

THE PATRIARCHS

The Story of Abraham

Genesis 12-22

PREPARATION

In the period of the Early World (Primeval History), we discovered how deeply rooted is the inclination towards sin (concupiscence) in the descendants of Adam and Eve – a consequence of the Fall. Over time, two different lines of people arise: the “Sons of God,” people like Enoch and Noah, who called upon name of the Lord God and worshiped Him; and the “Sons of Men,” people more like Cain, who followed their own desires and inclinations.

God set apart the righteous Noah and his family and destroyed the rest with a flood. But in the end, nothing changed in the hearts of mankind after the flood. By Genesis 11, the descendants of Noah had banded together to provide strength and security, disregarding the command of God “to multiply and fill the earth.” They sought self-sufficiency, power, and a name for themselves by building a tower-temple to heaven, to become “like God,” and be equal to him. This was a collective rebellion against God, similar, to the rebellion committed by Adam and Eve in Eden.

True to His promise, God reacted not by destroying mankind, but by confusing their language. The period of the Early World ends with confusion, as God’s children scatter in different directions to create nations according to God’s plan, and to populate the earth.

Our *History of Salvation* continues in Chapter 12, many generations later, around the year 2,000 BC. The place is the city of Ur in Mesopotamia, close to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The story picks up with a man named **Terah**, and descendant of Noah through his son, Shem. Terah has three sons: Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Haran dies at an early age. Terah moves with his sons and family clan from Ur and settles in the city of Haran. His plan was to move to Canaan.

The culture has become polytheistic. People now worship not one God, but a whole pantheon of gods. However, the **God Most High (El Elyon)** continues to be worshiped by many as the *highest God* in the pantheon of gods. He is the Creator of heaven and earth. It is evident from the text that Terah and his family tribe continue to worship the God Most High.

After the death of Terah in Haran, God speaks to Abram and calls him to leave Haran and to move with his family and household to the land of Canaan. Abram responds with the *obedience of faith*. This is the beginning of the second period in the history of salvation – the Period of the Patriarchs. The Patriarchs will become the founding fathers of a new nation, Israel, God’s chosen people.

STUDY AND REFLECTION

God Speaks to Abraham (Genesis 12-13)

Abram and his wife Sarai are living in Haran, together with their extended family, the house of Terah. After many years of marriage, they have no children. At some point in *God Most High* speaks to Abram in a clear and audible voice. He says:

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (Genesis 12:1).

In this brief revelation, God asks Abram to leave his father’s house (the family tribe), and to move to Canaan, as his father had originally intended to do. If Abram responds with the obedience of faith, God promises Abram three things: He will provide Abram with descendants, and will bring forth a great nation from him; He will provide land and eventually a kingdom; and He will bless Abram, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed by his descendants.

Abram responds with the “obedience of faith.” By faith, he listened to God and he believed. He submitted freely to the word of God and he obeyed it when he has called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance. He went out, leaving the security of his family ties and country, not knowing where he was to go, trusting that God would show him the land in time. Once he had reached the land promised by God, Abram lived there by faith, as a stranger and pilgrim, trusting that God would fulfill His promises in due time.

Abram’s response also involves an attitude of prayer, an intimate relationship with God. Abraham’s heart is entirely submissive to the word of God and so he obeys. Such attentiveness of the heart, whose decisions are made according to God’s will, is essential to prayer.

Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. Abram did not travel alone. He took with him his wife, Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all the people (slaves-servants), livestock and possessions they had amassed in Haran. They travelled together in a caravan. Lot travels with Abram, his uncle, because his father is dead. Abram’s brother, Nahor, remains in Haran.

Canaan is the Promised Land, the land of Israel as we know it today. When Abram arrived in Canaan, he stopped at a holy place, the *Oak of Moreh*, near Shechem, in the middle of the Promised Land. It is there that God appeared to Abram once again and said, “It is to you descendants that I will give this land” (Gen 12:7). So, Abram built there an altar for the Lord God, who had appeared to him, and offered a sacrifice.

From there, Abram moved to the mountainous district of Bethel (which means “House of God”), where he pitched his tent, with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east (north of Jerusalem). There, he built an altar to the Lord. From there, Abram made his way stage by stage toward the Negeb.

The first test of Abram's faith seems to be the famine in Canaan. Instead of relying on God's promise and providence to survive in the land that has been promised, Abram decides to leave the land and to seek another country, Egypt.

It is in Egypt that Abram learns how important it is to trust God in all circumstances, no matter how bad things seem to be. Having not told the whole truth about Sarai, Abram is in danger of losing his wife, the woman through whom God promised him descendants. When he reaches the point of giving up, God acts and saves him. Sarai is restored to him and they return to settle in Canaan, in the land that God had promised him.

After returning from Egypt (after the famine is over), Abram and Sarai settle in Bethel (more specifically, between Bethel and Ai); then finally, at the Oak of Mamre, at Hebron. Hebron was the hill above the grove or vale of oak trees named Mamre, about 20 miles south of Jerusalem. Bethel means "house of God," which foreshadows the Church as the house of God.

After returning to the place where God has called him to be, Abraham begins to prosper and becomes a rich man.

What happens to Lot?

Abram and Lot's great herds did not have the whole country to themselves as it was already inhabited by others. Since the land at Bethel was not able to support them and their herds, they decided to separate.

Abram allows Lot to have the first choice. Lot looks out and chooses the richest land, the land eastward towards the plain of Jordan and the cities Sodom and Gomorrah. It was land that was extremely fertile at that time. However, the people that are living there and extremely wicked.

We see to some degree, Lot's greed. Even though the land was promised to Abram, he wants the best for himself. Also, being tempted by what is pleasing to the eye, he does not take into account the consequences of living among people who are great sinners against God.

The incident reveals Abram as a peacemaker, a man who is very generous and genuinely concerned about others. The fact that he allows Lot to leave him and to take the best land for himself reveals a new and deeper faith in God's promise. God will provide an heir and He will provide for him from the land.

Pleased, with Abram's act of faith and trust in God's providence, the Lord appears to him again and renews his promise. All that land – to the east, to the west, to the north and to the south – shall be his; even the portion that Lot has taken for himself.

The Blessing of Melchizedek (Genesis 14)

Abram was able to assemble a total of 318 men. In battle, he is outnumbered, but by God's providence he is victorious and returns without any loss of life.

Again, we see Abram as a man who is not just willing and content to give, but a man who is willing to give of himself, totally. He is genuinely concerned about other people. He devotes everything, even his own life, to save Lot and his family.

In this incident, we see that Lot's begins to pay the price for his decision to live among those who are great sinners against the Lord.

When Abram returns victorious, he is greeted by the kings of two cities, Sodom and Salem. Does "Salem" sound familiar to you? Where could this place be?

Salem (which means "peace") is the ancient name of the city "JERU-SALEM." It is located about 20 miles north of Hebron, where Abram is living. The king of this Canaanite city, king Melchizedek, comes to greet Abram.

What is so special about this king Melchizedek? What gift does he bring to Abram? Does he remind you of anybody in particular?

The name Melchizedek means "king of righteousness." He is the king of Salem, or symbolically, the king of peace (Salem means peace). But Mechizedek is also a priest, the high priest of Salem, who worships the one true God, the "God Most High, creator of heaven and earth" (Gen 14:19).

From the text, it seems that Melchizedek was the first of the Canaanite kings. He comes to recognize Abrams' victory over the enemy, a victory that the five local kings could not achieve. In thanksgiving to God for the victory, he offers a sacrifice (gift) of bread and wine. They are the first-fruits of the land, offered in recognition of the Creator; and thus prefigure the gifts of bread and wine to be offered in the celebration of the Eucharist.

The appearance of Melchizedek and his offering becomes prophetic. It obviously point to the coming of Christ, the future descendant of Abraham and the promised Saviour. Through Abrahams' blood line, the true "King of Righteousness" and the "King of Peace" will appear – the Lord Jesus Christ. His Priesthood and Kingship shall be eternal, and He will offer His precious Body and Blood to the faithful in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist (Cyprian).

It is interesting to note here that Abram offers the king of Salem a tenth of everything that was taken, implying that the king had a right to receive. This would indicate that Abram was living on the territory which belonged to the king of Salem. Whereas Lot chose to live among great sinners, Abram chose to live in the land of a king who still worshiped the true God.

Even though Abram is permitted to keep what belonged to Sodom, he returns it to the king of Sodom. He wants to keep nothing for himself and renounces ownership of the spoils of war.

God Establishes a Covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15-17)

Once again, God appears to Abram in a vision. What does He promise Abram?

God is pleased with Abram's generosity towards Melchizedek and for his renouncing of the riches offered to him by the king of Sodom. Once again, God appears to Abram and renews his promise: Abram will have a son, an heir, and his descendants will be as numerous as the stars. To his descendants God will give the land of Canaan and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through the blessing bestowed upon Abram and his descendants.

At what time of day do you think this vision occurring?

Our initial thought we be that the vision is occurring at night, so that Abraham could see the stars in the sky. However, Gen 15:13 tells us that the sun did not set until later, after God has spoken to Abraham. So, the vision must have occurred during the day!

Imagine God asking Abraham to look up at the sky and to number the stars on a clear day. What would have been difficult task at night now becomes an impossible task during the day! He looks up at the sky, but he can't see the stars to count them. Yet he knows that they are up there, somewhere, and that without a doubt, in time (several hours) they will become visible to him.

Abraham then gets the message, and he responds to God with faith.

Like the stars, he could not yet see his descendants. But also like the stars, he realizes that his descendants are out there. In time, they will appear, and their number will be countless.

God asks us to believe based on what we know to be true about Him – not based on the evidence available to our senses. Abram was able to believe that God would give him offspring as numerous as the stars, even though he and his wife were childless and past the age of having children. His faith made him righteous before God.

What does all this stuff about cutting in half a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove and a pigeon, then putting each half side by side? What is flowing down through the middle?

This was an ancient practice that was associated with the making of covenants. The animals were cut in half and each half was placed side by side, down a hillside, forming two vertical columns. Blood flowing from the two halves would flow downhill, in between the animal halves, creating a central stream of blood. The parties to the covenant would then make their solemn oath and proceed to walk between the animal halves in the stream of blood. By doing this, the parties to the covenant were symbolically saying, "May this be done to me if I fail to keep this covenant."

A Covenant oath is often sealed with a symbolic action. What is the symbolic action (sign) that confirms the truth of God's word? Why is Abram seized with terror?

God used this ancient practice in establishing His covenant oath with Abraham. As the sun sets, He Himself "walks through the middle." "There appeared a smoking furnace and a firebrand that passed between the animal halves" (Gen 15:17).

Abram is seized with fear. The ritual means that he must walk through the middle, but he cannot. He lacks the faith required to fulfill the covenant agreement. What happens is this: God Himself walks through the middle for both, Himself and Abram, as represented by the smoking furnace and the firebrand. God takes upon himself Abram's responsibility. Abram does not have to do anything extraordinary for the promises to be fulfilled. All he needs to do is to believe and to trust.

Imagine what it must have meant to Abraham to see the presence of God passing between those pieces of meat. It is astonishing that God would pronounce such an oath, but it underscores that His promise will be carried out; it will not be broken. (For further insight, read Jeremiah 34:17-20.)

Why do Abram and Sarai decide to have a child through Sarai's slave girl, Hagar? What name is given to the child?

Trying to second guess what God had meant, they figured that His promise to provide Abraham with a son and heir would be fulfilled through a surrogate mother. The name given to the child born to Hagar is Ishmael, which means "God has heard." In some ways, the Covenant has been broken. No extraordinary efforts were required to obtain an heir. All that Abram and Sarai need to do was to believe and trust that God, in His time, would fulfill the promise.

Despite the failure, we do see growth in faith and understanding. Originally, after Lot had departed, Abram and Sarai thought that God's promise of descendants will be fulfilled through an adopted heir, Eleazar, a man from his own household (not of their own flesh and blood). Then Abram and Sarai assumed that God's promise would be fulfilled through a surrogate mother. Finally, they come to believe that God's promise will be fulfilled in the way he had promised from the outset: they will give birth to their own son, who will be the true heir.

After re-establishing His Covenant with Abram, God appears to him again and changes his name and Sarai's name. Why? In response to the Covenant, what does God ask of Abraham and his descendants? What sign of the covenant are they to maintain?

Abram means "exalted father." God changes his name to "Abraham" which means "father of many." God changes the name of Sarai to Sarah, which means "princess of many nations." In the Old Testament, names are important. They reveal the destiny and the vocation of a person. A name change means that a major change is about to take place in the life of a person, an important shift in direction and purpose.

At first when God established his covenant with Abraham, He asked nothing of him other than a response of faith. Now, however, the Lord God asks Abraham to keep His Covenant by being circumcised. Circumcision is to be Abraham's response to God's covenant and a sign of the Covenant. (Remember God's Covenant with Noah? The rainbow became the permanent sign of that Covenant.)

For Abraham and his descendants, circumcision was to be a permanent sign and reminder of God's Covenant with them as a people, a nation, and a sign of their consecration to God. God would fulfill his promise and establish a great nation, a people

of God, by whom all nations upon the earth would be blessed. For their part, Abraham and his descendants were to remain faithful and loyal, consecrated to God. Those who would fail in their loyalty to God, they and their offspring would be cut off and separated from God's blessing and promises, just as the foreskin had been cut away from the body.

Under the New Covenant (New Testament), what replaces the sign of the Old Covenant?

The Old Covenant sign of circumcision is replaced in the New Covenant by Baptism, in which people die to the old person and the sinful way of life. This is cut off and stripped away, like old clothing. The "garment of death" is cut off and removed. They rise to a new life with Christ as children of God, clothed in a garment of light and righteousness. It is truly a circumcision of the heart.

"In Him (Christ) you have been circumcised, with a circumcision not performed by human hand, but by the complete stripping of your body of flesh. This is circumcision according to Christ. You have been buried with Him, when you were baptized; and by baptism, too, you have been raised up with Him through your belief in the power of God who raised Him from the dead" (*Colossians 2:11-12*).

When God clarifies once again that Abraham and Sarah will have a son, how does Abraham react? How old were they at that time? When will this child be born?

Abraham bowed to the ground and he laughed, thinking to himself, "Is a child to be born to a man one hundred years old, and will Sarah have a child at the age of ninety" (*Gen 17:17*)? But God promises that Sarah will bear a son by the same time next year.

What name is to be given to the child? What does this name mean? What promises does God make about the child?

Isaac is the name that is to be given to the newborn child. The name Isaac means "God has laughed." His name would be a perpetual reminder that God can be trusted even when the situation seems laughable.

God's Covenant blessing and promises would continue through Isaac, and God would establish His covenant as an everlasting covenant through him. Isaac would also foreshadow another "impossible child," born of faith to a Virgin.

The Apparition of God at Mamre (Genesis 18)

This is a special apparition of God to Abraham and Sarah at the Oak of Mamre. In what form does God appear to them? How does Abraham speak to the vision?

God appears in the form of three angels, appearing as men. Abraham does not address them in the plural but in the singular. "My Lord," he says to them. He saw three but adored one.

Some have supposed that that one of them is the Son of God (the Second Person of the Trinity) accompanied by two angels. Abraham recognized Him as the Lord God and worships Him and speaks with Him alone. Nevertheless, the presence of three angels

becomes a symbol of the Trinity and the address of Abraham in the singular, an affirmation of the unity of God, one in three persons.

How do Abraham and Sarah respond to their guest(s)? What does that tell you?

They respond with hospitality. The hospitality of Abraham is an important virtue that should be practiced and shared by all his spiritual children.

How does Sarah react when she overhears that she give birth to a child in a year's time? How would you react?

She laughs, thinking to herself, "Now that I am past the age of childbearing and my husband is an old man..."

There is a famous icon based on this apparition. What is it? Can you explain its meaning?

Based on this apparition to Abraham, Andrei Rublev painted the famous icon of the Holy Trinity. Not only was he a man of great talent, but he was also a man of prayer and a monk of the fifteenth century. In illustrating the biblical text, Rublev runs no danger of deforming the divine mystery by his own personal imagination. He presents the mystery of the Trinity not according to his own ideas but rather by being faithful to Holy Scripture.

From Mamre, where are the guests headed? What are they going to do?

They are headed for Sodom and Gomorrah, to destroy those cities, because of the horrendous sins taking place there. The Lord remains with Abraham and continues to speak to him and then disappears. Only the two angels (men) go forth to Sodom to accomplish its destruction.

What great insight does Abraham receive from the Lord God, before he returns home?

The Lord God is extremely patient and merciful. He is willing to spare the cities from destruction, even on the account of ten righteous people.

The Destruction of Sodom (Genesis 19-20)

How does Lot greet the two angels (men) who come to Sodom? How does he respond to them? What does that tell you?

Lot greets them with hospitality and invites them to stay at his house. Again, the importance of hospitality as a virtue is emphasized.

How do the people of Sodom respond to the foreigners who have arrived? What is Lot willing to do to protect his guests?

The people gather outside Lot's house and demand that Lot send the two foreigners out to them, so that they could abuse them. Lot refuses to do this, for he is responsible for the safety and well-being of his guests. Hospitality is a serious thing. He is willing to send out his daughters to protect his guests and not the breach the unwritten law of

hospitality. This may also be an indication that he has already lost his daughters, who are becoming very much like the people of Sodom. One of the consequences of choosing to live among the people of Sodom was that Lot would lose his children and future generations to them.

What does this incident tell you about Sodom and the life of the people in this city?

The people are great sinners against God... Sodomy is considered to be one of the sins that cry out to heaven for vengeance, i.e. God's justice and intervention ahead of time.

What do the angels tell Lot to do? What happens to Lot's wife?

Lot is to take his wife and daughters and leave the city immediately. They are to run for their lives, neither looking behind nor stopping anywhere along the way. They are to make for the hills in order to be saved. Lot's future sons-in-laws laugh at him and refuse to believe the warning.

As Lot and his family were fleeing, fire and brimstone rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah. At some point, Lot's wife looked back, and was turned into a pillar of salt. Initially, Lot begs for permission to move to another smaller town. He has come to prefer life 'in the city' and does not want to return to life in the hill country. However, out of fear of being abused or persecuted as a foreigner, they do not enter the city, but remain in the hills.

His daughters, now without future husbands, devise a plan to conceive and to have children by means of their father. Lot had lost his children to the 'world' he chose to live in.

The Birth of Isaac (Genesis 21)

Why does Sarah drive Hagar and Ishmael away?

Sarah fears that there will be conflict between Ishmael and Isaac and that Ishmael will in time demand a share in the inheritance.

What happens on the eighth day after Isaac is born?

The child is circumcised on the eighth day and given the name Isaac, as God had commanded.

How is Hagar and Ishmael saved from death in the wilderness? What does God promise Hagar?

God sends an angel to them and saves them by leading them to a well. God promises Hagar that he will make her son Ishmael into a great nation.

What happens to Hagar and Ishmael?

Both are saved from death. They make their home in the wilderness of Paran. Ishmael becomes a great hunter, a Bowman. His mother chooses for him a wife from her homeland, Egypt.