

Promise

Genesis 12:1-4; 15:1-6; 22:15-18

As we continue our journey through the Bible we now meet Abram. You probably know him as **Abraham** because God changed his name, as God likes to do.

- The exalted Father (Abram) becomes the Father of many (Abraham)
- For the rest of Genesis we learn about Abraham's family and how it became the nation of Israel.

Genesis 1-11 introduced some foundational truths about God, us and the world:

Foundational Truths

- God is the Creator
- Sin and death are the result of human rebellion
- God punishes sin
- God provides a way of salvation
- God is at war with idolatry

God is the Almighty Creator of everything. Sin, death and suffering entered the world because Adam and Eve rebelled against God. God is just and will punish sin. God is merciful and provides a way of salvation. God is at war with all other gods and will work to tear down the idols we all like to build.

From Adam to Noah and from Noah to Abraham there was a line of blessing in fulfillment of God's curse upon the serpent:

The Line of Promise

"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he will crush your head, and you shall bruise his heel." Genesis 3:15 (NIV)

The same day that Adam and Eve rebelled against God and He had to kick them out of the garden, God promised that one of their great-great grandchildren would crush the head of the serpent who had deceived them. So even within the curses God pronounced as consequences for sin, ***there was hope in this promise of a wounded Savior***. And that hope would come through the offspring of Adam and Eve - **a child who would one day be born**.

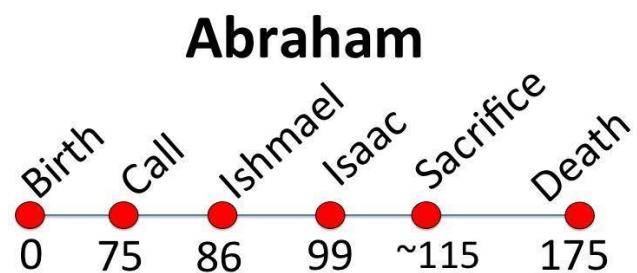
This is ***why genealogies are a big deal*** in the Bible and always have been to the Jews. For millennia they have traced their lineage from generation to generation, watching and waiting for the fulfillment of many promises like this one in Genesis 3:15.

Then we come to **Genesis 12** and see *the promise that gave birth to the nation of Israel* as the people of God:

*“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... and **in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**”* Genesis 12:1,3

There could not have been *a less likely candidate for the founder of a nation*. Abram was 75 years old and was married to Sarai who was 65 years old and they were unable to have children. God did not choose a young, healthy married couple in their 20s. Nor did God choose a large, established nation like Egypt. Instead, God chose the least likely couple - the one that would make it the most obvious that the blessing of becoming a great nation had come from God and God alone. *No one else could take the credit*. If Abram and Sarai had a huge family it would take a miracle.

Look at a **timeline for the life of Abraham**: He was **75 years old** when God called him to leave his homeland and family and head to a new land of promise. It would be 25 more years before Isaac would be born. Imagine having a child at 100 years old. Imagine waiting 25 years for this specific promise to be fulfilled.



It's easy for us to wait - we just turn the page and there's Isaac. But put yourself into Abram and Sarai's shoes. *Would you have believed this promise from God?* Would you have followed in the footsteps of Abraham? Would you have been tempted, as Abraham was, to take matters into your own hands?

- Oh, how many times have each of us **“given birth to Ishmael”**? Instead of trusting in God's promise and waiting on His timing, we take matters into our own hands...
- Instead of saving up in advance for **a purchase** you just buy stuff now and rack up credit card debt. Many of us have some Ishmael's like this in our past.
- Instead of waiting on God's timing for a **relationship** - for the right girl or guy - a GODLY girl or guy - you pursue the first one who pays attention to you and end up with various consequences from that relationship.
- Instead of **taking a risk** when God prompted you to step out in faith, you chose the safe and easy route and missed an opportunity to grow and serve.
- Instead of **resolving a conflict** quickly and personally you let it fester and the residue has grown into an Ishmael between you and that person.

We've all given birth to countless Ishmaels. It's called *living in the FLESH* instead of trusting God and walking in His Spirit. What we'll see in the story of Abraham is the **PATHWAY of FAITH** and the **REWARD of FAITH**. Those are the two parts for the message today. Five steps to follow the pathway of faith and three rewards for those who walk by faith.

Trust in the Promises of God

- The Pathway of Faith
- The Reward of Faith

The point of the message today is to **trust in the promises of God**. Turn away from all other allegiances, tear down all of your other towers of idolatry and fix your trust in Christ alone. Trust in Him. Hold on to Him. ***This is our firm foundation.*** This is where we should live as followers of Jesus - clinging to the promises of God - standing firm in our confidence that God is faithful. Think of God's promises as the foundation for the life you are building. And zoom in on that house you are building and see that faith also provides a bed to sleep in. ***REST in the promises of God.***

Anything else you cling to in faith will let you down. But this is where we can fix our hope. Trust in the promises of God. Hold fast to Him. Here is the pathway of faith.

The Pathway of Faith

(1) Repent

"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.'" Genesis 12:1

The first step for Abraham was to leave his past behind - his homeland, his extended family and above all, his traditional gods. We learn this from Joshua 24, after the Israelites had mostly conquered the land promised to Abraham:

The Pathway of Faith

(1) Repent

"Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods." Joshua 24:2

Even though Abraham was in the line of promise from Noah through Shem, he and his family did not worship the One Creator God. Instead they served other gods - ***they worshiped idols.*** When the Lord appeared to Abraham and called him to leave his homeland, the first step on the pathway of faith was to leave these other gods behind.

Have you repented? Have you REALLY repented? Have you drawn a line down a piece of paper to designate - that's WHO I WAS before Jesus and this is who I am now that I have put my faith in Jesus and I'm following Him? If you can't see a clear before and after in your life I'd encourage

you to do that exercise with a friend. Think through where your trust and allegiance and hope used to be and what it meant for you to repent - to turn away from your false gods and begin your commitment to the One True God.

That is the starting point for faith: repent. The second step is to commit. The sign of commitment was very concrete for Abraham - there was no way to dance around it.

The Pathway of Faith

(1) Repent > (2) Commit

“This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall **be circumcised.**” Genesis 17:10

From Genesis 12 through 22 God had several meetings and conversations with Abraham to establish and clarify their COVENANT relationship. **Covenants** in the Bible are much more than contracts - they are **binding promises that establish permanent relationship**, like a marriage. There are terms to these agreements, such as this one that Abraham had to fulfill. But mainly there are promises - solemn vows that God makes and stakes His reputation on.

In order to enter this covenant relationship, Abraham had to repent - leave his other gods behind - and commit. He had to cross a line. And the sign of his commitment was... let's say... **very PERSONAL**. If you're not sure what it means to be circumcised, just ask one of the other elders. They'll be delighted to explain the process. The point, for our purposes today, is that it was **personal, painful, and PERMANENT**. There was no middle ground - no half-circumcised. You were either snipped or not snipped. You were marked in your flesh or not marked. And that bloody mark was the sign that you belonged to your covenant God.

Have you made a formal commitment to Jesus? Have you been marked in your flesh? The sign for believers in Jesus is **BAPTISM**. Have you been DUNKED for Jesus? Going under water represents the death of your old life - being crucified and buried with Jesus. Coming up from the water represents your new life in Christ - coming to life with Him. Baptism is the sign of a believer's covenant relationship with God through Jesus. If you have committed to Jesus but have not been baptized, let's talk about that. I would love to meet with you to hear your story and talk about what it would mean for you to make that public commitment soon! **Cross the line of commitment with a clear sign** - baptism.

The third step on the pathway of faith is to obey.

The Pathway of Faith

(1) Repent > (2) Commit > (3) Obey

“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred...’ **So Abram went**, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him.” Genesis 12:1,4

Obedience is the fruit of faith. If you trust someone, you listen to them. You follow their instructions even when they don't make total sense to you.

- **Kids** obey their parents because they trust that mom and dad know what they're talking about.
- **Soldiers** follow orders, trusting that their commanding officer has a plan.
- **Employees** should obey their bosses, trusting that those managers and executives have the best interests of the company in mind.
- **Church members** should obey church leaders because they trust that those leaders are listening to the Lord.

Lack of obedience demonstrates a lack of faith or the absence of faith. If you don't typically obey the teachings of Scripture it means you don't trust God even if you might think that you do or you might claim that you do.

When God told Abram to leave his homeland, if Abram had said, "Sure thing. I'm on it. I trust you, Oh Creator of the Universe, and I plan to follow you," - if he'd said that but then stayed at his house and never actually set out, then he would not be remembered as a man of faith but as a man who lacked faith. **We can tell Abram trusted God BECAUSE he obeyed.**

James writes about this in the New Testament - "**Faith without works is dead.**" Don't kid yourself by saying you believe in Jesus if you don't obey the teachings of Jesus. Obedience is the PROOF of faith, the FRUIT of it. Don't hear me saying that your works save you. "We are saved by faith alone but the faith that saves is never alone" (John Calvin). True faith always produces obedience. If you don't see obedience in your Christian life then you would be right to wonder if you have true faith.

But if you are following this pathway, you can see **the progression**. **Repentance** breaks your ties to other gods. **Commitment** solidifies your bond to Jesus. And **obedience** reinforces that bond as you learn to walk with Jesus. "Trust and obey - for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

Abraham faced arguably **the most difficult faith challenge** of anyone in the Bible. He waited 25 years for the child of promise. Finally, when he was 100 years old, Isaac was born and he and Sarah could laugh at their lack of faith and all the trouble their disobedience had gotten them into. But then God called out to Abraham again. Imagine if the Lord asked this of you...

The Pathway of Faith

(1) Repent > (2) Commit > (3) Obey

"He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, 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.' So Abraham rose early in the morning..." Genesis 22:2-3

This young man - probably **a teenager** at this point - represented not just Abraham's personal hopes and dreams, but represented the covenant promises of God. How could this almighty, faithful, promise-keeping God ask this of Abraham? How could Abraham make sense of this?

For all of his failings - and they were many - **Abraham was at his best in this moment.** This test Abraham passed with flying colors. Hebrews 11 tells us that Abraham reasoned that God could raise Isaac from the dead if the sacrifice had to take place. Think of that. 2,000 years before Jesus was born, **Abraham had faith in God's power to raise the child of promise from the dead!**

With the knife poised above his teenage son, about to plunge it into his heart, God cried out to stay Abraham's hand. And as Abraham told Isaac on their way up the mountain, **God did provide a lamb for the offering**. Suddenly they saw a ram caught in a thicket. And so Isaac was spared and the animal died in his place. God provided a sacrifice. The fourth step along the pathway of faith is to pray.

The Pathway of Faith

(1) Repent > (2) Commit > (3) Obey > (4) Pray

“And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord.” Genesis 12:8

Not just one time, but as **a lifestyle of faith**. Prayer is how we profess our daily, constant dependence on God. Through prayer we call on the Lord to help us.

When we don't pray we demonstrate our independence from God. **Prayerless living is PRIDEFUL living**. If we don't pray it's because we don't think we need God. We don't need to call on His name. We don't need His help. We don't need His guidance or His power. Prayer is our profession of NEED. We call on God for help AND we listen for His voice to guide us.

And faith-filled prayer is persevering prayer. We do not give up - but learn the fifth step of the life of faith - how to WAIT. Romans 4 tells us of Abraham:

The Pathway of Faith

(1) Repent > (2) Commit > (3) Obey > (4) Pray > (5) Wait

“No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.” Romans 4:20-21

Does this mean Abraham was perfect? Obviously not! (Read Genesis!) But it tells us that **overall, he was a man of FAITH**. And his journey was anything but clean and simple. He had lots of twists and turns, lots of slips and falls. But whenever he fell, he got back up. Whenever he sinned, he came back to the Lord in repentance.

If you're like me then you are not big waiting. **Waiting is the worst**. But it is one of the many tools God uses to GROW OUR FAITH.

Do you see the milestones on this pathway of faith? It starts with repentance. Turn from other gods and commit to the one true God. Then begin to follow Him in obedience, even if His instructions don't make sense. When you're confused or afraid - which will be often - pray, call on the Lord. He will comfort and encourage you. Sometimes He will clarify His will. He will always strengthen you to wait for the blessings He has promised you.

Don't rush ahead and take matters into your own hands. Learn from Abraham's mistakes and **avoid producing more Ishmaels**. Wait for Isaac. Wait for the one God has for you.

- This applies immediately for any of you who are **single** right now. Don't rush into a relationship. Be patient and wait on God's timing. Trust Him. He knows what's best for you. He loves you and has good plans for you. Pray. Call on Him for wisdom and strength

and patience. God will shape you in this season of waiting. He will draw you closer to Himself.

- This also applies to those of us who are **married**. Don't manipulate your spouse. Don't try to be the Holy Spirit. It's not your job. Trust the Holy Spirit to bring conviction and prompt change in His timing. The Holy Spirit is a trained professional in this area - you are an unequipped novice.
- This applies at **every life stage**. Before we have kids we can't wait for kids. Then when we have kids we can't wait for them to get out of diapers. Then we can't wait for them to get into school. Then we can't wait for them to get into sports or music or whatever. Pretty soon you just wish they were small again because the years have flown by so fast. WAIT. Trust God and be thankful for the life stage you are in.
- Trust God for your **work**; for vocational direction; for direction in outreach and ministry. Call on Him. Obey His leading. Wait for the fruit to come.
- Many of us have **loved ones who don't know Jesus** or aren't walking with Him. Pray. Wait. Act when the Lord leads you to act. Refrain when the Spirit warns you to hold back.

Faith is a pathway. Faith begins with a line in the sand when you move from unbelief to belief. But it doesn't end there. That single step sets you on the pathway of faith. On that pathway we continue to repent, to commit, to obey, to pray and to wait. But along that pathway are the rewards of faith. Let's look at what God promised Abraham and how our faithful God delivered on those promises.

We see **three rewards of faith** here: a people, a provision and a place.

Genesis 12:2-3,7 "And I will make of you (1) a great nation , and I will bless you... and in you (2) all the families of the earth shall be blessed ... To your offspring I will give (3) this land ."	Rewards of Faith (1) A People (2) A Provision (3) A Place
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God promised to make Abraham into a great nation – a multitude of **people** would come from this infertile 75 year old man. God promised to bless Abraham and to bless the whole world through him. Here God's promise to crush the head of the serpent is restated positively as a **provision** of blessing to all families on earth. And third, God promised a **place** where His people would dwell – a rich, fertile land.

The way of faith is the pathway to God's blessing. "Without faith it's impossible to please God." But if we trust in the Lord and follow Abraham's pathway from repentance to commitment to obedience, prayer and patience, God WILL BLESS US. Look at each of these rewards.

The Rewards of Faith

1. **A People** – Connection into Community

“And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you... I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth.” Genesis 12:2; 13:16

Now this is **a God-sized promise** – to turn an elderly couple into the parents of a great nation with so many descendants you can’t even count them all. Some of you have **10 or more grandkids** and feel profoundly blessed, don’t you? My parents have 10. Kristin’s parents have 12. That’s a lot of cousins when we all get together. We are thankful for large basements up north that you can throw the kids down there and close the door...

But imagine having **a family so large you couldn’t even begin to count them all**. That would be multiplication on a divine scale. And that is the story of the rest of Genesis. How Abraham and Sarah eventually have Isaac. Isaac has Jacob and Esau. Then Jacob, through some wild twists and turns, ends up with 12 kids. So even by the third generation Abraham must have been wondering – dust of the earth? Stars in the sky?

But we know the rest of the story. **The Jewish nation grew** like crazy during the 400 years they were in Egypt –we’ll get into that next week. And despite the attempts of numerous powerful enemies to destroy them, the Jews are still around to this day. And that’s only part of the fulfillment of this promise. Every one of us in this room actually represents the greater fulfillment of this promise to Abraham. **We are the community of believers** God had in mind when He spoke of the people He would create.

We have been grafted into the family of God’s people – connected by faith into this community that is designed and called to reflect God’s glory to all the nations.

That is the first reward of faith. You become a part of a community of believers. You are connected into something bigger than you. Lots of Abraham’s friends and family stayed behind when he left. But a bunch decided to go with him on this crazy adventure into the unknown, trusting only in the fact that Abraham believed God had spoken to him.

The second reward is a provision. This is what unites the community – what brings us together.

The Rewards of Faith

1. A Provision

“I will bless you... I will establish my covenant with you... **to be God to you** and your offspring after you... and **in your offspring** all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” Genesis 12:2; 17:7; 18:8

God promised to bless Abraham and through him – specifically through one of his descendants – **to bless all the nations on earth**. The provision of this blessing would fulfill God’s covenant promise and fully and finally establish the relationship between God and His people. Remember,

a covenant is a relational bond that forms when God's promise connects with a faith commitment.

For 2,000 years God's people didn't know the exact nature of this blessing, this provision. They saw **many fulfillments** that looked like (and were) God's blessing to them – but not all the way. **David** was a great king and through him God blessed and strengthened the nation. **Hezekiah** and Josiah were great kings who purified the nation. But all of Israel's kings – even the best ones; and all of Israel's prophets and priests – even the best ones – had their own issues. Every hero we will read about in the Bible is afflicted by the same disease of sin that plagues us still today.

Every hero, that is, except one – the One who was the ultimate fulfillment of this promise. Who was the offspring of Abraham through whom God's covenant blessings are streaming to the nations? Your Sunday School instincts are good – **Jesus is the answer.**

But let's get more specific because the Bible does – and wonderfully so. We are not just talking about some physical, material blessings. Look at what God provides when we fix our faith in Him. Genesis 15:6.

The Rewards of Faith

2. A Provision – Credit for the Perfection of Jesus

“And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as *righteousness*.” Genesis 15:6

God promised Abraham a great nation, a great name, a great blessing and a great land to live in. And Abraham believed the LORD. **He chose to believe this impossible promise.** He fixed his confidence not in what his human reasoning could understand but in the power and faithfulness of the God who made the promise.

And when Abraham's faith connected with God's promise the result was RIGHTEOUSNESS. **God gave him CREDIT for a PERFECTION that was not his.** If you read the rest of Genesis you learn right away that Abraham was far from perfect. We already saw he was an idolatrous pagan before God called him. And even after he set out on his journey of faith he lied about his wife twice, basically surrendering her into the harems of two kings. That is not recommended in Biblical Marriage Class 101. He slept with his wife's maidservant. It was his wife's idea but he clearly didn't object to it.

Abraham was not the picture of righteousness. But because he believed in God's promise, God gave him CREDIT for a perfection that was not his. And the righteousness by which Abraham was saved – JUSTIFIED is the word Paul uses in Romans – was a righteousness Jesus would not earn for another 2,000 years! And yet the God who exists outside of time was able to **apply that future perfection to Abraham just as he applies Jesus' past perfection to you and me.**

If you have put your faith in Jesus then **God has given you credit for the PERFECTION of Jesus.** When God looks at you he does not see your sin and failure, He sees the perfect glory and righteousness of Jesus! Isn't that amazing?

Think of this in a small way. You have **a rich uncle**, parent or grandparent. You're in some financial trouble so you call this rich relative and he or she sends you a check. When you deposit that check into your account you receive CREDIT for money that was not yours but has been applied to your account. Your uncle's bank account drops whatever amount, and your account rises that amount.

In order to give each of us credit for perfection, **Jesus had to take on all of your debt and all of my debt.** Our account before God jumped to perfection – but Jesus' account dropped to infinite depths of wretched sinfulness. He was covered in the filth of our sin so we could be dressed in His perfect righteousness.

Feel the truth and wonder of this verse as expressed in Romans 4:

The Rewards of Faith

2. A Provision – Credit for the Perfection of Jesus

“To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, *his faith is counted as righteousness.*” Romans 4:5

Our God delights to justify the ungodly. His blessed provision in Jesus Christ is that sinners can be declared righteous solely on the basis of our faith. This has nothing to do with our works. It is a sheer gift of God's amazing grace.

But we're still not done. The third reward of faith, very briefly, is a place.

The Rewards of Faith

3. A Place – Communion with God forever

“And I will establish my covenant... to be God to you... and I will give to you and your offspring... *all the land of Canaan*, for an everlasting possession.” Genesis 17:7-8

The Promised Land represented the physical reality of God's blessing to His people. As we read through the Bible we will see that God led them into the Promised Land with remarkable miracles of power and revelations of His glory. But the Israelites did not remain in the land forever, because of their idolatry. So even ***the promised land pointed ahead to something greater*** – a place that would be like the original garden God created in which he walked with the man and woman in perfect fellowship.

Like Abraham we look ahead to the land of promise ***where we will live in perfect communion with God*** and His people forever. That will be our everlasting possession. That will be our final rest in a haven of perfect peace under God's limitless blessing.

So that is the pathway of faith and the reward of faith – illustrated for us by Abraham, then perfectly and beautifully fulfilled in Christ. Let's prepare now to gather around the Lord's table to remember how richly He has blessed us and look ahead to the coming reunion when He will gather all of us together!

Let's pray.