

Patriarchs, I

We begin our class by reading a few verses from Joshua 24, to which I will make reference in the course of the lecture. In verse 2, we read:

Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods.’ [Notice that Abraham and Nahor were worshipping other gods.] ‘But I took your father, Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants.’”

I want to read to you now from the Gospel of John, John 8:31 and following:

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”

Then after Jesus’ response in verses 34-38, they said, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus replied, “If you were Abraham’s children, then you would do the things Abraham did.” In verse 53, they said to Him, “Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?” Jesus concluded His reply in verse 58 by saying, “I tell you the truth. Before Abraham was born, I am!”

Let us pray.

Lord, our God, as we look at the total picture of the Scriptures, we see what a dominant place Your servant, Abraham, had. You called him. You purified him. You made him serve You. We thank You for what You did through him and his seed. Especially, Lord Jesus, we thank You for coming to us through the seed of Abraham so that we today may be called ‘seed of Abraham.’ God, help us to understand this message of Scripture as we move through it week by week. Keep sin from us. Give us joy in our work for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

In beginning our consideration of Abraham, let us first look quickly at the circumstances in which the life of Abraham is set. First, we must remember that Abraham lives after the confirmation of the creation covenant or the cosmic kingdom. Remember Genesis 8—seed time and harvest, summer and winter will never cease. The creation order will continue with all of its in-built patterns and laws and seasons. God had established that firmly. We must, therefore, realize that when God comes to Abraham, He comes in a very definitely maintained cosmic order. Abraham need not have any uncertainties as to whether or not, for example, the land will continue or whether there will be a flood to wipe out the land which God promises to him and his seed. The creation covenant will continue, and thus God’s kingdom is assured of its continuance. God will continue to reign. God will continue to carry out His will within the great cosmic creation setting. God’s kingdom will surely continue because He has given the seed of government, which will be a means for the controlling of people under His reign.

The governments of all the nations are, in a sense, a reflection of God, the King, who is the great governing and ruling one. People, created to be the image of God, imitate God by setting up their little kingdoms and governments. Through human government, God initiated the preservation of the human race. Robertson in *Christ of the Covenants* discusses the institution of capital punishment, calling it a

great advance in God's revelation concerning how we are to govern ourselves and how we are to protect the human race. The point is that the creation covenant will continue and the continuation of God's kingdom is assured.

In Genesis 11, we find the story of Babel that caused the spread of the peoples and the formation of the different nations. In the midst of that, as the people spread, God chose a specific line. The genealogy can become a little difficult to follow, but let us trace some of the major ancestors of the human race. From Adam, we have the lines of Cain, Abel, and Seth. The sons of Cain were wiped out in the flood, and Abel was murdered, but Noah was a descendant of Seth. Noah has three sons—Ham, Shem and Japheth. Their descendants were scattered, but it is interesting that the Shemites may have remained right there in the Mesopotamian Valley where it is thought that paradise was. Many people also think that the ark landed in the upper Mesopotamian Valley. As we saw last time, the Japhetites will multiply. In the Hamitic genealogy we have the four major nations: Cush, Mizraim, Put and Canaan. The Canaanites, in a sense, come to represent the line of Cain although there is no biological connection there. It is the Canaanites that particularly have their cup full of iniquity. God is going to wipe them out, but not by a flood. Rather, He is going to use this people, which He has ordained to be the agent of salvation, to be the agent of the Canaanites' demise. We will see that in the Book of Judges.

We trace the mediatorial line from Seth to Noah to Shem to Terah to Abraham to Isaac to Jacob and his twelve sons. Of the twelve, Judah is selected as the bearer of the mediatorial line. In this line we see God working out His cosmic purposes as He covenants with His people

We have a lot of territory to cover in these next two lectures, since we will be looking at Genesis chapters 11 through 50. Another factor that you must keep in mind as you look at the setting in which God came to Abram is that Abram was living in the southern part of the Mesopotamian Valley, very likely in the fertile delta area where Ur of the Chaldeans was. Abram was living in a highly cultured setting. Archaeology shows that they had double-story homes where they even had flush toilets and bathtubs on the second floor. As I read to you from Joshua 24, the people in these lands worshiped other gods. Idolatry was widespread. From this setting Abram had to become a tent-dwelling nomad. God called him away from the comfort and the idolatry of the Canaanites and the Chaldeans.

We go now to Genesis 12. The first thing I want to point out to you is that for those of you who have been studying Hebrew, here is a place where your Hebrew will come in very well to help you grasp some of the finer points. For example, the Hebrew, *lek* is the hiphil imperative of the verb *halak*, "to go." Abram was not given a choice. He was given a command: "go, leave." Before he was told what he had to leave, we have another form of the verb *halak*, but it has different vowels, *laka*. I have read some commentaries interpret this *laka* as "go for yourself." However, Umberto Cassuto, in his commentary, points out that other passages in Scripture indicate that this means "by yourself," not "for yourself." His commentary gives four or five references where that preposition with that pronoun means "by yourself."

In this passage we see election. Abram is singled out and the particularity of election is stressed. The translation of *laka* as "by yourself" is supported by the three words that follow. *Me'artzecha* means "from your land," so we have "go by yourself from your land." However, Abram is not to migrate from his land with his family. When my mother's family left the Netherlands, her father's twin sister came with them. My grandfather had 11 children and his twin sister had 13. All four adults and 24 children came together. But God commanded Abram to leave his extended family. This word, *mimoladthecha*, comes from the word *yalad*—it means "those who were born in the extended family." Even more specifically, God commands him to go from the house of his father. He is not to take his brothers, or his father, or his nephews or nieces. He is not to take anyone.

Interestingly, as the story develops, we learn that Abram did not go alone. His father Terah, his brother, and his nephew Lot also came. Perhaps this was Abram's idea, or perhaps it was because these others hung on, but God removed them all from Abram's side, one by one. People asked from what place Abram was called. If we read the last part of chapter 11, we see that Terah had gone to Haran, which was in northern Mesopotamia. However, when we turn to Acts 7:2, in Stephen's speech, he says, "Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran."

Now Genesis 11 and 12 do not specifically say that Abraham received God's call in Ur of the Chaldeans. If you read Genesis 11 and 12, you might think that God called him while he was in Haran. Stephen says that this is not the case. He was told to leave his family, and he left his father's family when he was in Haran, but he did not leave Lot. There was a stipulation that was definitely involved in this call: he had to separate himself. The principle is that the one must come out of the many in order to become the servant of the many.

Sometimes it is difficult to leave. When I was a boy, I said I was going to become a missionary. When I was in the military, I spent 19 months in Japan after the Second World War. I saw the great need in Japan and I decided to come back after I had studied for the ministry. In the meantime, I remembered the sweet little girl that I wanted as a wife. It took us about 9 and a half years from the time we first met until we got married. I returned to the United States. I studied. I volunteered for missions in Japan, but another man got the call. That was in God's providence. I took a call to a church in west Michigan. I had been there for less than two years when I got a call to go to Australia. Why go to a land of sheep, rocks and desert when there are 80 million people in Japan and only about 15 million in Australia? But God placed the call before me through the church and I was constrained to take it. It was difficult to decide to go, but as Jesus said, the time comes when you have to pick up and leave everything and go. It was difficult to leave the church. It was terribly difficult saying good-bye to my wife's father and her brothers and sisters who were living in Michigan, but we were looking forward to seeing my family and all my relatives in California. But the most difficult thing of all was the day that we had to pick up our suitcases and go to San Francisco. We stepped on that ship, the *Orsova*, from the British Pacific and Orient Lines. Harriet and I stood there with the six children we had at the time. There were three or four hundred people gathered there, and one by one, they all left the deck and went and stood on the pier. Finally we felt the throb of the motors and the tugboats start pulling us out. We could hear the people on the pier singing the hymn, "He Leadeth Me." It is difficult to pick up and go. It not easy by any means. Perhaps God softened it somewhat for Abram, by letting his father go with him to Haran and a nephew go with him until he got to Shechem.

The time came, however, when Abram had to be obedient and stand alone. That was a covenantal stipulation, but there were also covenantal promises and blessings. God says to Abram in Genesis 12, "Go to the land that I will show you." The fact that Abram will receive a land indicates God's sovereign kingship. He is the Lord of all lands. That was a comfort for me when I went to Australia. There may not be many people there and there may be a great deal of desert and sheep (Australia has 15 million people and 170 million sheep) but God is the Lord of them all. God could promise this land and give the land because He's the great land-owner. He is the King. He is in charge.

And then as you go on to read the passage—"and I will make"—that verb is *asa*. It says, "I will make you to be *goy*." It does not say *am*, which is the Hebrew word for a people group. *Goy* is the Hebrew word that designates a nation—a recognized, organized, politically functioning unit. The adjective that modifies *goy* is *gadol*, which means "very large," so God will make Abram into a great nation. He goes

on to say, “and I will also bless you,” which is the word *barak* in its various forms. I would say that this blessing includes God’s bestowing life and energy upon Abram and filling him with everything he needs. Also the word *barak* surely includes an implicit promise of God’s salvation. God says, “I will save you, Abram, because I will enter into your life.”

The word *barak* comes from an older word that meant “to kneel.” When God blesses us, He reaches down to us with His very long arm and His ever-open hand and He gives us whatever we need. The word *barak* contains the idea that God will supply the ones he blesses—physically, materially, spiritually, morally, socially, and in every other way. The second covenant blessing is God’s making Abram into a great nation. Not only will God give Abraham place to live and not only will he become a spiritual, moral, social, prosperous giant in the land, but God gives Abram a third covenant blessing: “I will make your name great.” The word for “name” is *shem* and the word for “great” is *gadol*. The same word that was used of making Abram a great nation is used here to refer to Abram’s name. God is saying that He will make Abram famous. His name will be known throughout the world. This promise has been fulfilled—notice how the people in Jesus’ day were talking of Abraham, and even today in the great struggle between the Arabs and the Jews in Palestine, Abraham is repeatedly called upon as the source of their rights.

Then God said, “and you shall be a blessing and you will become a channel.” God tells Abram that He is bringing him to the land to be a channel of service. These are the blessings and the promises that God gives to Abram in Genesis 12. We must note the extent of Abram’s promised influence. His influence was to go forth to all nations. The phrase in verse 3 is “to all the families of *ha adamah*.” The smaller groups, the bigger groups, every family of the earth is going to receive blessing through him. Now I don’t have time to go into a discussion of whether this niphath form of the verb *barak* here in verse 3 is reflexive or passive. Some people translate it, “and these nations will bless themselves in you.” That is the reflexive, which the niphath form of the verb often carries, but it can also carry a passive sense—“and they shall be blessed.” If you believe it carries the reflexive aspect, that places an obligation on the other people in the way they relate to Abram. The text says that if they curse him, they will be cursed. That would indicate that God places a certain amount of responsibility on the nations to carry out and maintain a proper relationship to Abram. They are to acknowledge him. Of course, this demanded of Abram that he obey the conditions set out in Genesis 17. He had to walk with God. He had to be perfect and complete. Let me put it this way. I think God is going to bring judgment on many people who scoff at the church and mock God’s covenant people, but I think that sometimes the church people are as much to blame as the others because of the way they live and act. God’s people do not always act with a kind of behavior that would bring respect and honor.

We read in verse 4 of chapter 12 that Abram went according to the word that God gave him. Dumbrell makes much of this passage, because he says that here we have the heart of God’s covenant with Abraham. Other writers have placed a greater emphasis on Genesis 15 and 17. Some scholars place an emphasis on this passage and others don’t. I think the basic difference is that many people have failed to see the Old Testament missionary mandate as clearly as they should. Genesis 12:1-3 contains the Old Testament missionary mandate. God called Abram to leave his people and to go in order to serve the nations. In the context of God’s cosmic kingdom, God told Abram to leave a corner of the earth and live in the middle of the nations.

Genesis 14 tells us how Abraham went to Egypt and God brought him back and how Lot had to be separated. Then in Genesis 15, after all these things, God came to Abram said, “Don’t be afraid.” This passage in Genesis 15 is particularly picked up in the New Testament. The reason I read to you from John 8 is because it is in Genesis 15 and 17 where the idea of the seed becomes so prominent. The New

Testament helps us focus on this seed concept. Galatians 3:29 tells us that those who belong to Christ are the seed of Abraham. In the verses I read to you from John 8, Jesus is trying to get the people to believe in Him so that they may prove that they are indeed seed of Abraham.

Something that really stands out in Genesis 15 is the continuity of the seed line. Abram did not have his own child. Yet God had promised him that he would become a great nation. He is attacked and he looks around and God comes to him and says, "Fear not, I am your great reward. I have a tremendous future for you, Abram." Abram says, "Do You mean my servant is my future? Since I have no children, I guess You want Eliezer of Damascus to be my heir." God says, "No, Abram, no. Look to the stars of the heavens. If you can count them, you will be able to count how great your seed will be." So we see the continuity of the seed in this passage, and we also see three very important concepts that are picked up in Scripture: faith, righteousness, and obedience. We read that when God said, "No, your seed will be your heir," then Abram said "Amen, so be it, LORD, I have confidence in You." This was counted to Abram as righteousness. We have seen this word "righteous" once before. It is such a rich concept that we should take a moment to deal with it.

The word *tzedek*, "righteous," appears in a number of different contexts. Sometimes it appears as a masculine noun, sometimes as a feminine noun, and sometimes as a verb. I mentioned before that Dumbrell points out that it is a term of relationship, and I myself have found that when the word *tzedek* is used, a living relationship is basic and fundamental. However, the word is not always used in the same way. Sometimes righteousness comes to us in the setting of a declaration, where God declares someone righteous. At other times, the word appears in a setting when God imputes righteousness to someone. In still other settings, the reference is to one who becomes righteous. And if one becomes righteous, one is righteous. It is this sense that is used when the Bible speaks of Noah being righteous. He exhibits it or he shows it—he lives out his righteousness.

There is no doubt that this righteousness is the fountainhead of the relationship. Everything depends on God's sovereign action, but God's declaration that we are righteous is never separated from the act of faith. Faith is not meritorious; faith is the setting. We must make a distinction between contingency and conditionality. Our faith is not conditional. When we believe, God justifies, because God gives us the ability to believe. God gives the Spirit, who enables us to believe. The point I want to make now is that the declaration, the word of God, is basic, fundamental, and primary. When God declares, His word becomes effective and He imputes righteousness. In the case of Abram, God said to him, "Abram, I declare you right with Me. The right relationship is restored. You have become righteous and you are now within My will." It was when he said, "Amen, Lord," that Abram received the assurance that he was declared righteous. Now, of course, the question becomes whether he will exhibit that righteousness.

In this chapter, there is the ceremony that deals with the cutting of the animals. God used this Semitic ceremony to give Abraham the assurance that what He had said concerning the land would surely come to pass. God said to Abraham, in effect, "You will always have a place to serve. I am the Lord of the nations and the great King of creation; I have a place for you and you will always have a place."

The land is secondary to the promise of the seed. The importance of the land is that Abram's seed will always have a place to work and to live and to influence the surrounding nations. Thus, by God's covenantal promises, Abram is assured not only about his family but also about the place that will be theirs. The land itself, however, was not to be seen as the all-important thing. You might get that impression today when you read about all the fighting over land that is taking place in Palestine. Notice that Abraham himself never had more than a burial place there. God did not immediately give him the

whole Middle East. Rather, God began His work with the seed because that seed is primary and fundamental. The mediatorial line is the thing that God wanted to work out with Abram, so this ceremony gives Abraham assurance concerning the land. The assurance about the land is there because God had said that Abram would become such a numerous people.

I also want to point out that the land God promised Abraham was from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates. When David was king and Solomon, his son, followed him, that is exactly how far the Davidic and Solomonic kingdoms extended. God kept His promise in the very beginning of the monarchy. There are people today who say that God still has to fulfill His promise of giving that great area of land to His people, but God has already done it. Read Psalm 72 and read the accounts of how far David's and Solomon's kingdoms extended. The promise of land in Genesis 15 has been carried out.

Then in Genesis 16, the chapter that deals with seed, Abram listened to his wife like Adam listened to Eve. Sarah said, "Here's my slave girl, the Egyptian girl. I'm getting too old to have a baby and we have to have a boy, because so much depends on it." Abram was ready to listen to his wife. Maybe Hagar was a nice looking girl too. Abram got her pregnant and Ishmael was born, and today we still have the Arab-Jewish struggle between the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac. We ought not to blame Sarah only. Abram knew better, but he said, "At least here I have a son, Ishmael."

Chapter 17 takes place when Abraham was in his 99th year, 13 years after Ishmael was born. God came to Abram and said, "Abram, we need to get the record straight here." The first thing that God does is give His name, *El-Shaddai*. (Vos deals with the names of God, and I suggest you look to him for the distinctions between *El-Elyon*, *Elohim*, *El-Shaddai*, and of course God's redemptive name, *Yahweh*.) God came to Abram and said "I am the great, almighty, exalted one. Walk with Me, Abram." God comes to lift him out of his sinfulness and disobedience. Some people translate this "with Me" as "before My face," but it can also mean "in company with Me." God tells Abram to do exactly what we read that Enoch had done and what Noah had done. God says to Abram, "Be like Enoch and be like Noah. Walk with Me. I will lift you and I will continue to be with you."

Then God tells Abram to be *thamim*—"whole, blameless." God does not want anyone to be able to blame Abram. They could do that because of the way he had dealt with Hagar. God says, "You have a real problem in your house with little Ishmael. Hagar and Sarah can't get along. If you had walked with Me, that would not have happened." So God comes with His stipulation and tells Abram that He has an ethical demand. Then in verse 2 God gives His promises. The verb is *nathan*, which basically means "to give." God graciously gives His covenant to Abram in the setting of his disobedience with Hagar. God then says, "My covenant is with you and with your children and with the children of your children. And I will make you great, exceedingly many." He promises again that Abraham will become *bimeod meod*—"very, very great." God reiterates the promise of seed by telling Abram that He will not use Eliezer or Ishmael. God remains in sovereign control of Abram's life and Abram's response was to fall on his face before the Lord and worship. I believe that this response takes the place of an oath.

At other times when a covenant was made, there would be some type of an oath, but Abram doesn't even try to make an oath. He is on his face before God. From then on Abram becomes the man of faith, the man of obedience, the man of ethical living. The covenant is ratified—whereas before, the blood of an animal had to be shed, now it is human blood that needs to be shed to ratify the covenant by circumcision. Circumcision indicates cleansing and rolling away of the past (that is in Joshua 5), which is why in Reformed Presbyterian circles, we speak of baptism taking the place of circumcision, because baptism speaks of the washing away of sin. So circumcision would speak of the rolling away of the past,

because that is what Abram needed so badly in light of his somewhat disordered life up to that point. God said, “Abram, the past is rolled away for you and I have claimed and have separated all these children and all those under your control.” Both Vos and Robertson have discussions of circumcision in the texts we read for this course.

This passage contains the ratification and the seal together, as well as the theme of election. Notice that Abram again then tries to have Ishmael inherit the promise, but God says, “No, I am going to give you Isaac. I will give you a boy and it will not be Ishmael, but I claim Ishmael also.” Ishmael had to be circumcised because he was Abram’s son, so Ishmael was not cast off or rejected, but he received the sign of the covenant also.

Obedience to God, the sovereign king, was the absolute requirement. God gave Abram the grace to obey and God graciously continued his covenant with Abram. In the next lecture we will conclude our discussion of Abraham and move on to discuss Isaac and Jacob.