

Overview of Abraham

I. Introduction

A. Over the past four months we've looked at the first major section of Genesis

1. Genesis can be roughly divided into two sections - Primeval History and the Patriarchs
2. As Dan covered the Table of Nations and the Tower of Babel we finished Primeval History
3. So, this morning we are starting the next major section of Genesis

B. As with all major sections of Genesis, it is a story of generations

1. Genesis 11:27 reads - *Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor and Haran...*
2. Like all generation stories, the story is about the son of the person named
3. So, this morning we are starting the story of Abraham

C. Unlike the stories we have covered so far in Genesis, Abraham's story is quite long

1. The story takes the major part of thirteen chapters of Genesis to cover
2. For comparison, Adam and Eve only lasted three chapters
3. Cain and Able only lasted two chapters
4. Even Noah only took four chapters of Genesis
5. But Abraham's story is much longer and this points to the centrality of Abraham to the story of Genesis, the story of the Pentateuch, and even the story of the whole Bible

D. Although Abraham's story is quite long, I'm going to try to cover it rather quickly

1. I'm going to try to limit myself to twelve sermons on Abraham
2. Now, that might not seem short to you
3. But, if we spent as much time per chapter in Abraham as we did in Adam and Eve or Noah we should do 20-30 sermons on Abraham
4. And it could be quite easy to do that, I could easily do 25 sermons on Abraham and not run out of material
5. But, we're going to try to limit how long we're in Abraham so that we don't lose sight of the big picture, where is the story going - Abraham's not the end, he's a major character, but he's not the end

E. Since I am going to be running rather quickly through the story of Abraham, though, for this first message I want to do an overview sermon

1. So, this morning we aren't going to focus on one particular piece of text, instead we're going to look at the text as a whole
2. I think this is important, especially as we move through the text quickly over the next several months, for several reasons
 - a. First, an overview will help us see the main point of all of Abraham's story - what is the main point?
 - i. As I've already mentioned, I don't want to lose sight of the whole while we go through Abraham's story
 - ii. So, right here at the beginning I want to make sure we figure out what the main point is, so as we go through the stories we can keep the main point in front of us
 - b. Second, an overview will help us understand the point of each individual story - how does each story fit into the whole?
 - i. As we go through the stories, I know that I'm going to assume you have a familiarity with the story of Abraham to make my points
 - ii. So, it's just a good idea to start here by making sure we're all familiar with the story of Abraham so that as we discuss what the purpose of the story of Abraham and Abimelech is, we know the background and where it fits into the story

- c. Third, an overview will help us keep our eyes on the whole of Biblical History - how does Abraham's story point to Christ?
 - i. Here's a spoiler alert - although I hope you would already guess it - my desire is to see that Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of Abraham's story
 - ii. An overview of Abraham's story is going to help us understand the big picture of how Christ is the fulfillment
 - d. Fourth, an overview will help us organize the points made during Abraham's story - what do we learn from the whole as opposed to the parts?
 - i. As we go through Abraham, we're going to see that there are two main topics in Abraham's story
 - ii. But the teaching of Genesis is not merely inside each story, it is often in how the stories relate to each other
 - iii. So, understanding the larger picture is going to help guard our understanding of the truths we learn in Genesis
3. I'm going to come back to these questions at the end of this sermon and hopefully we will start to have a basis for answering these questions that we can carry with us through the story of Abraham by the end of this morning

F. I'm going to cover five points this morning as we look at Abraham's story

1. I've just finished a brief introduction to the story of Abraham
2. Next we're going to look at the structure of Abraham's story
3. Third, I'm going to give a brief overview of how the rest of the Bible references Abraham's story
4. Fourth, I'm going to start to define the central point of Abraham's story and give an overarching proposition that will guide us through the rest of our study of Abraham
5. Finally, I'll give a brief conclusion, coming back to the four concepts/questions I just defined to see how our overview of Abraham should help us move forward in our study

II. The Structure of Abraham's Story

A. The story of Abraham is central and foundational to the story of the Bible

1. But Abraham's story is also an excellent piece of literature
2. It is carefully crafted to demonstrate the author's purpose
3. So, the first thing I want to look at this morning is an overview of the literary structure of Abraham's story
4. This will help us understand Abraham's story better as we go through it in more detail over the next several months
5. But I hope it also helps you stand in awe of the Word of God as you see the beauty of the story of Abraham

B. There are three main sections of the story of Abraham

1. The three sections are separated by a simple phrase - "After these things"
 - a. Abraham's story starts in Genesis 11:27 - *Now these are the generations of Terah*
 - b. The next section starts in chapter 15 verse 1 - *After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision*
 - c. The third section starts in chapter 22 verse 1 - *After these things God tested Abraham*
 - d. So, the three divisions are, roughly, chapters 12-14, chapters 15-21, and chapters 22-25
2. These three sections emphasize the three main things Moses wants us to learn from the story of Abraham
 - a. The first two sections focus on two promises of God
 - i. Genesis 12-14 focus on God's promise to Abraham to give him a land
 - A. Genesis 12:1 - *Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."*
 - B. Genesis 12:7 - *Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land."*
 - C. These are only two examples, the promised land is referenced at least twelve times over these three chapters
 - ii. Genesis 15-21 focus on God's promise to Abraham to give him a son
 - A. Genesis 15:4 - *And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir."*
 - B. Genesis 18:10 - *The LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son."*
 - C. These are only two examples, the promised offspring or son is mentioned at least thirty-seven times in these seven chapters
 - iii. Now, these two promises are never fully separated
 - A. There is also an implicit promise of a son in Genesis 12-14, and the promise of land does not disappear in Genesis 15-21
 - B. But, the two sections focus primarily on one promise and then the other
 - C. As we will see, though, both promises are fulfilled in the same person, which is why they are never completely disentangled
 - b. The last section of Abraham's story then demonstrates Abraham's faith in God's promise by Abraham's actions
 - i. We have the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in chapter 22, demonstrating his faith in God's promise by being willing even to sacrifice Isaac while believing in God
 - ii. We have the story of Abraham seeking a wife for Isaac in chapter 24, demonstrating his faith by seeking one of his own family for Isaac to marry instead of intermixing with the people of the land
 - c. These two topics - the promise of God and the response of faith - are the central themes of Abraham's story - and thus they become the central themes of the Bible
 - i. In fact, the two promises to Abraham are really promises of Christ
 - A. As we go through the story of Abraham, I hope that you will see that the promise of a

land is truly fulfilled in Christ providing new heavens and a new earth to His people - II Peter 3:13 - *But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.*

- B. And I hope that you will see that the promise of a son is also truly fulfilled in Christ who is the promised son and the king that came of Abraham's line - Galatians 3:16 - *Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ.*
- ii. And as we see God's promises in Christ, the response to God's promises must always be faith
 - A. When we understand God's promises in Christ, God calls us to faith
 - B. And Abraham teaches us what that faith must look like
 - C. As we go through the story of Abraham, this is one of the main things I am going to draw out - how does Abraham's faith, or lack of faith, teach us to have faith in God's promises

C. The first and second section of Abraham's story - the two promise sections - also have internal organization to them that help us understand why certain stories were selected by Moses and by God to record for us

1. The general pattern of the promises sections are:
 - a. A promise from God to Abraham and initial faith
 - b. A time of disbelief in the promises of God that seem to imperil God's promises
 - c. A restoration of faith and renewal of the promise
 - d. Abraham is shown to be blessed and to be a blessing
2. So, in the first promise - the promise of land - we have the following stories:
 - a. The call of Abraham is a promise from God to Abraham and initially Abraham shows great faith and he 'obeyed and went'
 - b. But then we have the story of Abraham in Egypt where Sarah is taken by Pharaoh and Abraham does not act by faith in God's promise
 - c. When Abraham returns, though, his faith is again demonstrated as he allows Lot to choose the best part of the land and trust God to fulfill His promise and God reaffirms His promise to Abraham
 - d. Finally, Abraham is shown to be a blessing to Lot as he rescues Him from the kings who carried Lot captive and Abraham is shown to be blessed by Melchizedek's blessing
3. The same pattern holds for the second promise - the promise of a son - but the pattern is actually repeated twice
 - a. Chapter 15 records God's covenant with Abraham, a solemn promise from God
 - b. But then we have the story of Abraham and Haggai and Ishmael where Abraham acts without faith and jeopardizes the promise
 - c. After this fiasco, though, God reappears to Abraham and renews His covenant with Abraham
 - d. And Abraham is shown to be blessed as God then shares his plans with Abraham and he is shown to be a blessing as he intercedes for Sodom and Lot is saved for the sake of Abraham
 - e. The cycle repeats again with another act of disbelief with the story of Sarah and Abimelech
 - f. But God's promise stands and God fulfills His promise to Abraham in the birth of Isaac
 - g. And again Abraham is shown to be a blessing by making a covenant with Abimelech and is shown to be blessed by recovering the wells that were taken from him
4. This pattern helps us tie the concepts of promise, faith and blessing together
 - a. The promises of God require faith in the promise
 - b. Faith must be acted on, which means acting as though God's promises are true
 - c. But, and this is really important, faith is not the basis of the promise - faith is not primary, God's promise is primary
 - d. So, even as Abraham fails in faith at many points, God's promise stands - Abraham's faith is a required response, but not the basis of earning the promise
 - e. God's promise requires responsive faith, it is not based on responsive faith
 - f. So, God will fulfill His promise in Christ - He will remain faithful - and the world will be blessed through Christ, that is, through Abraham, not on the basis of Abraham's faith but on the basis of God's promise

III. The Biblical Commentary on Abraham

A. The story of Abraham is probably the most referenced story of the whole Bible

1. Just a simple search for Abraham comes up with 231 references
2. I'm not going to look at each of these references this morning - many of these references are merely glancing references that remind us as we go through the Bible how everything that is going on is based on the promises to Abraham
3. But even as we filter these glancing references out, I still have 39 solid references to the story of Abraham in the Bible split almost equally between the Old Testament and the New Testament
4. I want to spend a moment as we do an overview of Abraham's story to consider how the rest of the Bible views Abraham's story
5. If we want to make some overarching conclusions about the point of Abraham's story, we should make sure that the rest of the Bible agrees with us

B. The Old Testament commentary on Abraham

1. Abraham had a special relationship with God
 - a. In Isaiah 29, Isaiah describes God as the one who redeemed Abraham
 - b. And in Isaiah 41, God calls Abraham His friend
 - c. This description is repeated in II Chronicles 20 where Abraham is again called the friend of God
 - d. Abraham's relationship with God was a close and special relationship, one that forms the basis of the covenantal relationship of the Israelite nation with God and thus forms the basis of our covenantal relationship with God in the church
 - e. Interestingly, in the same way, Jesus tells His disciples in John 15 - *Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.*
2. So, God's faithfulness to the Jewish nation was based on the Abrahamic covenant
 - a. In Joshua 24, Joshua proclaims that God brought the Israelites into the land based on the Abrahamic covenant
 - b. In II Kings 13, although the people of Israel failed to follow after God, God was merciful and compassionate to them because of His covenant with Abraham
 - c. In I Chronicles 1 - the genealogies at the beginning of Chronicles - Abraham is a major character who heads the Jewish nation
 - d. In I Chronicles 16, David sings of God's faithfulness to His covenant with Abraham as the Ark is brought into the city of Jerusalem
3. Thus the Abrahamic covenant is a basis for appealing to God for mercy and grace
 - a. In II Chronicles 20, Jehoshaphat, facing the Moabites and Ammonites in war, prays for God to deliver them, remembering His promise to give the land forever to the descendants of Abraham, His friend
 - b. And in Nehemiah 9, as the people confess their sins, they recall God's promise and His faithfulness to Abraham in their plea for mercy
4. And the Abrahamic covenant demonstrates God's faithfulness to His promise
 - a. In Psalm 105, the psalmist calls us to remember God's wondrous works, remembering specifically His covenant with Abraham
 - b. And in Isaiah 51, Isaiah calls the faithful to remember how God was faithful to Abraham and to continue in faithfulness
5. But, without living out the faith Abraham had, though, the Abrahamic covenant will be useless
 - a. In Ezekiel 33, Ezekiel warns the people not to rest in the promises to Abraham if they are living in rebellion to God's commands - the promises to Abraham and the faith of Abraham go together
6. Ultimately, though, God promises that there is a greater fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant
 - a. In Micah 7, Micah looks forward to a future fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant
 - b. Micah 7:18-10 - *Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast*

love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old.

- c. Micah understood that the promise to Abraham was not primarily in the past but in the future
 - d. The promises had not been fulfilled, they had been typified, but not fulfilled, throughout the Old Testament!
7. On the other hand, Sodom and Gomorrah are great symbols of God's coming wrath against all sinners
- a. Isaiah 1, Isaiah 13, Jeremiah 49, Jeremiah 50, Lamentations 4, Ezekiel 16, Zephaniah 2

C. The New Testament commentary on Abraham

1. The promise of Christ is rooted in the promise to Abraham
 - a. Matthew 1 - Abraham heads the list of the Jewish lineage of Jesus - the promise of Jesus in some way starts with Abraham
 - b. Luke 1 - Mary and Zechariah understand the birth of Jesus to be the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham
 - c. Luke 3 - Abraham is an important step in the human lineage of Jesus - Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise to Adam
 - d. Acts 3 - God promised Abraham and thus Israel to be a blessing to all the nations and Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise
 - e. Acts 7 - Stephen's defense of Christ and the gospel begins with the story of and promise to Abraham
2. Abraham's faith is the prime example of how to receive the gospel
 - a. Romans 4 - Justification is by faith and the promise is received by faith
 - b. Galatians 3 - All of salvation is by faith, the blessing to the nations is propagated through faith, and the offspring of Abraham is counted by faith through Christ, so the righteous must live by faith like Abraham
 - c. Hebrews 11 - Abraham is perhaps the prime example of faith in the Bible because of his continued obedience looking for God's promise
 - d. James 2 - Abraham's faith was not without works, so justification by faith does not exclude works but rather requires them
3. But physical lineage from Abraham is not how to receive the gospel
 - a. Matthew 3/Luke 3 - Though the Jews prized their Abrahamic lineage, it is not enough for salvation without repentance
 - b. Luke 3 - Though the Jews prized their Abrahamic lineage, it is not enough for salvation without repentance
 - c. John 8 - Though the Jews claimed Abraham as their father, Abraham's true children believe and obey and are not enslaved to sin
4. God's faithfulness to Abraham is an example of His sovereignty in salvation
 - a. Romans 9 - God's choice of Isaac is a display of His sovereignty over salvation
5. The New Covenant is a fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant
 - a. Galatians 4 - The glory and benefit of the New Covenant can be understood by looking at Isaac and Ishmael as types
 - b. Hebrews 6 - God's covenant to Abraham was to demonstrate His faithfulness and to bolster faith
6. Christ, the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, is greater than Abraham, the recipient of the promise
 - a. Hebrews 7 - Melchizedek is a type of Christ that calls us to see Christ as greater than Abraham
7. Abraham is not the only positive example, Sarah also demonstrates how godly women should live
 - a. I Peter 3 - Sarah's submission to Abraham is an example for godly wives
8. But, like the Old Testament, Sodom and Gomorrah are excellent examples of God's coming Judgment
 - a. The judgment on Sodom is an excellent example of God's wrath against sin (II Peter 2) that lasts forever (Jude) and will happen again when Christ returns (Luke 17). Sodom's sin was great but disbelieving Christ is an even greater sin (Matthew 11). Lot's rescue, on the other hand, is a picture of salvation from God's wrath (II Peter 2).

IV. A Summary of Abraham's Story and Overarching Premise

A. We've already started to summarize Abraham's story by seeing that there are two main themes

1. First, the promises of God to Abraham that are promises ultimately of Christ
2. Second, the response of Abraham to God which is faith lived out in action
3. And really, we could stop here, because this is how I'm going to treat Abraham's story, under two heads - promise and response
4. But, as we think here at the end, I want to go through and work out how the stories and words in Abraham's story point us to this

B. As we look across Abraham's story, I think four main words (or concepts) pop up over and over again

1. These four words are:
 - a. Blessing
 - b. Land
 - c. Offspring (son)
 - d. Faith (believe)
2. We see most of these concepts just in the first verses of chapter 12
 - a. Genesis 12:1-3 - *Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that 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 dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*
3. And one of the verses of the Old Testament most quoted in the New Testament is in chapter 15
 - a. Genesis 15:6 - *And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*
4. The first three words are wrapped up in the promise of God - God's promise was a land and a son who would be a blessing to Abraham and then to whole world
5. And the last word is wrapped up in Abraham's response - faith

C. Overarching Premise

1. So, how do we put all of these words and ideas together succinctly to understand the point of Abraham's story - Here's my attempt:
2. God made two promises to Abraham, a land and an offspring, and the story of Abraham is a story of faith in those promises. The purpose and result of these promises is a blessing for all the families and nations of the earth, that is all those who bless Abraham. The story of Abraham calls us to see the true fulfillment of these blessings in Christ and to have faith like Abraham in the promise of a land and the promise of an offspring that have been fulfilled in Christ.

D. Focused Premise

1. I think the previous paragraph is a good, succinct summary of the story of Abraham, but that's still a lot to say every week and it's still enough to get lost in
2. So, that is my overarching premise, but as we approach the text every week, I think I can simplify the premise somewhat:
3. Focused Premise - The Promise was Christ. The Response was Faith.
4. If you miss everything else in the story of Abraham, I hope you get those two things - God made great promises to Abraham - promises that could only be fulfilled by the Son of God coming to earth as a man and redeeming the children of Abraham - that is, those who are children of Abraham by having the same faith that Abraham had
5. So, this is how I am going to organize my sermons every week

E. So, my sermons as we look at Abraham will have two topics and four questions

1. What are the promises?
 - a. In most of Abraham's stories God is making, repeating or reaffirming promises to Abraham
 - b. And since I believe these promises are ultimately fulfilled in Christ, I want to carefully look through the text and define what promises are being made and what they mean
2. How are the promises ultimately fulfilled in Christ?
 - a. God will promise Abraham the land of Canaan - what does this have to do with Christ?
 - b. God will promise Abraham that he will become a great nation - what does this have to do with Christ?
 - c. God will promise to bless all the nations of the world through Abraham - what does this have to do with Christ?
 - d. So, we will take the promises we identify in the text and trace them through the rest of the Bible to see how they are ultimately fulfilled in Christ
3. How does Abraham respond?
 - a. Most of the stories about Abraham emphasize how he responded to God's promises
 - b. Abraham obeyed and went
 - c. Abraham left the land and went to Egypt
 - d. Abraham let Lot choose the best of the land
 - e. Since these responses are supposed to teach us about faith, I want to look through the text and define what Abraham's responses were and how they demonstrated or did not demonstrate faith
4. What do Abraham's responses teach us about faith?
 - a. With my final question, I want to apply Abraham's faith to us
 - b. If Abraham demonstrated, or did not demonstrate, faith in all these ways, what does this mean for us
 - c. Can we generalize the stories of Abraham in a way that we can apply them to us in 21st century America?
 - d. Does Abraham's story simply tell us not to go to Egypt and give our wife to Pharaoh, or are there real ways that we need to imitate Abraham's faith?

V. Conclusion/Application

- A. First, an overview will help us see the main point of all of Abraham's story - what is the main point?**
- I hope you have gathered at this point that the main point of Abraham's story are the promises of God and Abraham's response
 - God makes many great promises to Abraham that can be summarized as two great promises - a promise of land and a promise of a son
 - And Abraham reacts either in faith or without faith at different times to these promises
 - So, the main point of Abraham is God's promise and our response
- B. Second, an overview will help us understand the point of each story - how does each story fit into the whole?**
- The story of Abraham is crafted to show the interplay between God's promises and Abraham's faith
 - So each story should be taken in context of the promise of God that is being focused on - how does this story fit into the promise of land or the promise of a son?
 - And each story should be evaluated to see how Abraham does or does not respond in faith
 - This should help us as we come to Egypt and Abimelech and the stories that we might not be sure how to deal with - let's look at the promise of God and the response of Abraham and fit the story into context
- C. Third, an overview will help us keep our eyes on the whole of Biblical History - how does it point to Christ?**
- If there are two promises in Abraham's story, both of these promises are ultimately fulfilled in Christ
 - Only Christ can give us a perfect land that we will possess forever - He will give us new heavens and a new earth where righteousness dwells and He will call us to be with Him forever there
 - Christ is the promised son - there are many types of the promised son as we go through the Bible, but the promised son does not become a great blessing that blesses every family of the earth until Christ
 - So, the promises to Abraham underpin the Bible because they are promises of Christ, and if they are promises of Christ, then Abraham's faith should be exactly the same as our faith
 - This is the point of Hebrews 11 - we should believe the promises just like the faithful in the Old Testament believed the promises because they were all promises of Christ
- D. Fourth, an overview will help us organize the points made during Abraham's story - what do we learn from the whole as opposed to the parts?**
- The last three points are good information and good application, but here is where I want to make my big application this morning
 - As we go through Abraham's story, we see both God's promises and Abraham's faith
 - And as we dig into each story, we might start to feel that Abraham's faith was necessary to bring about the promises - somehow Abraham's faith earned God's promises
 - But the story as a whole tells us that this is not the case! Abraham had several episodes of disbelief where he jeopardized the promise.
 - But every time Abraham jeopardized the promise, God was still faithful. God's promise stood regardless of Abraham. Abraham could not earn the promise, God gave the promise.
 - So, we see that God's promise has the place of primacy in Abraham's story. The promise does not rely on faith, faith relies on the promise.
 - In other words, our faith doesn't earn us God's great promises. Instead, our faith grasps onto God's promises and receives them.
 - Our faith does not have the place of primacy. God's faithfulness comes before our faith. Our faith rests in God's faithfulness and not the other way around.
 - So, let's learn from Abraham how to have faith. But let's also learn from Abraham that to learn how to have faith we must learn the promises of God. We learn to have faith by learning the promises of God.
 - In other words, I want you to see Christ first in the story of Abraham. I don't want you to see faith first, I want you to see Christ first. Then, as you see Christ, I want your faith to be built up like Abraham. As you see everything that Christ is promised to be and how Christ has become all of those things, I want you to love Christ and believe the promise and act like Abraham.
 - Acting like Abraham is not the goal. Acting like Abraham is the response. Seeing Christ is the goal.