



# God's Promises to Abraham

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There is a reason God promised that Abraham would be the “father of many nations” (Ge. 17:5). The Hebrews came from him through his son Isaac, while Arabic Muslims regard him as their ancestor through Ishmael. And of course, all Christians are spiritual descendants of Abraham through Christ (Gal. 3:29). No wonder his name was changed from “Abram,” meaning “exalted father,” to “Abraham,” meaning “father of a multitude” (Ge. 17:5)! A study of the various promises God made to this great man reveals his importance to the overall plan of salvation revealed throughout the entirety of Scripture.

For example, the Lord promised Abram that his descendants would be “a great nation” (Ge. 12:2; cf. 13:16; 17:6; 18:18). This promise was fulfilled when Abraham’s descendants through his son Isaac and grandson Israel became a nation of great numbers during their time in Egypt (Ge. 46:3; Ex. 1:7; Dt. 26:5), a nation which would become great and powerful under the direction of godly leaders such as Moses, Joshua, and David who directed Abraham’s descendants to faithfully serve the Lord.

Along these same lines, the Lord also commanded Abram to leave his country and family and travel to “the land that I will show you” (Ge. 12:1), the land of Canaan (12:5-6). At that point God promised Abram, “To your offspring I will give this land” (12:7), a promise he kept centuries later starting during the days of Joshua (Josh. 21:43-45) and ending in the days of Solomon (2 Ch. 9:26; cf. 1 Ki. 8:56). This promise was based on the condition that Abraham’s descendants remain faithfully obedient to Jehovah (Josh. 23:14-16; cf. Le. 26:14-45; Dt. 28:15-68). Old Testament history reveals how Abraham’s descendants repeatedly fell away from the Lord and as a result repeatedly lost control of their land and were taken into foreign captivity (Judges; 1-2 Kings; 1-2 Chronicles; Jeremiah; Lamentations; etc.), with the ultimate destruction of their claim to Canaan delivered to them by God through Rome after they rejected Christ as the Messiah (Mt. 21:33-46; 23:29-39; 24:1-34; Mk 13:1-30; Lk 19:41-44; 21:5-32; 23:27-31). After the abominations visited upon them by Rome in the latter part of the first century AD, Abraham’s descendants through Israel could never again lay complete claim to the land possessed by their ancestors. Even today, after the United Nations worked to reunite Jews with the land known in biblical times as “the Promised Land” in an effort

to help them recover from the horrors visited upon them during the Holocaust of World War II, Abraham's descendants through Israel daily fight numerous enemies from the nations surrounding them in order to hold on to just a small fraction of the land originally promised by God. Since the days of the Truman administration, many in this country and elsewhere believe that the United States and other allies of Israel should help her retake Canaan's land primarily because it is the will of God. However, political pundits and commentators who claim that Israel currently has a divine right to the land directly east of the Mediterranean overlook the fact that God's promise to Abraham was conditioned upon his descendants continued loyal obedience to him, a condition which they failed to keep (Je. 31:32).

Abram and his wife Sarai, or Sarah as she would later be named (Ge. 17:15), were childless when Scripture first introduces us to them (Ge. 11:26-30). By promising to make of him "a great nation" (Ge. 12:2), God in effect was promising Abram "offspring" (Ge. 13:15-16). After Jehovah declared himself to be Abram's "shield" and promising him that his "reward shall be very great" (Ge. 15:1), Abram pointed out that he was still childless and that his current heir was his servant Eliezer of Damascus (15:2). The Lord then promised Abram that "your very own son shall be your heir" rather than Eliezer (15:4), and then declared that his offspring would be compared to the innumerable stars of heaven (15:5). Abram "believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (15:6), a passage quoted by centuries later by Paul to prove to Judaizers that one under Christ's covenant were not required to do the works of Moses' law in order to be justified (Ro. 4:1-25), and quoted by James to show that a person is justified by works of obedience to the commandments of God in addition to faith (Ja. 2:20-24).

Abram's faith in God's promises to give him offspring was not always constant, however. This is shown in the numerous times he dishonestly presented Sarai as his sister rather than as his wife in efforts to preserve his life from those whom he feared would take it (Ge. 12:10-20; 20:1-18). It is sadly ironic that due to Abraham resorting to lying because of a lack of faith that God would keep him safe in order to keep his promise of granting offspring to him, the son God promised to him would eventually follow his father's sinful example and lie about his own marital standing in order to save his life even after God made him a similar promise (Ge. 26:1-11). May Christian parents today heed this lesson and be warned about the power of their own example and the influence it has on our children!

Abram and Sarai's faith in God's promise to give him offspring was shown to be weak on another occasion when Sarai convinced him to obtain a child through marriage to her servant, Hagar (Ge. 16:1-4a). This polygamous union resulted in the conception and birth of Ishmael (16:15-16), which in turn caused considerable strife in Abraham's family both then and in the years to come (16:4b-6; 21:8-11). However, God was able to use their weak faith and the sin that resulted from it. Centuries later, he would inspire

Paul to use the polygamous marriages of Abram, Sarai, and Hagar and the two sons that resulted from them to allegorically illustrate the differences between the Mosaic covenant and Christ's covenant in order to show the superiority of the latter (Ga. 4:21-31). He also used this sinful episode to fulfill his promise to make Abraham "the father of many nations" (17:5) by causing Ishmael also to be the ancestor of a great nation (16:7-12; 21:12-21). Yet, the strife resulting in Abram and Sarai's lack of faith in God's promise is felt even today as we see Isaac and Ishmael's descendants still at war with each other. One cannot imagine how different the world would be if Abram and Sarai's faith had been stronger and they had decided to wait for God to fulfill his promise to them on his own time (Ps. 25:3; 27:14).

On yet another occasion, Sarah's faith in God's promise was shown to be lacking (Ge. 18:1-8; cf. 18:22; 19:1ff). Even though God had already specifically promised Abraham that Sarah would bear him Isaac in their old age (17:15-19), Sarah laughed to herself when she heard the Lord repeat the promise to Abraham and wondered how she and Abraham could conceive after menopause (18:9-12). God called her on the lack of faith shown by her laughter, even though she initially denied that she had laughed (18:13-15). A year later, God fulfilled his promise to them in spite of her laughter and she bore Abraham a son in their old age, naming him Isaac, which means "he laughs" (21:1-7). Interestingly, by telling Abraham to give the promised son that particular name even before the episode in which Sarah laughed (17:19), God proved that he knew of Sarah's reaction in advance...and yet gave the promised and the blessing of children anyway. What a testimony to his love, grace, and patience (Mt. 5:44-45)!

In spite of these lapses, Abraham and Sarah's overall faith in the promises of God stand as an example for us today. Their faith in God's promises was what prompted him to obey his extremely difficult command to leave their home and family to travel to an unknown and distant land (He. 11:8-9; cf. Ge. 12:1-5). Sarah's faith in God's promises, even though proven to be weak on at least two occasions as we've seen, was still the reason the Lord kept his promise to her (He. 11:11-12). As a result, she is the spiritual "mother" of Christian women who follow her example of respectful, pure, modest, quiet conduct today (1 Pe. 3:1-6). Likewise, Abraham's faith in God's promise of numerous offspring gave him the strength to obey the extremely burdensome command God gave to test his faith when he told him to sacrifice Isaac (He. 11:17; cf. Ge. 22:1-12). His faith in God's promises was so strong that he considered that God would resurrect Isaac in order to keep his promise to him (He. 11:18). Thus, his faith exemplifies what true obedience to God is all about (Ja. 2:14-26). The times when their faith was weak also serve as a warning for us to be watchful when we think we are strong (1 Co. 10:11-12).

Undoubtedly the most significant and important promise God made to Abraham is found in the statement, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Ge. 22:18; cf. 26:4; 28:14; 12:3). Peter pronounced this prophecy fulfilled in Jesus

(Ac. 3:17-26; cf. Dt. 18:15-19). Later, Judaizing Christians who believed salvation to be dependent upon adherence to the laws of Moses sought to limit this promise to those who were either physical descendants of Abraham or to Gentile Christians who were circumcised and kept the Mosaic commandments (cf. Ac. 15:1ff).

This prompted Paul to address the issue in his letter to the Galatians by first stating those who have faith are “sons of Abraham” (Ga. 3:7), i.e., his true descendants. God’s promise to Abraham that in him “all the nations” would be blessed was fulfilled when God justified the Gentiles by faith, proving that in a sense Abraham had had the gospel preached to him centuries earlier (Ga. 3:8; cf. Ge. 12:3) and that under the Christian covenant Jew or Gentile who believe in God as Abraham did are blessed just as he was (Ga. 3:9; cf. Jn. 8:39; Ro. 4:11-12; He. 11:8-10).

Those Jews who tried to be justified by Mosaic Law (Ro. 9:31-10:13) would be “under a curse” (Ga. 3:10; cf. Dt. 27:26; Je. 11:3; Ez. 18:4; Ro. 3:10-19). They would not find justification through works of the Mosaic economy which required perfect obedience, but rather through faith as the Old Covenant itself foretold (Ga. 3:11-12; cf. Hb. 2:4; Le. 18:5). Paul went on to clarify that true sons of Abraham would have faith specifically in Christ by pointing out how Christ “redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” via his crucifixion (Ga. 3:13; cf. Dt. 21:23; 1 Pe. 2:24; Ti. 2:14; Ep. 1:7). Therefore, it would be only “in Christ Jesus” that “the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles” in order for them to “receive the promised Spirit through faith” (Ga. 3:14; cf. Ge. 12:3; Jn. 7:37-39; Ga. 3:2; Ac. 2:38-39). This is why Paul would specify how the promises God had made to Abraham did not say “‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ” (Ga. 3:16; cf. Ge. 12:7).