. Yeah. But it will come at a cost.

So it's a promise mixed with a warning. It is. The path to fulfillment.

Might not be easy. Might not be easy. Okay.

And then right in the middle of all this covenant talk, God does something kind of unexpected. He changes their names. He changes their names.

Abraham to Abraham. And Sarai to Sarah. Why the sudden rebranding? Well, name changes in the Bible are never just cosmetic.

Okay. They always signify a change in identity. Okay.

A new chapter. A new chapter. In this case, the names are tied to the covenant.

Okay. And the promise of a son. So it's not just about changing a label.

Right. It's about changing their destiny. It is.

Abraham means father of many. It does. The constant reminder.

And God's promise. And for Sarah. Yeah.

The name change is particularly poignant. It is. Her initial laughter.

At the idea of having a child. And her old age will turn to joy. To the joy of motherhood.

It's like God is using their names to rewrite their stories. Yeah. Transforming doubt into belief.

Right. And barrenness into fruitfulness. That's right.

But there's another layer to this covenant. There is. That, Dr. Mathews, highlights.

And it involves a physical sign. Okay. So this is where things can get a bit sensitive.

It can. But it's important to understand the historical and cultural context. Absolutely.

Circumcision was a common practice. It was. In the ancient world.

And for Abraham and his descendants, it took on this spiritual dimension. So it's not about the physical act itself. Right.

It's about what it represents. Right. A covenant commitment.

Okay. A visible marker of belonging to God's chosen people. And this idea of a physical sign of setting apart a people for a specific purpose will have a ripple effect throughout biblical history.

Throughout the whole story. It's a powerful symbol of identity. Right.

And a reminder of the covenant relationship. Okay. So we've got these incredible promises.

Yeah. A dramatic covenant ceremony. Name changes.

And a physical sign. It seems like everything's falling into place. You would think so, but... Human impatience enters the picture.

Yep. Sarah? Still waiting for the promised son. Still waiting.

Decides to take matters into her own hands. This is where Hagar, Sarah's maidservant, enters the story. Right.

She basically tells Abraham... Take Hagar. Take Hagar. And maybe she can give you the son that God promised.

I know. Talk about a messy situation. Oh, it's messy.

It's a reminder that even those closest to God can make choices that create conflict and pain. They're not immune to human weakness. Right.

Or the temptation to manipulate circumstances. And this decision has lasting consequences. It does.

Hagar gives birth to Ishmael. Right. Who becomes the ancestor of the Arab people.

Yeah. And it sets the stage for centuries of tension and rivalry. It does.

A reminder that even our seemingly personal choices... Can have ripple effects. Can have ripple effects throughout history. That's right.

But it also highlights God's ability to work through even the most complicated situations. It does. Ishmael, though not the son of promise, still receives God's blessing.

It's like God saying, even in your mistakes, even in your impatience... I can bring forth something good. I can bring forth something good. Yeah.

But it's clear that God's plan hasn't changed. It has not. The promise of a son through Sarah remains central.

Right. And that brings us to one of the most well-known scenes in Genesis. Okay.

The visit of the three mysterious strangers. To Abraham's tent. Yes.

It's just full of anticipation. A hint of the supernatural. And what's so amazing about this whole story of Abraham... Yeah.

Is that it points forward... To Jesus. To Jesus. Yeah.

To this ultimate fulfillment... That's right. Of God's promises. Of God's promises.

And that's what makes it so relevant for us today. It is. Thousands of years later.

Absolutely. Because it reminds us that God is faithful. He is.

He keeps his promises. He does. And even when we can't see the full picture... We can trust him.

We can trust him. That's right. Thanks for joining us for this deep dive into the life of Abraham.

It's been a pleasure.