



CONNECTING THE DOTS: ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

Psalm 8:5 tells us that God made man “a little lower than the angels.” Comedian Will Rogers added, “And he’s been getting a little lower ever since.” That’s the theme of the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis.

The Garden of Eden was the scene of the first *Adam bomb!* Adam and Eve *bombed*, they sinned - and the fallout poisoned the entire human race. The contamination was immediately visible in the form of a birth defect. Adam and Eve’s kids were born as self-centered as their parents had become. They see it first in their son’s self-righteousness and jealousy. Cain murders his brother, Abel. From there, the Adam’s family goes from bad to worse. Humans cavort with demons. They’re given over to rebellion, and deviance, and perversion. It gets so bad... God floods out humanity and starts afresh. Noah’s family exits the Ark to multiply and fill the earth. But rather than *scatter out* people *huddle up*. At the Tower of Babel, led by a tyrant named Nimrod, all the tribes come together to defy the Lord.

And it’s amazing, after every sinful episode in the human drama rather than write us off, God responds with a covenant. He reaches out in love with new terms for a relationship... God’s goal is to redeem man. *Make him new and better – not just return him to his state of innocence.* This is why God allowed sin. God prefers a man who’s fallen and can’t get up; then is lifted up – to a man who’s never fallen and thinks he could get up if he did. Even after the Flood, God came to Noah with a covenant. God judged man’s evil, but then He hung up His war bow. The rainbow was the sign of God’s mercy. He’d never again judge the earth with water.

But Nimrod refused to trust God. A fallen world is full of *the fearful and frightful* – and Nimrod played on man’s fears... The question we all face is will we trust God in the midst of this scary world, or fiend for ourselves? Nimrod convinced the people to look out for themselves and trust him. They built a water-proof tower in the desert. He didn’t trust the promise of the rainbow. Nimrod made God out to be the bad guy and waged war against Him. Nimrod’s Tower doubled as an observatory. He consulted the stars. He coaxed man into worshipping creation rather than the Creator.

Genesis 1-11 races through history. The first 11 chapters cover a period of over 2000 years... *whereas the last 39 chapters span only 245 years.* At the end of chapter 11 Genesis puts on the brakes. God crashes Nimrod's party. He alters the mono-tongue of man, and confuses the languages. And God forces men to separate and scatter. After the Tower of Babel God issues a caution flag. He slows the pace.

In Genesis 1-11 God works with mankind as a whole – *but with little success.* It ends with a worldwide revolt. Satan chooses **a man, Nimrod – a place, Babel** – and **a means, fear.** God has to bust up the mutiny. But how does God respond to our sin? *It's always with a covenant.* God never gives up. But this time He changes strategy. Beginning in chapter 12 He'll no longer work with mankind corporately, instead He picks one family through which He'll install His covenants and redeem mankind. Beginning in chapter 12 God chooses **a man, Abram - a place, Canaan** - and **a means, faith.** The rest of the Bible is the story of the plan of salvation God works out through the Hebrews - the family of Abraham.

Which brings us to our text, Genesis 12:1, **"Now the LORD had said to Abram..."** There're all kinds of fanciful Jewish legends that paint Abraham as godly from birth. One story has him expressing his faith at 10 days old. The truth is, Abraham started out a Babylonian idol-worshipper. That is, until the day God spoke to him... Suddenly, Abraham had to choose. Would He believe that *God is God, or trust in his own wisdom?* Abraham trusted God. From this time onward Abram believed in God – *not always perfectly* – but time after time he went against the grain of the doubting, skeptical culture in which he lived, and believed God's promises.

Genesis 11:28 says Abram came from Ur of the Chaldeans. Ur was one of the wealthiest and most sophisticated cities of the ancient world. Ur was a land of luxury. Bathtubs were first used in Ur. *It was the hot-tub capitol.* While living in Ur, Abram married a *her* - a gal named **"Sarai."** Her name means **"contentious,"** which proves marriages in those days must've been *arranged.* What man in his right mind willing marries **"Miss Contentious?"**

But the Lord spoke to Abram, **"Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you."** Abram comes home from work, and announces, **"Baby, pack up the house, we're moving!"** Sarai was so excited! **"He got a raise! Uptown Ur here we come. We'll live in a swim and tennis."** She was already thinking new furniture. But then she asked, **"Where are we moving, honey?"** And she wasn't ready for his answer, **"God told me to move. He just didn't tell me where!"** Recall her name... **"contentious."** A heated discussion must've followed!

Abram's initial foray in faith was more like *a stumble* than *a step of faith.* God said, **"get out of your father's house..."** instead he let his father and nephew, Lot, tag along... He was also told to go to **"a land God would show him."** On his first attempt he didn't make it – he moved 600 miles west of Ur, but stopped 400 miles short of Canaan. **Abram followed God half-way.** And this happens to us at times. We make a move toward God, but pull up short of all He's asking. We hold on to elements of the old life, rather than shaking free. We've got one foot in the world, and one foot with God. Rather than relocate to a new land, we only move upstream.

Donald Barnhouse use to put it, **"They have enough Christianity to be miserable in a nightclub, but not enough to be happy in a prayer meeting."** A partial follower of Jesus will be miserable man. He's got too much of the world to enjoy God, and too much of God to enjoy the world. Abram's compromise landed him in **"Haran"** - which means **"parched."** And when we compromise our commitment to Jesus we end up *parched - spiritually dry.* Abram didn't fully follow God until his father died. Terah was holding him back. *I wonder what's the Terah in your life?*

What needs to die for you to become fully-devoted to Jesus? **Often faith begins with a funeral!** When Terah died, Abram moved to the land God promised him.

But God also makes another promise in His covenant to Abram. Verse 2, **“I will make you a great nation...”** The name **“Abram”** means **“father.”** But this was an embarrassment at first. Abram was 75 years old, *and childless*. Every time Abram met someone new he was asked about his kids. *His name invited the question...* And ole **“father”** had to say he didn't have any. But here God promises Abram descendants. You can't sire a nation without an offspring. And God is promising Abram *that he'll have a child*.

And God makes him a third promise, **“I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing.”** Ultimately, the **“blessing”** God promises to bring through Abram is our salvation. Jesus was born of Abram's lineage. All the blessings we have in Christ come through Abram. It's interesting, Nimrod had said, **“Let us make a name for ourselves,”** but he went about it the wrong way. He rebelled against God. He struck out on his own... Abram on the other hand, chose to live by faith and follow God even into the unknown - and God promised to make his **“name great.”**

At first glance you might miss the importance of this covenant. It's disarmingly simple. But Genesis 12:1-2 are the most strategic verses in the Bible. Here's **The Abrahamic Covenant**. It's the most important deal God ever struck with man. From time to eternity, history turns on this covenant. Notice again the three-fold covenant God makes with Abram's progeny. He promises **a chunk of land – a great nation - and an ultimate blessing**. Here's the condensed version – just three words - **land, nation, blessing**. Or an even easier way to remember it - **sod, seed, salvation**.

I hate to belabor the point, but the significance of this covenant can't be overestimated. **The Abrahamic Covenant is the bedrock of the Bible**. Genesis 12 to Revelation 22 just fills in the details of this three-fold promise. *Here you can connect the dots*. The rest of the Bible is all about **the land, the nation that lives there, and the blessing that comes through that lineage**. Grasp these three promises, and you'll understand the Bible.

And notice what else God promises to Abram and his offspring in verse 3. He takes an oath, **“I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”** Not only does Scripture bear this out, so does history. *Nations have prospered and crumbled* based on their treatment of Abram's family.

Egypt declined in power after their enslavement of the Hebrews...

After Babylon sacked Jerusalem they were conquered by Persia...

Greek culture decline when Antiochus destroyed the Temple...

Rome persecuted the apostles, and were targeted by Barbarians...

The Jewish Inquisitions were the end of Spain's greatness...

Hitler's attempt to exterminate the Jews sealed Germany's defeat...

Certainly, one of the reasons for the sudden fall of the Soviet Union was its cruel treatment of Jews and opposition to the state of Israel...

Even the Medieval Church sunk into the Dark Ages when they assumed it their duty to punish the Jews for their rejection of Jesus...

And I have no doubt one of the reasons God continues to shed His grace on America is because we've remained staunch allies of Israel... And if we ever pull that support - *mark it down* - judgment will be close behind.

This past Wednesday, Kathy was out of town, so I put her car in the shop for repairs. At noon the mechanic called and told me it was ready. But I didn't have anybody to call to take me to the shop, so I decided to run. I try to exercise most days anyway, so *why not*... So I ran from my house in Loganville to Snellville... almost 7 miles... *What was I thinking*... For some reason 7 miles didn't sound so far sitting on my couch. But when I started pounding the pavement, and dodging tractor-trailers, and climbing hills it got longer. Those seven miles got very tangible *and real*.

This was the realization God wanted to awaken in Abram in Chapter 13. In verse 14, the Lord told him, "**Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are - northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever...**" *Farther than the eye can see*... that was the land God promised Abram.

And notice the duration of the promise, "**all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever.**" "**Forever**" is a pretty long lease. This means that even today, and in the future – it doesn't matter what the US, or UN, or Muslim nations, or world community has to say about the borders of Israel – the land God gave to Abram belongs to Jews not Arabs.

Notice verse 16, "**I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered.**" Later in chapter 15, God takes Abram out under a pitch black night sky - *and this before the days of a city's ambient light* - and God tell Abram his descendants will be as the stars in the sky. A childless, 75 year old, Gezer, will end up with a family as numerable as *the dust particles on Earth and the celestial bodies in the heavens*.

Then I love what God tells Abram next, verse 17, "**Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you.**" He needs to pound the ground - pace the pavement - experience firsthand God's blessing! If you told me on Wednesday the stretch of Highway 78 from Loganville to Snellville is really a spiritual land – a heavenly land – I'd say you were nuts... Try to convince me that "*walking the land*" is really just a metaphor for *growing spiritually*, and I'd show you my blister - then say you're nuts. And I'm sure this is how God and Abram react to those who want to spiritualize these promises. The land promise of the Abrahamic Covenant is a literal land. God gave Abram *a chunk of dirt - a clod of sod – some sod from God*. This is why the Bible unfolds in Canaan rather than Beijing, or Paris, or Stone Mountain. The Abrahamic Covenant gives *real land to real people*. The heirs of this covenant are not *the spiritual children of Abraham* - they're the real, bloodline, DNA-tested descendants of Abraham. God has literal promises on the books, that have to do with literal land, and with literal people.

In fact, God even gave Abraham literal borders. In Genesis 15:18 God tells Abram, "**To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt (the Nile) to the great river, the River Euphrates.**" Of course, today's hot topic in Israel-Palestinian negotiations are the Israelis settlements on the West Bank. Does Israel own the west bank of the Jordan River – the land the Bible calls Judea and Samaria? Well, God says Israel not only owns the West Bank of the Jordan River, she owns the land all the way to the West Bank of the Euphrates River. That not only includes all the disputed territories - the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan - it gives Israel a lion's share of Egypt, the Sinai, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait. There are folks in Egypt living in **de-nile**, but the Bible is clear, the land God promised belongs to Israel.

Today's Israel consists of 8000 square miles - the size of New Jersey. But one day – *and it may be when Jesus returns and fulfills all God's promises* - Israel will possess 300,000 square miles of territory. As God promises in 13:15 this is the land God given to Abram's heirs "*forever.*"

But who was Abram's heir? Two episodes from his life clear up any confusion. In Genesis 15 it's been a decade since God's first promised Abram descendants. He's now 85 years old and he's starting to worry... There's an expiration date on child bearing. He won't be fertile forever. Abram suggests that God make his servant, Eliezer, his heir-apparent. But that's not God's plan. In 15:4 we're told, "*The word of the LORD came to him, saying, 'This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.'*" Abram's been on social security for 20 years. He's no spring chicken, yet God will solve the problem not by adoption, or in-vitro, or surrogate parents. Even before the days of Viagra - the Ole Boy, Abraham, will sire a son from his own body!

And notice Genesis 15:6. Here's a key verse in your Bible. It says of Abraham, "*And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.*" This is an often-quoted verse. It appears four times in the NT. In Romans 4:3, in Romans 4:22, in Galatians 3:6, and in James 2:23... This is the verse Paul uses to prove we *obtain and maintain* a right standing with God - not because of what we do or don't do - but because of our faith in God's promise! All His blessings are received by faith alone! Mark Twain once quipped, "*Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out, and your dog would go in.*" God pours His blessing - not on folks who think they deserve it – but on those who trust His grace. And what happens next is one of the most interesting and monumental events in all Scripture. Abraham believes God's promise – but his faith isn't perfect – he asks God for some corroboration. In essence, He wants God's signature on the covenant. And God signs all His covenants in blood...

Thus, God responds in verse 9, "*Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.*" *What in the world is going on?* Is God launching a petting zoo? "*Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.*" This is how the ancients signed contracts. They literally "*cut a deal.*" They would slaughter a series of animals. Cut them in cross-sections from head to toe - and then arrange the animal halves into a corridor. The more important the covenant, the more animals it took... *And you think the closing on a house is a hassle. Imagine signing this type of an agreement!* After the animals were sacrificed, the two parties entering the agreement would meet in the middle, and walk arm-in-arm between the animal halves as a commitment to their part in the covenant. They were walking between sections of the same animal – they were becoming one.

Well, Abram got out his knife and went to work. After slicing the beef he sat down to wait on God. Abram expected God to literally walk with him through the animal halves. He waited all day, into the evening... He wore himself out shooing away the hungry vultures... waiting on God to appear. Verse 12 tells us, "*Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him.*" In other words, Abram had nightmare in which God reveals the future of His descendants – their 400 years of bondage - their exodus from Egypt - how God will use them to judge the evil Amorites when they return to the land.

What happens next astonishes me every time I read verse 17. "*And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces.*" According to custom, a covenant was signed when both partners joined arms and walked together through the animal carcasses. They were saying if they didn't fulfill their end of the deal they

would be dead meat. Abram was expecting God to literally appear, and join arms with him - and the two of them would walk together – down the corridor of blood. But that’s not what happened. God appeared while Abram slept. He came in the form of *a burning torch and a smoking censor* – **smoke and fire**. Later God guides Israel as *a cloud by day and a fire by night*.

But here’s what happened... God walked through the animal parts without Abram – all by Himself. Perhaps Abram woke up just in time to see God walking through the carcasses... *He awoke, looked on, and believed*. In doing it this way God was establishing a unilateral covenant. It was totally one-sided. This was not *man’s part* and *God’s part*... It was all God! God would take sole responsibility to complete His promises to Abram. All God expects out of Abram or us is to rest and put our faith in Him.

And here’s the lesson for us. Salvation is not a tag-team effort. It’s not up to us to meet God half-way. The blessing of God is not received by God doing half the work, and the recipient doing the other half. In our covenant of salvation, *God does all the work!* He takes sole responsibility for earning God’s blessing. All we do is wake up and believe.

You would’ve hoped the signing of this covenant might’ve been enough to steady Abram’s wobbly faith, but not so. Recall, God uses Abram as an example of faith, but His example *isn’t perfect faith* – there’s no such thing. In chapter 16, Abram and Sarai wobble together. She’s at least 75 now and has been taking mega-doses of fertility medication for years, *but it just ain’t happening*... She concocts a plan. She has a maid named Hagar – and maybe Hagar can bear a child in Sarai’s place. A case of surrogate motherhood. Abram goes along with the scheme, and the result is a boy. Father Abram finally has a few pictures on his I-phone. He has a son named Ishmael who God promises to multiply.

Sadly, the birth of Ishmael taught Abraham a painful lesson. Almost immediately the plan backfires. It blows up in Abraham’s face. He learns firsthand the agonizing truth that *a sinful plan can’t produce godly results*. We’re told in 16:4-5, “**When (Sarai) saw that (Hagar) had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes. Then Sarai said to Abram, "My wrong be upon you!"** *Ole contentious* is acting the part. She blames Abram for what was her idea. The baby isn’t even born when a war erupts. Hagar is haughty. Sarai is jealous. Poor Abram is between two *feuding females*. It’s interesting, the Middle East today is still victimized by this ancient sibling rivalry. Ishmael and Isaac are still at each other’s throats. The hostilities between Jew and Arab, are the result of Abram’s lack of faith. Always remember, try to do *God’s will your way* and you’ll usually make a mess of the situation. Trust God to do *His work - His way - in His time*.

On the heels of Abram’s failure God prepares him for the miracle birth. The Abrahamic Covenant is so significant God attaches to it a symbol. In chapter 17 God instructs Abram to be circumcised. Imagine a man 99 years old having a surgical procedure on his privy member. That’s rough. It reminds of the two trees named after the Jewish rite of circumcision... There’s the **Juniper (Jew-nipper)** and the **Eucalyptus (You-clipped-us)**. The Abrahamic Covenant was to be passed down reproductively. The **land, nation, and blessing** was intended for Abram’s heirs. It’s poetic, that God places the symbol of their covenant on the fountain of reproduction.

In Genesis 17 the two waiting parents receive new names. Abram is 99 years old, and freshly circumcised. Have no doubt... *that alone qualifies him as a man of faith!* And because of his faith God gives him a new name, “**Abraham**” which means, “**the father of many nations.**” He’s has one child... and now he goes from *father* to *Big-Daddy*.

And God changes Sarai's name as well. From "contentious" to "Sarah" or "princess." And when God reaffirms His promise to give Sarah a son, we're told Abraham, the great man of faith, fell "on his face and laughed." I wonder how many of us would've done the same? A 100 year old man and 90 year old woman expecting a child? Abraham is suppose to become a dad after he'd been on social security for 45 years? Sarah could pay for a delivery with Medicare? *It can't possibly be!* Abraham belly-laughed!

Actually, when God mentions him having a son, Abraham shouts, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" Hagar's boy was Abraham's son. But God's reply has profound theological and political ramifications even today. In 17:19, God corrects Big-Daddy, "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac." And... "I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants forever."

This is the underlying squabble in the Arab-Jewish stand-off today. Mohammed was a shepherd / merchant who was disillusioned with life in Mecca. He wandered into a cave in the mountains outside the city. He had a series of visions that denied the Trinity, and claimed the only way to please Allah was to surrender to him. Mohammed was a *pretend, want-to-be prophet* who needed some religious corroboration for his visions, so he claimed a connection to Abraham through his son, Ishmael. In fact, *in the Koran, Mohammed does a rewrite...* The Bible – in at least 16 passages – refers to the God of the land and the covenant as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob..." But the Koran, which was written 2000 years later, refers to Allah as "the God of Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac."

Mohammed exalted *Ishmael, father of the Arabs*, over *Isaac, father of the Jews*. The Koran teaches that Ishmael was the son with the miraculous birth. Ishmael was offered by Abraham on the mountain top. According to Mohammed, Abraham and Ishmael built the Moslem temple in Mecca. The Koran steals the covenant from Isaac and bestows it on Ishmael. Mohammed claimed that Ishmael was the keeper of the "true faith," and passed it down to him - while Isaac "strayed," and his descendants, the Jews, lost God's inheritance... The Bible teaches that *the blessing* which comes through Abraham *is Jesus*. While Islam asserts that the same blessing pointed to Mohammed. This is a blasphemy of biblical truth.

Read through Genesis and the covenant God makes with **Abraham** in chapters 12, 13, 15, 17, and 22 – gets repeated to Abraham's son, **Isaac**, in chapter 26 – and to his grandson, **Jacob**, in chapters 28 and 35. Certainly, not everything the state of Israel does is right. And the Arabs aren't always wrong. In fact, God promised to bless and multiply both Jews and Arabs. But the Covenant God made with Abraham – the **land**, the **nation**, the **blessing** – belongs to the descendants of Isaac, not Ishmael. Abraham might've laughed, but today it's no laughing matter!

And not only did Abraham laugh at *God's promise* - so did *God's princess!* In Genesis 18 angelic messengers show up at Abraham's tent to reaffirm God's promise of a son. This time Sarah is eavesdropping in on the conversation, and in verse 12 we're told she "laughed within herself..." That's when an Angel answered her, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" And of course, there's not. The proof is in Genesis 21:2, "Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the set time... Isaac."

Did you hear about the cool video games Abraham had running on his laptop. Isaac was checking them out when a concerned look came over his face, "Dad, I don't think your computer has enough memory to run all these games." I love how Abraham replied, "Son, God will provide the RAM!" Which brings us to the ultimate test of Abraham's faith – Genesis 22.

In verse 2 God tells Abraham, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac" God doesn't even recognize Ishmael, Isaac alone is Abraham's heir. God tells him to take Isaac, "and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." Imagine raising a knife with the intent of slitting the throat of one of your sons. On top of that, Isaac was heir to God's promise. Abraham had waited 25 years for his birth - *now he was suppose to sacrifice him back to God?*

According to Hebrews 11:19, Abraham concluded "that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense." Abraham believed God would resurrect his son, Isaac. Hebrews 11 tells us this was *test for Abraham*, but also *a picture for us*.

Father Abraham travels to Moriah to offer *His only son*, Isaac. God the Father made the same trip 2000 years later to offer *His only Son*, Jesus. Moriah was one of the hills of Jerusalem. In Abraham's day there was a settlement about halfway up the mountain - this means Abraham probably climbed above that settlement, to the top of the hill. A place that was later called "*Calvary*." The exact spot where God would offer up His Son Jesus.

Notice too, a few details... Abraham took wood for the sacrifice and laid it on Isaac. Jesus carried His cross up the hill... Two men travel with Abraham to offer Isaac. There were two thieves on the cross with Jesus... On top of Moriah God stopped Abraham from laying the knife to his son's throat. *His willingness passed the test*. And immediately, a voice spoke from heaven. It pointed to a ram stuck in the thicket. God provided the sacrifice that day - as He did 2000 years later when He offered His Son. Jesus is the lamb of God - the sinless sacrifice that blots out our sin.

Then the voice that spoke on top of Moriah talked to Abraham again. Genesis 22:18, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." You've heard of the famous verses - *John 3:16 and 1 John 3:16* - there is another 3:16. In Galatians 3:16 Paul quotes Genesis 22 and makes a big deal out of the word "*Seed*." Paul is emphatic - it's "*Seed*" (*singular*) not "*Seeds*" (*plural*). He uses this verse to prove that the covenant God made with Abraham ultimately pointed to one "*Seed*" - Jesus - *not just the Jews*. This is why *the Abrahamic Covenant* is so vital to us. It not only outlines God's future dealings on earth, but it clarifies the root of our salvation.

The life of Abraham is an epic story. Big-Daddy Abraham starts out an idol-worshipping Babylonian, and ends up the father of true, saving faith. Abraham holds a fascinating distinction in Scripture. Three times he's called "*the friend of God*." He never held a property deed on anything God promised. Rather he roamed in tents his whole life, looking to God Himself. Hebrews says, "*he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God*." Abraham was given so much on earth, since he needed so little. His eyes were on a bigger prize. When you walk by faith you're not home until you get to heaven. May we follow in his footsteps. Here's what we're learning, all God's covenants are *initiated by grace - signed by blood - entered into by faith*. *Let's walk in the footsteps of faith*.