

The Promise Keeper
#8 in a Series on The Story: From Creation to Christ
Genesis 12:10-15:21
Faith Community Church – February 24, 2008

Introduction

As Americans, we dislike waiting, especially for things that are a) important, or b) good. Most of our waiting is for short periods and for things that are often relatively insignificant. Sometimes our waiting is longer: we wait during illness, for a clear sense of direction in life, or for a family member to trust in Christ. Waiting in those cases can be hard and they can test our faith.

We might describe Abram's life as a cycle of hearing God's promise and then waiting, followed by a reaffirmation of God's promise and then waiting some more. We also might look at it as a cycle of promise, then trouble, then promise, then trouble. I would encourage you to read through Abram's story and see how, from a human standpoint, the promise was potentially jeopardized by the events and circumstances Abram found himself in. Yet God continually delivered, restored, and rescued.

One of the difficult things about a survey like we are doing is that we can't stop and talk about everything. Perhaps at some point in the future we'll come back and look at Abram's life in greater detail, but today I want to focus on the theme of this section – the promise of God – and Abram's response.

The Plot

Let's walk through the plot of this section so that we get a sense of what is happening in Abram's life.

1. Calling – we looked at Genesis 12:1-9 last week, where God calls Abram out of a pagan civilization and tells him to go to a land he would be shown. Abram's travels take him to Canaan, where he worships God.
2. Deception – At some point after Abram is in the land, he encounters a famine and makes a decision to travel to Egypt in search of food. But we see a surprisingly selfish side of Abram in 12:11-13. Sure enough Sarai is added to Pharaoh's harem, and somehow finds out the truth. He rebukes Abram and sends him out of Egypt, though substantially more wealthy than when he entered.
3. Separation – Abram returns to where he first built an altar and restores his relationship with God. (Note application) But the increase in his flocks has made it difficult for him to co-exist with Lot, his nephew. Abram proposes that Lot choose a direction to go in and he will go in the other. Moses' description of Lot's choice is full of foreboding (13:1-13).
4. Promise – After Lot leaves, God reaffirms his promise, beginning in 13:14.

5. Conflict – The ancient world was filled with lesser kings who paid tribute to greater kings, and because of a rebellion of some of the local smaller kings, the greater kings attacked and captured the people and possessions of those on the plain by Sodom, including Lot. When Abram hears that Lot is captured, he plans and executes a successful rescue. Upon his return he meets with two kings – Melchizedek, the king of Salem, who blesses Abram, and the King of Sodom whose approach to Abram betrays thanklessness. Abram’s gifts to Melchizedek and refusal to benefit at the hand of the King of Sodom is a moment in which he chooses an alliance with God as opposed to what is wrong. [Commentary]
6. Promise & Covenant – Immediately in chapter 15 we have the most significant encounter between God and Abram as relates to the promise. The main part of the chapter involves an elaborate ceremony that was common in the ancient near east in which God swears to keep the covenant he has made with Abram.

The Promise

What was the promise that God made? We read it in the following verses:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3 ESV)

Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. (Genesis 12:7 ESV)

The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.” (Genesis 13:14-17 ESV)

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” (Genesis 15:1-5 ESV)

And he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” (Genesis 15:7 ESV)

The promise involved two components: First, Abram would become a great nation that would bring blessing the world. Second, God was giving him the land of Palestine.

The rest of the Old Testament story is a record of how God fulfilled those promises, and in ways even Abram couldn't anticipate.

Abram's Response

Abram is not a perfect man. He has his share of failures. But Abram believes God, and his belief in God holds strong as time goes on and his human strength diminishes. And therein is the lesson for us:

What Can We Take Away from This Part of Abram's Story?

1. God shows us what real faith is all about.
 - a. What is faith? Is it a leap in the dark? A hope? A wish? Positive thinking? A cross-your-fingers and try to believe type of thing?
 - b. We often hear people say, "Have faith," when someone is going through a difficult time. It's kind of like the Disney song, "Fairy tales can come true, they can happen to you . . ." Is that what faith is?
 - c. Paul provides a definition of faith by using Abram in Romans 4:21. He says that Abram was "fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised."
 - d. We need to grasp that. Faith is not building a wish-list of what we would like God to do in our lives and then trying to muster some kind of positive psychic energy that we hope will convince God to bring thing to pass. Faith is believing what God says. That means that the way I look at life as a Christian – even when I go through difficulty – is that God is good, God is for me, God loves me, God will cause all things to work together for my ultimate good, and so on. Faith establishes my perspective on life.
2. God shows us how sinful people can be made right with him.
 - a. Genesis 15:6 records an incredible statement: "And he (Abram) believed the Lord, and he (the Lord) counted it to him as righteousness." What does this mean?
 - b. Righteousness, in some contexts, has to do with character, but in this case it has to do with how God views our sin and our relationship with him. To be righteous in God's eyes means that God no longer looks at us as being guilty, but instead of simply forgiving us, God credits Christ's righteousness to us.

- c. It was as if Abram was wearing a suit of clothes that said “fearful, deceitful, selfish, impatient, adulterer . . .” and in a moment God took those clothes off and put new ones on that said, “forgiven, pardoned, righteous in my sight.”
- d. That is what God does with us when we believe his promise in the Gospel – I can’t say it better than Paul does in Romans 4:4-8.
- e. Your understanding this is so important. If you don’t get this you’ll look to something you do as a means to earn favor with God. If you don’t your assurance will be based in whatever vehicle God used to bring you to faith. And if you don’t your day-to-day relationship with God will be based on what you are doing for Christ – how you are performing – and not on what Christ already did for you.

Conclusion

God is a promise-keeping God. His word is able to be believed. So if you haven’t trusted in God’s promise of forgiveness and new life in Christ, I urge you to do so. And if you have, I would encourage you to think long on what it means to be counted righteous in God’s eyes, and enjoy the privilege of being his child.