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## **A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE**

### **THE BOOK OF GENESIS**

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#### **ABRAHAM AND THE NATIONS (11:27-16:16)**

##### **The Place of the Passage**

We move from the general picture of the nations in Genesis 4-11 to the specific story of one man, Abram (Abraham), and his family. Yet the wide-angle picture of all nations is not lost in the story of Abram, since God promises to bless all nations through Abram's seed. In this section of Genesis, God makes a covenant with Abram and his descendants, a covenant that is not deserved by or based on Abraham's faithfulness. It is a covenant that God himself guarantees.

##### **The Big Picture**

God promises to bless the nations through the seed of Abram.

##### **Discussion**

Read through the entire text for this study, Genesis 11:27–16:16. Then interact with the following questions and record your notes on them concerning this section of Genesis.

— Genesis 11:27 begins a new section: "Now these are the generations of Terah." The story of Terah, Abram's father, is told in the life of his son, Abram. Terah begins a journey to Canaan but settles in Haran. Genesis 12:1 begins, "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.'"

— What are the ways that God promises to bless Abram in Genesis 12:1-3?

— What is ironic about God's promise to make Abram's name great (Genesis 12:2) in light of the sin at the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:4?

— What are some other contrasts you see between the call of Abram and the Tower of Babel?

— Abram steps out in immediate obedience. At seventy-five years of age, he takes his entire family and sets out to go to the land of Canaan.

— How does God confirm his promise to Abram in Genesis 12:4-9?

— Despite Abram's faithful obedience in Genesis 12:4-9, his own faithlessness in Genesis 12:10-20 threatens the fulfillment of the promise. When famine strikes Egypt (Genesis 12:10), Abram lies to Pharaoh about his wife Sarai (Genesis 12:11-20). How does this

jeopardize the fulfillment of God's promise, "To your offspring I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7)? How does God intervene to ensure that his promises in these verses are fulfilled?

— After Abram's "exile" in Egypt, he demonstrates more faith in his relationship with Lot in Genesis 13:1-14:16. When the land cannot support both him and Lot, he allows Lot to choose whichever land he might want (Genesis 13:8-13). And when Lot is taken captive in a war by the kings of that area, Abram goes to rescue him (Genesis 14:12-16). How does the Lord affirm Abram's faith and his own promises in Genesis 13:1-14:16?

— In Genesis 14:17-24, Abram meets both Melchizedek, king of Salem, and the king of Sodom, how is Abram's faith demonstrated in this passage?

— Genesis 15:6 is one of the best known verses in the story of Abraham: "And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness." While Jews around the time of Jesus generally celebrated Abram's act of sacrifice of Isaac as the pinnacle of his faith, the New Testament focuses on Abram's belief in God's promise (Romans 4:1-25; Gal. 3:1-9). Ironically, though, the context preceding Genesis 15:6 focuses on God's promise in the face of Abram's faithlessness! How is Abram's faithlessness evident in Genesis 15:1-5?

— In Genesis 15:17, a smoking fire pot passes between the pieces of Abram's sacrifice. This is an odd scene! Covenants are usually accompanied with a sacrifice, and after the covenant is sealed, each of the parties would pass between the parts of the carcass of the sacrificed animal. Walking between the parts of the carcass is like saying, "Let it be done to me if I do not fulfill my part of the covenant" (cf. Jeremiah 34:18-20). If fire and smoke represent the presence of God (e.g., Exodus 19:18; see also Exodus 3:2; 13:21-22), then only God and not Abram passes between the pieces of the sacrifice. What does this imply about God's commitment to keeping the terms of this covenant?

— Abram's remarkable encounter with God in Genesis 15 has not cured his faithlessness. What consequences does Abram's faithless inability to trust God for the fulfillment of the promise have in Genesis 16:1-16?

— Look back over Genesis 12-16. How do these chapters show God's commitment to his promise even in the face of human faithlessness?

## **Gospel Glimpses**

**SACRIFICE AND THE COVENANT** — God's radical commitment to his promise and covenant with Abraham is seen as he passes alone through the pieces of the sacrifice in Genesis 15:17. If the terms of the covenant are not kept, then he will bring upon himself the curses of the covenant. This radical commitment to the covenant looks forward to Christ, who took upon himself the curse of the covenant: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:13-14).

Jesus has taken the curse of disobedience upon himself so that the nations might receive the blessing of Abraham.

**FAITH** — “And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). When Paul celebrates salvation by faith, he looks back to Abram’s faith in Genesis 15:6. In Paul’s day, the Jews looked to Abraham because of his obedience in being willing to sacrifice Isaac. The focus is on Abram’s obedience. The New Testament writers, however, focus more on Abram’s trusting faith in Genesis 15:6 (Romans 4:1-8; Galatians 3:1-14), and even references to the sacrifice of Isaac focus on his faith (“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac” (Hebrews 11:17). Even in Genesis, God’s blessing and promise do not flow out of Abram’s obedience. Rather, Abram’s faith and obedience are a response to God’s lavish promises. Abraham should be seen and celebrated as the father of faith.

### **Whole-Bible Connections**

**OFFSPRING OF ABRAHAM** — Earlier in Genesis, God promised that the offspring of the woman would crush the head of the offspring of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). God then promises to bless the offspring of Abraham. He says, “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3), and “To your offspring I will give this land” (Genesis 12:7; 15:18). In Jesus’ day, the Jews claim to be legitimate offspring of Abraham—but Jesus says that they are of the devil (John 8:39-44). The apostle Paul clarifies that we are off spring of Abraham not by bloodline but by “faith line,” connecting this explicitly to Genesis 12:

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Galatians 3:7–9)

Paul then clarifies that this biblical, God-spoken promise “does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ” (Galatians 3:16). Jesus Christ ultimately fulfills God’s promise to bless the nations in the offspring of Abraham. However, this blessing is not fulfilled only in Christ as an individual, for “as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. . . . And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:27, 29).

**EXILE TO EGYPT** — Egypt plays a critical role in the story of Abraham. When famine strikes the land of Canaan, Abram immediately flees to Egypt (Genesis 12:10) and then returns to the land of Canaan. This pattern of exile and return foreshadows Israel’s later slavery and affliction in Egypt (Genesis 15:13), as the family of Jacob moves there so that Egypt becomes a womb for the multiplication and increase of Israel as a nation (Exodus 1:7). However, the womb of Egypt becomes a place of affliction (Ex. 1:8–14) and an “iron furnace” (Deuteronomy 4:20), and God leads them out of Egypt back to the Promised Land. Later, Egypt becomes a metaphor for Israel’s exile in Assyria: “They [Israel] shall not remain in the land of the Lord, but Ephraim shall return to Egypt, and they shall eat

unclean food in Assyria” (Hosea 9:3). Historically, Israel never was exiled to Egypt after Hosea’s day, but Egypt is a metaphor for their affliction and hardship. Exile is not the last word, however, since “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1), just as Hosea looks forward to the day when “they [Israel] shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria, and I will return them to their homes” (Hosea 11:11). This return from exile is ultimately fulfilled in Egypt, when Jesus as a child flees to Egypt from the murderous intentions of Herod “to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I called my son’” (Matthew 2:15).

### **Theological Soundings**

**THE GOD OF ABRAHAM** — Repeatedly in the Bible, God reveals himself as the “God of Abraham” (e.g., Exodus 3:16; I Chronicles 29:18; Acts 3:13). This reminder establishes that God is a God who keeps his promises. God assures Isaac, “I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you” (Genesis 26:24), just as God reminds Jacob, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac” (28:13). Similarly, God tells Moses to encourage the people by telling them, “The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you” (Exodus 3:15). Even Elijah called on the “Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel” (I Kings 18:36) when he prayed for fire to fall on his sacrifice. Throughout the Old Testament, God reminds his people that he is the “God of Abraham” who keeps his promises. This reminder of God as the living God carries over to the New Testament, where Jesus uses this as an argument for the resurrection (Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37). This God of Abraham is the living God who continues to keep his promises and even raises the dead. The story of Abraham is not primarily about his sacrificial obedience but about God’s covenantal commitment to fulfill the promises he has made.

**THE NATIONS** — From Genesis 1, the scope of God’s concern is macrocosmic: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28). Genesis 1-11 pictures the earth being filled not with representatives of God but with rebels against God. This was clear at Babel, when God scattered people over the face of all the earth because they desired to “make a name for ourselves” (Genesis 11:4). In the face of humans seeking to make a name for themselves, God himself promises to an individual, Abraham, “I . . . will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2). The lens of Scripture zooms in from all nations in Genesis 1–11 to one man and his family in Genesis 12-50, so that this one man’s family might bless all nations (Genesis 12:3). Peter (Acts 3:25-26) and Paul (Galatians 3:8) identify the ingathering of the Gentiles—upon Christ’s life, death, and resurrection—as the fulfillment of this promise. And in the new earth, the redeemed people of God will be “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Revelation 7:9).