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The covenant with Abraham: Genesis 12–22

The Scriptures reveal the true story of God's good creation and of mankind's nature, purpose, fall, and rescue. It is a story about God's love and mercy. For his own mysterious reasons, God the Creator bound himself to humanity from the beginning. How do we know? We see in the genealogy at the end of Genesis 11 that Abraham is connected to Noah, who is connected to Adam. So, the story of Abraham is the beginning of the story of God's definitive plan to rescue all of Adam's children.

He begins his great rescue plan by wooing one man and his wife, Abraham and Sarah. Together with their child, they take the fragile first steps in a journey that has now lasted nearly 4000 years. The story of salvation is like a great tapestry. We normally see only how it is unfolding from the back side. Our view is mostly of knots and confusing tangles. It is not until we come around to the front to see how the tapestry is unfolding that it begins to make sense. Life must have felt like that to Abraham and his barren wife Sarah. What does one make of the missteps in Egypt, the dalliance with Hagar, the rescue of Lot? How does one make sense out of the command to sacrifice one's son? All these events are at the very beginning of the tapestry that the participants only ever see from the back. Abraham and his family are the first of the threads, the first of the messy knots and tangles. From our side, the lovely "right side" of the tapestry, we see a family, a marriage. And the beauty that is unfolding is set in an all-too-real human story, filled with strange twists, cowardice, heroism, and mysterious visitors blessing Abraham.

God chose to rescue the world through a human family, with its mixture of frailty and courage. This is entirely consistent with God's most remarkable act of rescue: the birth of Jesus, the second Person of the Trinity, to a human couple. God's rescue of humanity is inexorably tied to his creation blessing and promise: be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth! The unity of the husband and wife—the promise that "the two shall become one"—functions as a signpost pointing the way to the most wonderful mystery of all: God wants to be one with us. He wants to share his own life with us. He wants to live one life with us. From the earliest prophets to the book of Revelation, the image of marriage is employed to describe the covenant. In fact, the union of a man and a woman in marriage is the fundamental symbol of God's covenant with us. God is the Bridegroom and Israel is the (often unfaithful yet still beloved) bride.

The story

Abraham is a tribal chieftain—wealthy, confident, shrewd, well-traveled, and 75 years old. His wife, Sarah, also well up in years, is with him. Also with him is his nephew Lot, next in line to inherit this wealth. Abraham and Sarah have no children. Fanned out around them is a throng of relatives and workers, plus massive numbers of herds and cattle, tents, cooking utensils, bedding, clothes, provisions, and silver and gold to feed and house this large crowd on its periodic travels. They are walking south from Shechem, at the center of Canaan, toward the Negeb and Egypt.

We pick up the story at the end of chapter 11 of Genesis. Here we meet a man and his wife, who have set out with their extended family from the city of Ur (in modern-day Iraq) for the land of Canaan. However, when they come to Haran, in modern-day Turkey, they decide to settle there.

It was not unusual for nomadic tribes like Abraham's to settle on the outskirts of a city, sometimes for several generations. Such a family might even become involved in local politics. But things always change. Perhaps a family might wear out their welcome. Jealousy and tension between the locals and successful migrant groups still happens today. There might be a local drought so that they would need better pastures for the flocks. Perhaps simply their nomadic nature might prompt them to leave. But eventually, a nomadic family like this would move on again.

Abraham's story is different from the typical one, however. None of the usual reasons caused this man and his family to continue their journey to the land of Canaan. The father of the clan had an encounter with a God, and this God made three promises to him: I will give you a land, I will make of you a great nation, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

We know who this God is. We have the benefit of four thousand years of history. We know that this God is the Creator of the universe. We know that he is one God, but three distinct persons. We know that the second Person of the Trinity became man. We know that he suffered, died, and rose from the dead. We know that he sent his Holy Spirit to be with us. We know that this remarkable encounter with Abraham and his family was the first act in God's plan to rescue humanity from the terrible predicament that had caused humanity's exile from the garden and had opened the door to death.

It must be remembered that Abraham did not have this benefit of thousands of years of tradition and mighty stories about the Lord's powerful saving actions. His experience of God consisted only of some promises, a few rescues, and a mysterious blessing from the king of Salem. Now he is asked to believe that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars of the sky. And he does! He does believe.

At the heart of this journey of discovery is a covenant. It is something like a modern contract, with duties and obligations for each party. But in the ancient world a covenant was much more than a mere contract. A covenant was a solemn promise between two parties that established a relationship. While it could be a business agreement, a land sale, etc., it also could establish terms between a king and his subjects. In Abraham's case, the covenant revolves around how God plans to rescue humanity and restore his good creation. He will do it by establishing a unique relationship. He proclaims, "I will be their God and they will be my people."