

Abrahamic Faith: Studies & Principles In The Life of Abraham

Eastside Church of Christ • Adult VBS • June 1-15, 2015

Monday: Abraham & The Covenant Promise

Tuesday: Abraham & The Faith

Wednesday: Abraham & The Law

Thursday: Abraham & The Seed Line

Friday: Abraham & The Covenant of Righteousness

The Abrahamic Covenant and Righteousness (The Forgotten Dimension)

As Christians, it is imperative that we have a proper understanding of the relationships that exist among the different dispensations (ages) that the Bible presents. The books of Romans, Galatians and Hebrews spend a great deal of time and effort in developing such an understanding by addressing how the gospel of Christ relates to the law of Moses. That relationship is crucial to understanding, among other things, the establishment of the church (e.g., its origin - Acts 2; et. al.), the purpose of the church (Eph 3:8-11), the role of faith in salvation (Rom 4) and eternal life (Rom 1:16ff).

Parallel to a proper understanding of the gospel-law association is understanding how it is that the Abrahamic covenant relates to the law of Moses, as well as to the gospel of Christ. Galatians, chapter three, notes the chronological relationship when it notes that the law was added to the promise (i.e., covenant - Gal 3:17). Thus, the covenant was first, and the law was second.

The relationship, however, does not end there. Paul goes on to say that the law, by design, was taken away after it brought us to Christ (Gal 3:19-25; cf. Rom 10:4; Col 2:12ff). This adds an additional dimension to the first point: the law not only was second to the promise chronologically, it was also second in significance.

Because the principles of the promise/covenant existed prior to the law, and continue to exist after the end of the law (cf. Rom 4), the promise/covenant must be superior to the law. This is the point of Paul's analogy with Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4:21ff (cf. Rom 7:1-4). We are children of Sarah, the freewoman (and thus the promise), not children of Hagar, the bondwoman (the law).

There are, I am sure, many more biblical perspectives that we might address concerning these relationships, but permit me to focus on just one. In examining the promise/covenant that God made with Abram we have often noted the following: (1) God promised to make Abram the progenitor of many nations; (2) God promised to bless those who blessed Abram and curse those who cursed him; and (3) God promised to give Abraham's descendants the land of Canaan.

There are several additional elements, nuances if you will, that come to the fore in fully addressing these three general areas. With regard to the first facet of the promise made to Abraham, we note: (1) in order to make Abram the father of many nations, God would have to make Abram a father the first time. The birth of Ishmael and the significance of such as it relates to God's plan to man provides an interesting study; (2) the failure of Abram to realize that God's promise referred to a specific son (not just any son), and that this child would be a fleshly descendant of both Abram and Sarai, leads us to an understanding of the "child of promise," and the distinction that God makes between his people and the rest of the nations; and (3) the concept of God's promise of descendants being fulfilled ultimately in a single "seed" (Gal 3:16) leads us to an appreciation of the role of God's only begotten son, the Christ.

Concerning the second facet of the promise made to Abram, we would do well to learn: (1) how it was that the children of Abram were to be a blessing to the nations; (2) how it was that the nations would be cursed because of their cursing of Israel; and (3) how all families of the earth (then and later) would be blessed through Abram. The first two areas lead us to studying the history of the children of Israel and their interaction with the peoples around them. The third leads us beyond that, ultimately, once again, to the Christ and His gospel.

The third part of the promise, that of the pledge to Abraham of the land of Canaan, also constitutes an interesting study. We might note: (1) the sign of God in Genesis 15, where God informs Abram that his descendants would be enslaved in a foreign land (Egypt) before he delivered them into the promised land, given as surety that Abram would indeed have a son of his own; (2) the providential role of Joseph, Abraham's great-grandson, in leading his family into the land of Egypt; (3) the role of Aaron and Moses as they lead Israel out of the iron furnace of Egypt; (4) the wondering in the wilderness for 40 years; (5) the entrance into, and conquest of, the land of Canaan during the time of Joshua; (6) the problems that Israel faced with her neighbors when she failed to follow God's will, resulting finally in God's removal of Israel from the land; (7) the promise of the restoration of the land; and (8) finally, how the land of Canaan is a type of the church and heaven.

While learning about each of these three major divisions, and their respective subdivisions, constitutes a worthwhile consideration of the promise made to Abraham, there exists more that we need to know and emphasize. I am certain that there is much more than I can fathom, but certainly worthy of our consideration is the following premise: there exists an intricate connection between God's covenant/promise made with Abraham and *righteousness*, a relationship that I feel we have too often ignored.

When God first covenanted with Abram, He not only made "promises" of (1) nations/seed, (2) blessings and (3) land, He commanded Abram to "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you." (Gen 12:1). In faithful response to God's command "Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him" (Gen 12:4, cf. Heb 11:8ff). This element of the covenant made to Abraham is sometimes overlooked. While it is true that God made promises of nations, blessings and land, it is also true that God expected Abram to be holy and righteous. In the context of Genesis 12, Abram's righteousness is demanded (and made evident) in his departure from his country and from his father's house. Joshua reminded the children of Israel several hundred years later that Abraham's ancestors, including his father, Terah, "served other gods." (Josh 24:2) Why did God want Abraham to leave his country and his family? So that Abraham would be separated from the influence of those who worshipped "other gods" and thus be righteous.

Some might think that the evidence for the alleged connection between the Abrahamic covenant and righteousness based upon the information given in Genesis 12 is a bit weak. Further analysis will show that this connection is far from "alleged."

Later in the life of Abraham, after the birth of Ishmael but before that of Isaac, God repeated his covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:2ff). Once again, as initially introduced in Genesis 12, God promised to make Abram a father of many nations (v 4). He promised land (v 8), and he promised blessings of fruitfulness (v 6). But that is not all we read in this chapter. In the very first verse we learn that God said to Abram: "I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless." God expected Abram to be "blameless." Later in the chapter, God told Abram (now Abraham) that he was to "keep My covenant" (v 9ff) by following the sign of circumcision. The significance of circumcision is later seen to be representative of the differences that exist between Israel, God's chosen people, and the nations around them. Israel was to be a righteous people, a peculiar people, a people for God's own possession. The covenant of God with Abraham, and thus Israel, demanded righteousness.

Note further the words of Zechariah, the father of John the baptizer, who by the Holy Spirit of God uttered these words:

"Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, who have been since the world began, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to perform the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant, the oath which He swore to our father Abraham: to grant us that we, Being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life." (Luke 1:68-75)

Note that Zechariah's historical prophecy concerning the role of his son, John, and that of his son's cousin, Jesus, mentioned the "covenant" (also the "oath") that God made with Abraham. Note too that God promised to deliver Israel from their enemies, not just to demonstrate that he could do so, but so that they "might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life." It is by design that God's covenant with Abraham demanded righteousness.

That principle is no different today. God has called us to be "holy and without blame" (cf. Eph 1:4) just as He called Abram to be "blameless" (Gen 17:1). Our "blamelessness" is part of our death to sin, which occurs by "putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ" (Col 2:11). Just as Abraham practiced physical circumcision as a sign of the covenant and practiced holiness before God, so must we implement spiritual circumcision and its attendant righteousness under the new covenant.

When we are "buried with Him in baptism" (Col 2:12), we are making the same commitment to God that Abraham did. Indeed, in this act we become not only "Christ's," but "Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29). We can not fairly look only at the promises of blessings in Christ (e.g., the forgiveness of sins and eternal life) and do justice to new testament teaching anymore than we can focus only on God's promise of nations, blessings and land to Abraham and expect that to be the sum of biblical teaching concerning the covenant.

God's covenant with Abraham demanded righteousness. God's covenant with us, through Christ (the fulfillment of God's with Abraham - cf. Rom 4:1ff; Gal 3:6ff; Heb 2:16ff), demands no less.

As we complete our thoughts, notice the emphasis on righteousness presented in Romans 6:15-23. This emphasis on righteousness occurs in the context of discussing what is involved in the very process of becoming a Christian, as well as that which relates to remaining faithful. In this reading both actions (seen here as fruit, obedience, righteousness, holiness) and commitments (seen here as presenting yourselves as slaves, as well as holiness) are addressed. Paul says:

"What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin to death, or of obedience to righteousness? But God be thanked that {though} you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human {terms} because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members {as} slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness {leading} to {more} lawlessness, so now present your members {as} slaves {of} righteousness for holiness. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things {is} death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin {is} death, but the gift of God {is} eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:15-23)

[For further study consider the following: (1) the faith of Abraham and righteousness (Rom 4:1ff; Gal 3:6ff; James 2:14ff); (2) Abraham and Melchizedek, the King of righteousness (Heb 7:1ff); (3) God knew that Abraham would teach his descendants to keep His word, i.e. practice righteousness (Gen 18:19); (4) Moses

admonished the children of Israel to keep God's statutes and commandments so that they would be righteous (Deut 6:23-25) in the land that was promised to the fathers, including Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Deut 6:10; Note: the righteousness mentioned here, and elsewhere, addresses the righteousness attributed to Israel because of their submission and obedience to God's will. It is not because of righteousness obtained independent of God's will - cf. Deut 9:4ff - but that which is attributed due to obedience - e.g. Ps 103:17-22, where repeated emphasis is placed upon covenant keeping, commandments, hearkening to God's voice, etc.; cf. also Ps 112:1-3; 132:11-12; Is 54:17; 56:1; 61:8-10; Dan 9:4; et. al.); (5) God's faithfulness in performing the words of the covenant with Abraham conveys His righteousness, thus paralleling the same principle that mankind must follow (cf. Neh 9:7-8; Ps 50: 1-6; 111: 3-5; Is 33:5-8; 42:5-6; 54:17; 56:1; 61:8-10; Dan 9:4); (6) God kept his covenant with Israel, even when Israel was unfaithful (cf. Ps 78:37), in order to maintain a remnant leading to the Christ; (7) per #6, God maintained a covenant or righteousness with Israel in order to lead them (and all men) to the covenant of Christ (Jer 31:31), the Branch of righteousness (Jer 33:14-16; cf. Mal 3:1ff; Lk 1:72-75; Gal 3:17-21); (8) for related passages dealing with faith, promise and righteousness cf. Acts 3:8-10; 24:24-25; Rom 1:17; 3:21-31; 4:9, 11, 13, 14, 16, 20, 22; 9:30-32; 10:1-21; Gal 2:20-21; 3:1-9, 21-25; 5:5; Phil 3:9; 2 Tim 3:15-16 Heb 11:7-9; 2 Pet 3:13.]

Passages To Consider

Ge 15:6 And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

Ge 18:19 “For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.” (cf. Genesis 18-19)

Isa 51:1 “Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, You who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were hewn, And to the hole of the pit from which you were dug. Isa 51:2 Look to Abraham your father, And to Sarah who bore you; For I called him alone, And blessed him and increased him.”

Lu 1:73* The oath which He swore to our father Abraham.; Lu 1:75 In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.

Ro 4:3* For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

Ro 4:9* Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness.

Ro 4:11* And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, Ro 4:12* and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised. Ro 4:13* For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.

Ga 3:6* just as Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”; Ga 3:7* Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.; Ga 3:8* And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.”; Ga 3:9* So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.

Heb 7:1* For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him.; Heb 7:2* to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated “king of righteousness,” and then also king of Salem, meaning “king of peace.”; Heb 7:4* Now consider how great this man was, to whom even the patriarch Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils.; Heb 7:5* And indeed those who are of the sons of Levi, who receive the priesthood, have a commandment to receive tithes from the people according to the law, that is, from their brethren, though they have come from the loins of Abraham; Heb 7:6* but he whose genealogy is not derived from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises.

Jas 2:23* And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God.