

“Covenant Two: Abraham”

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 • Psalm 22:23-31 • Romans 4:13-25 • Mark 8:31-38

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There are four major *covenants* in the Bible, four important *agreements* that God established with our ancestors in the faith. A *covenant* is a solemn or binding promise between two parties, usually formal in nature, typically in writing, and often affirmed with some kind of visible sign or seal. God's first covenant in the Bible is with Noah: "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature that is with you ... that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." It's an *unconditional* promise. Humanity does not have to do anything. God will keep this covenant regardless of how good or evil, moral or immoral, we are. It's a promise. A gift. We didn't earn it; we don't deserve it; God gives it to us anyway. That's *grace*. The sign of this covenant is the rainbow: a reminder – both to us *and to God* – of God's unconditional, everlasting promise: *never again*. This first covenant is a promise with *all* of humanity. Jews and Gentiles, Christians and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, followers of *any* of the world's religions, or *none* of them; men and women of all skin colors, from every people and language and nation; this covenant is for *all* of humanity. It is the most *universal* of any of the biblical covenants.

The second covenant is much more specific. God chose one man, one family, out of all the people on earth, to receive a special promise. That choice set in motion a complex set of events that has lasting impact to this day, nearly four thousand years later. That choice gave rise to the world's three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Today there are about 15 million Jews, 2.4 billion Christians, and 2 billion Muslims around the world. Nearly four and a half billion people – more than half the world's population! – trace their biological heritage, or their spiritual heritage, or both, back to this one man: Abraham. He is the faith ancestor of *all three religions*. I'm going to explain why. This will be easiest if I focus on one group at a time. I'm going to talk first about what Abraham means for *Jews*, then for *Muslims*, and then for us *Christians*. That's not the chronological order – Islam is the youngest of the three faiths, emerging 600 years after Jesus – but this is the most *logical* order.

Abraham was a *very* complicated guy. He responded faithfully when God called him at the age of 75; he was, for a time, a successful military leader; he held strongly to his faith while living in a land filled with foreign gods; he established the biblical practice of tithing; he was respected by numerous rulers in different lands. There was a *lot* about Abraham that was commendable. But he also deceived people, at least twice; he demonstrated, at times, a *lack* of faith; he sexually exploited his wife's slave-woman; then he later banished that slave-woman and her – *his!* – child, casting them out into a desert wilderness where they nearly died. The Bible does not hide Abraham's faults, nor does it really condone them. He is a complex man, righteous and unrighteous, faithful and unfaithful. Which makes him a lot like *us*. We can't relate to *perfect* people. We can relate to people who have *flaws*. We all, like Abraham,

have strengths and weaknesses, faith and lack of faith, areas in our lives where we are very much in line with God's will, and other areas where we are very much *not*. *God did not choose a perfect person to receive this covenant.* God chose someone who was flawed, and who could also rise *above* those flaws.

God establishes a covenant with Abraham in the 15th chapter of the book of Genesis. At the beginning of that chapter, God promises Abraham that he would have innumerable descendants. At the end of that chapter, "the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Gergashites, and the Jebusites.'" This is a promise of *land* – a vast expanse of *land*, stretching from the Nile River in Egypt all the way to the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia. Let me be very clear: the Jewish people, the people of Israel, have *never* controlled that much land. They came close, under Kings David and Solomon, about a thousand years before Jesus, when their political influence extended up to *part of* the area along the Euphrates River, but they never *completely* controlled all that land, nor did their influence *ever* cover the Sinai Peninsula or the land of Egypt. This promise – "to your descendants I give [all] this land" – remains *unfulfilled*. That fact continues to have *major* political ramifications today.

Two chapters later – in chapter 17 – God reaffirms and embellishes that covenant. God says: "This is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.... I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding, and I will be their God." God makes three material promises: (1) lots of descendants; (2) "nations" and "kings"; and (3) the land of Canaan as a "perpetual holding." There is also a spiritual promise: to be God to Abraham and his offspring. Like the covenant with Noah, this is an *everlasting* covenant. But unlike the covenant with Noah, this one has a catch; it's somewhat conditional; there is something God wants Abraham to do: "This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: ... Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old.... Any uncircumcised male ... shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." Thus began the Jewish practice of circumcision, which continues to this day, and has long been a source of both identity and pride for the Jewish people, especially during times of oppression or persecution. It's a way of saying, "we are different from the other nations, and we bear the mark of that difference on our bodies." The sign of God's covenant with Noah – the rainbow – is visible for all to see. The sign of God's covenant with Abraham – circumcision – is private. It is a constant reminder to Jewish boys and men, and also to their mothers and their wives, that they are a *special people* in the sight of God, blessed with special promises. Many descendants. Nations and kings – the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and, arguably, the modern state of Israel. And *land* – but here in chapter 17, the promise of land is *just the land of Canaan*, which roughly corresponds to the modern state of Israel and the occupied West Bank. *This* promise of land does *not* extend from Egypt to Mesopotamia. Why the difference? Well, *that's* a good question, one that I'm not even going to *attempt* to answer! And next week, we'll look at how that promise of land later became a *conditional* promise, dependent on Israel's *behavior*.

So that's Abraham for the Jews. What about Abraham for the Muslims? Abraham has both *biological* and *spiritual* significance in Islam. Biologically, many Muslims consider themselves to be

physical descendants of Abraham, through Abraham's *firstborn* son, the one that Abraham banished, *Ishmael*. Genesis says that Ishmael's twelve sons became "princes," leaders of twelve tribes in Arabia. Muslims believe that Mohammad, their most important prophet, and many of his followers, descended from those tribes. Spiritually, Muslims see Abraham as a very important prophet, a messenger of God, the Pioneer and Friend of God who willingly submitted to God's will, who consistently proclaimed the Oneness of God, and who helped purge idolatry from the world. Abraham – or *Ibrahim*, as Muslims call him – is mentioned dozens and dozens of times in the Quran, Islam's holy book. Some of their stories about Abraham would be familiar to you; others are not so familiar – like the story that Abraham and Ishmael built a holy shrine in Mecca, at a site that continues to be revered to this day. Like the Jews, Muslims circumcise their male children, following the example set by Abraham, a mark of their identity.

Now, what about Christians? What do we make of Abraham? We are not his descendants in a *biological* sense. Christianity is remarkable in that it has always been, right from its birth on the day of Pentecost, a *global* religion, open to people from *any* nation, *any* race or ethnicity. We do not all look the same, or speak the same language, and we should *celebrate* that diversity. We affirm that God chose *one* group of people in the time of Abraham, but that ultimately led to an open invitation to *all* groups of people, through Jesus. The apostle Paul – who was a Jew – expounds on this at length. He says that God's chosen people rejected Jesus, and that rejection is what opened the door to allow *us* to come in.

So we're not Abraham's *biological* descendants. But we are his *spiritual* descendants. How? Because of what he did in the 15th chapter of Genesis, before he had *any* children. God took him outside to view the multitude of stars in the night sky; God told Abraham, "so shall your descendants be," and Abraham "believed the Lord." Abraham *trusted* God's promise, despite the fact that Abraham was some eighty years old and his wife was barren! He "believed in the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." That was *faith*. Paul puts it like this: "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised." Being fully convinced that God is able to do what God promises: that is faith. Being fully convinced, for example, that God *will* ultimately vanquish evil: that's faith. Being fully convinced that God *does* defeat death: that's faith. Being fully convinced that God *will* deliver us from all our sins: that's faith. Paul continues: "Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him,' were written not for his sake alone but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over for our trespasses and was raised for our justification." When we have the kind of *trust* in God's promises that *Abraham* had in God's promises to him – that's faith. When we can believe like that, Abraham becomes our *spiritual ancestor in the faith*.

So is God's covenant with Abraham a covenant for *us*? No, it's really not. The covenant with Abraham belongs to the *Jewish* people. Paul says: "They are Israelites, and to *them* belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants...." God's covenant with Abraham isn't like God's covenant with Noah. Both are everlasting. The first is unconditional; the second is somewhat conditional. And the first is universal, while the second is very particular. It's a covenant with the *Jews*, and the *Jews alone*. This covenant has *no lasting significance* for us. So Christians don't have to circumcise their baby boys. Many Christians don't. That's not the sign of *our* covenant with God. We use a *different* sign. Abraham is important to us, but not because of this covenant. He's important because of his *faith* – which is a *model* for all of us.

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