



INTRODUCING

# **THE GOSPEL**

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## The promises to Abraham





# Lesson 7: The promises to Abraham

## Introduction

A key part of understanding the Gospel and the hope it offers is to look right back into the Old Testament and the promises God made to a man called Abraham. Abraham lived about two thousand years before the birth of Jesus, and is the first person in the Bible whose life we have a detailed account of.

These promises didn't end when Abraham died, instead they were repeated to some of Abraham's descendents and point to the future Kingdom of God.

Some of the promises have been fulfilled, but some of them haven't yet been. Jesus, as a descendant of Abraham, is a focus of many of these promises, and through him, they are passed to all of mankind.

In this chapter you will learn:

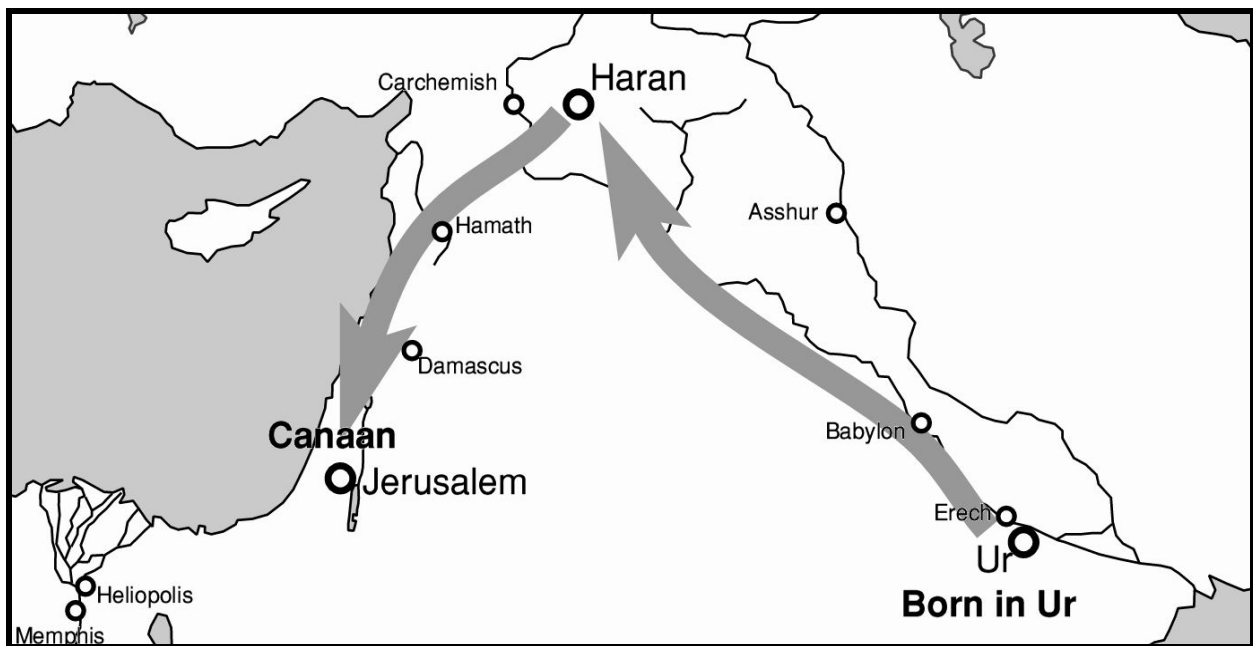
- Who Abraham was and why God made him promises
- How these promises were passed on down the generations
- How those who have faith can inherit these promises



## Introducing Abraham

Abraham (called Abram earlier on in life) was born in Ur, a city in southern Iraq. At the time of his birth, Ur was a prosperous and sophisticated city, but Abraham and his family left it and travelled to another city called Haran. At some point before Abraham reached Haran, he received a call from God to go to Canaan, the area which is now covered by Israel, Palestine, and parts of Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.

Abraham followed God's call and travelled into Canaan where he became a nomad, living in tents and moving from place to place. His journeys took him all over Canaan; he even visited Egypt on at least one occasion.



Abraham was already an old man when he left Haran - according to Genesis 12:4 he was 75 years old. His wife was called Sarah (earlier called Sarai) and she was also elderly; the two of them had passed the point they could have children. It was a miracle then, when Sarah became pregnant at an advanced age after a promise from God, and had a son, named Isaac.

Isaac is of great significance in the account of Abraham, and was an important part of God's promises to him. Abraham had other children, but Isaac had a special place in God's plan.



## The promises

There are several occasions on which God gave promises to Abraham. The first set were made in Mesopotamia, before Abraham left Haran, and possibly when he was still in Ur.

**“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 dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.”**

Genesis 12:1-4

There are three essential promises here:

1. **“I will make of you a great nation:”** Abraham was to become the father of a great nation. This, of course, requires that he would have children. At an already advanced age, Abraham was going to become the father of at least one child, and further descendants would increase until they were a nation.
2. **“I will bless you and make your name great:”** Abraham’s name is his fame. That his name was to become great was a promise that he would be known everywhere. There can be no doubt that this has become the case, even today.
3. **“In you all families of the earth shall be blessed:”** Abraham was to bring a blessing, which would extend to everyone on earth. This is fulfilled because one of the descendants of Abraham is Jesus.

God repeats these promises in later chapters of Genesis, and adds further promises to them. For example this second set in chapter 13:

**“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

This passage reiterates the promise of a great (numerous) nation, and also adds in the promise of their own land. This land, which is identified elsewhere in Genesis as the territory between the Brook of Egypt and the river Euphrates, was to be given to Abraham and his descendants.

Promises are also made later on to Abraham’s son Isaac in **Genesis 26:2-5**, Isaac’s son Jacob in **Genesis 28:13-15**, and King David - a much later descendant - in **2 Samuel 7:11-16**.

## A promised son

For the promises to be fulfilled, it was necessary that Abraham should have a son. However, he was an old man, and Sarah, his wife, was also too old to have children.

As time went on, Sarah and Abraham attempted to manage matters themselves. Sarah gave her servant-girl Hagar to Abraham as a concubine (lower status than a wife), and she produced a son for him called Ishmael. You can read more about this in **Genesis 16**.

However, God later reiterates that his promise was that Abraham would have a legitimate son through his wife Sarah.

**“And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.””**

Genesis 17:15-16

God is explicit in stating that the promised child would be through Sarah - something which seemed physically impossible. Neither Abraham or Sarah were prepared to believe God, in fact, this prediction that Sarah would bear a child made them laugh!

**Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”**

Genesis 17:17

Laughter - or *Isaac* in Hebrew - was the name given to Sarah’s son when he was finally born. Ishmael was still a son of Abraham, but Isaac was the son that God had promised.



Isaac was the father of Jacob, who was later renamed Israel. Jacob had twelve sons who became the forefathers of the nation of Israel.

Ishmael on the other hand was sent away after conflict within the family, and in time became one of the main founders of the Arab nations.

## The near-sacrifice of Isaac

One incident in particular is important for demonstrating just how strongly Abraham believed in these promises. When Isaac had grown to be a young adult, Abraham received another call from God:

**“After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 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.””**

Genesis 22:1-2

Abraham was called to take Isaac, the son of promise, and to sacrifice him as a burnt offering. This would involve putting him on an altar, killing him with a knife, and then burning his dead body on the altar. This would be a horrendous experience for Abraham, but in spite of this, he trusted God and believed that there was some purpose behind it.

Remember that God had promised Abraham that his descendents would come through a son born to himself and Sarah. They had waited all this time for that promise to come true with the birth of Isaac. Abraham knew that God wouldn't break that promise now by ending his line with Isaac. He trusted that whatever would happen next, God would keep his promises.

Abraham was an old man by now, and was probably around 120 years old. Isaac on the other hand was around 20 years old. Abraham could not have overcome Isaac if Isaac had decided to resist him. But either Isaac had some revelation of his own, or he trusted Abraham completely, and he allowed himself to be tied up and placed on the altar.



**“When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.”**

Genesis 22:9-10

At this point, God intervenes and Isaac is saved from being killed:

**“But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.””**

Genesis 22:11-12

In this incident, we have a father who is willing to give his own son as a sacrifice. The son is a willing victim who did not resist his father. However, the son was saved from death. This is remarkably like the situation of Jesus Christ, who was given as a sacrifice for sin, who did not resist, but who offered himself and was then delivered from (a permanent) death.

Abraham and Isaac here are providing a picture of the death and resurrection of Jesus as a sacrifice for sin, as well as a demonstration of their faith in God’s promises.

## The final promise

Immediately after this event, Abraham receives a further promise from God:

**“And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.””**

Genesis 22:15-18





This passage repeats the promise that Abraham would have many descendants. However, it then goes on to talk about a single offspring: **“your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies”**. The pronoun here is singular.

Abraham was to have a single pre-eminent descendant who would overcome his enemies, and will bring a blessing on the whole world. The New Testament identifies this descendant unequivocally as Jesus Christ:

**“Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.”**

Galatians 3:16

## Fulfilment

God gave promises to Abraham. The claim of God, and the evidence of other promises is that God is faithful and keeps his word. But in the case of Abraham, some of the promises haven't been fulfilled yet.

One example is God's promise that Abraham would receive the land of Canaan. The words of the promise in **Genesis 13:15** are: **“for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever.”** This is not merely a promise that Abraham's descendents would one day become owners of that land, but that the land would be given to Abraham himself.

But God did not give the land to Abraham during his lifetime. That land has passed through various nations' control ever since. As this promise has not yet been fulfilled, there will be a time in the future when it will be.

The letter to the Hebrews gives a commentary on the activities of many of these people of faith who appear in the Old Testament. Among these is Abraham.

**“And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”**

Hebrews 11:39-40





Not only did Abraham receive promises which are yet to be fulfilled, but so did other people! Those which haven't come to pass yet will be fulfilled in the future, and we have the opportunity to be a part of them.

These promises include the promise about Abraham receiving the land. This means that Abraham will need to be raised from the dead - there is no other way in which he can receive this promise. The verse then indicates that we are part of the same plan. We are to be blessed with Abraham, so we have the same hope as him.

**“So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”**

Galatians 3:9

The final point that needs to be made about Abraham is that he had his sins forgiven because of his faith.

**“...just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham”**

Galatians 3:6-7

**“For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.””**

Romans 4:3

Abraham's faith consisted of believing God, but then of basing his life on that belief. He believed that God would save Isaac's life, and so he was prepared to sacrifice him.

It was not merely the following of a set of rules which brought salvation to Abraham, but trust in God, the acceptance of God's way, and dedication to that way in his life. Those who have the faith of Abraham are considered to be part of Abraham's family, and therefore are also able to receive promises from God.

**“And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.”**

Galatians 3:29

**Lesson summary:**

1. Abraham was the first of the faithful and provides a pattern that the faithful can follow. He had his sins forgiven because of his belief in, and dedication to, God.
2. As a result of his faith, Abraham was given promises by God. These promises were passed on to the generations who followed after him.
3. Jesus Christ is a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David. As such, he is a focus of many of the promises. Through him, all of mankind have the opportunity to be saved, and those who have faith can become inheritors of those promises.



## Lesson 7 summary questions:

1:

- a) Where did Abraham come from?
- b) Approximately how far is it from there to Haran, and then how far is it from Haran to the land of Canaan?
- c) What does this tell you about the magnitude of the task that Abraham was given by God? (Genesis 12:1)

2: The promises made by God to Abraham appear in **Genesis 12:2-3, Genesis 13:14-16, Genesis 15:5-7, 18-21, Genesis 17:4-8, 16-19, Genesis 22:16-18**. Make a list of these promises.

- a) Which of the promises were fulfilled in Abraham's lifetime?
- b) Which promises were fulfilled after Abraham's death, but before the present day?
- c) Which promises have yet to be fulfilled?

3: Abraham was ready to sacrifice Isaac, but received him back from death in **Genesis 22:1-12**. What other figures in the Bible have received a child back from the dead?

4: Which of the following are not physical descendants of Abraham?

King David (1 Chronicles 2:1-15)

Luke the Evangelist (Colossians 4:10-14)

Isaiah the Prophet (Isaiah 1:1)

The Apostle Peter (Matthew 4:18)

Jesus Christ (Luke 3:23,31)

Caiaphas the High Priest (Matthew 26:3)

The Apostle Paul (Philippians 3:4,5)

Pontius Pilate (Matthew 27:2)

### Deeper dive questions

5: Why is Abraham such an important character in the Bible?

6: Why is the Bible almost exclusively concerned with the history of Israel? Why are there no prophets from other areas in the world?