

# JOURNEY THROUGH SCRIPTURE GENESIS TO JESUS

Studying Scripture From the Heart of the Church

Kimberly Hahn and Michael Barber



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judgment on the Tower of Babel. Terah has three sons: Abram, Nahor and Haran. Abram receives the blessing from God.

In the past two lessons we have looked at the conflict within the human family, a conflict between two *seeds* (see Genesis 3:15), two *sons* (see Genesis 4–5; 10) and two *lines* (the *righteous* and the *unrighteous*). In his famous work *The City of God*, Saint Augustine understood Genesis in terms of two cities: the City of God, which is based upon the love of God even to the point of the contempt of self, and the City of Man, which is based upon the love of self even to the point of the contempt of God. Certainly we find ourselves facing a challenge: How do we live as citizens of the City of God while sojourning in the City of Man?

#### Review Questions for Personal Study

1. How is the story of Noah and the Flood like the Creation account?
2. How does the Flood prefigure baptism?
3. How does Christ fulfill the Creation covenant?
4. Describe the parallel structure of Genesis 1–11 in terms of *toledoth*.

#### Recommended Verses to Memorize

Genesis 6:5  
Hebrews 11:1  
1 Peter 3:21

#### LESSON FOUR

## Abraham: Our Father in Faith

This fourth lesson focuses on God's covenant with Abraham and the connection between covenant blessing and trials for God's faithful people in the example of Abraham. God gives to Abraham the covenant blessing, and then through Abraham he gives it to all the nations. God rewards Abraham's obedience through covenant renewal, so that ultimately all those whom God has scattered because of the Tower of Babel can be regathered as the family of God.

We conclude with a brief history of the sojourn of the Hebrews in Egypt, leading up to the Exodus.

#### And God Blessed Them...

From the beginning God pronounced his blessing on creation (see Genesis 1:22, 28; 2:3). Life—both the gift of life itself and life-giving power (“be fruitful and multiply”)—reveals God's blessing. The blessing of the covenant is given and received through the family. In fact, both natural life and covenant blessing are shared within the family and are part of the family legacy.

Genesis shows how the blessing passes from father to son. After the Flood God restores the blessing through Noah (see Genesis 9:1). Noah then blesses his firstborn son, Shem (see Genesis 9:26). Through Shem Noah's family receives God's blessing (see Genesis 9:27).

When humanity rejects God, attempting unity without God at the Tower of Babel, God scatters those who are in rebellion (see Genesis 11). Later he promises to bless Abraham for his obedience and through him restore humanity (see Genesis 12).

In Genesis 12:1–3 God uses the term *bless* or *blessing* five times. The divine blessing is transmitted through family lines (that is, Abraham's descendants). Furthermore, humanity will not be united through making a name for itself;

only through God will Abraham's name—his *shem*—be made great (see Genesis 12:2). Thus the covenant blessing passed on through Shem will now come through his descendant Abraham.

From Adam to Noah God expanded his family from two people to a family. Now God expands his family even further: whereas Noah was the *father* of a *household*, Abraham is the head of an extended family, the *chieftain* of a *tribe*.

Adam triggered the covenant curses through his disobedience; Abraham secures God's blessing through his righteousness. Thus in *Abraham* the failure of Adam is partially reversed, and through his *seed* God promises to bless all humanity again. In Genesis 12:1–3 God promises Abram three things: *land* and *nationhood* (see 12:1–2), a *dynastic kingdom* (see 12:2, “a great name”) and a *worldwide family* (see 12:3). Eventually God strengthens Abraham's faith by upgrading his threefold promise with three covenant oaths (see Genesis 15, 17, 22). God swears these oaths to Abraham because of his patient endurance and faithfulness (see Hebrews 6:13–17).

### Abraham Responds in Faith

When God calls Abram (meaning “exalted father”), he is seventy-five years old. Abram is extremely wealthy but has no heir (see Genesis 12:4–5; 13:2; 16:1). At God's command Abram leaves his home for a nomadic life with part of his clan: his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot and many domestic servants and their families (see Genesis 12:4–9). Abram is already demonstrating that he is a man of faith (see Hebrews 11:8)! Later, God renames him Abraham, which means “father of a multitude” (Genesis 17:4–5).

However, Abraham's life reveals that the road to blessing is paved with trials and temptations. He faces a multitude of hardships, including famine (see Genesis 12:10), exile and temporary “loss” of his wife (see Genesis 12:10–20; 20), family strife and division (see Genesis 13), wars (see Genesis 14:1–16), unfulfilled promises (see Genesis 15), marital discord (see Genesis 16), surgery (circumcision) (see Genesis 17), the supernatural destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (see Genesis 18:16–19:29), more family strife and division (see Genesis 21:8–21) and the ultimate trial of a father, the offering of his beloved son (see Genesis 22:1–19).

Abraham grows in faith through these tests, and he makes ever greater sacrifices. In the midst of his trials, God fulfills his promise to bless him (see

Genesis 14:17–20). Abraham defeats his enemies; then he meets Melchizedek, whose name means “righteous king” of “Salem” (Hebrew for “peace”). More than just a king, Melchizedek is a *priest* of God Most High. (This is the first reference in Scripture to a priest.) Melchizedek offers bread and wine to Abram, and then he gives God's blessing to Abram. Abram's response is one of homage by paying him tithes. In short, Melchizedek prefigures Christ in three ways: (1) he is a priest-king who (2) offers bread and wine and (3) receives homage.

### Three Promises Strengthened by Three Oaths

In Genesis 12 God makes three promises to Abram: *a nation with its own land* (see Genesis 12:2), *kingship* (a great name, a royal dynasty) (see Genesis 12:2) and *worldwide blessing* (see Genesis 12:3). God rewards Abram's faith with three covenant *oaths* recorded in Genesis 15, 17 and 22.

**The First Covenant Oath.** In Genesis 15 Abram is still childless. When God promises him a great reward (see verse 1), Abram respectfully reminds God, *what good is a reward if he has no son to inherit it?* In response God swears a covenant oath to give Abram a son. God makes a covenant with him when God passes between the parts of animals cut in two by Abram (see 15:7–21).

The first blessing that God promised Abram in Genesis 12:2, land and nationhood, is upgraded to a covenant oath. God swears that Abram will be a father to innumerable descendants, who will be delivered from bondage and receive the Promised Land (see Genesis 15:13–16). This foreshadows not only the Hebrews' slavery but also their exodus from Egypt.

As time goes by, however, elderly Abram and his wife, Sarai, grow impatient. They decide to take matters into their own hands. Sarai tells Abram that he should take her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, and have a son through her (see Genesis 16:1–3). Abram complies. However, after Hagar conceives a son, she begins to look at Sarai with contempt, sowing seeds of family discord (see Genesis 16:4).

**The Second Covenant Oath.** At this point God renames Abram “Abraham,” meaning “father of a multitude” (Genesis 17:5). He also renames Sarai “Sarah,” meaning “great mother” (Genesis 17:15). God swears another covenant oath to Abraham to give him a son through his wife Sarah; Ishmael is *not* the chosen heir. God gives an amazing promise: not just descendants but “kings of peoples



shall come from [Sarah]" (Genesis 17:16). This prefigures the covenant God will make with David to establish his kingdom in 2 Samuel 7:9.

God promises that Abraham will have a son in one year through Sarah (see Genesis 17:21). The promise includes a command, however: Abraham must circumcise himself and all the males in his tribe (see Genesis 17:10–14). Ishmael is thirteen years old and is circumcised, as are the household slaves. From this day forth all descendants of Abraham shall be circumcised on the eighth day.

At this point Abraham is ninety-nine years old. He has three months to recover and conceive with his wife Sarah! Even in his obedience to be circumcised Abraham demonstrates great faith.

Just as God promised, Isaac is born one year later. After he is weaned Abraham has a great feast (see Genesis 21:8). Fearful that Ishmael may try to usurp Isaac, Sarah asks Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael once and for all from their midst (see Genesis 21:10). Abraham hesitates, until the Lord instructs him to do as Sarah requests.

**The Final Covenant Oath.** Once Ishmael is banished, Abraham is left with his only beloved son Isaac. Years pass before God gives Abraham the ultimate test: He asks Abraham to sacrifice his son on a mountain of Moriah (see Genesis 22:1–2).

Abraham obeys immediately. He prepares the supplies himself, and he sets off with Isaac on the three-day journey (see Genesis 22:3–4). Once they arrive at the appointed place, Isaac carries the wood of the sacrifice up the hill (see Genesis 22:6). When he asks his father, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham responds, "God will provide himself the lamb" (Genesis 22:7–8).

Abraham binds Isaac and lays him upon the altar. Just as Abraham is about to plunge the knife into his beloved son, the Lord commands Abraham to spare Isaac. Abraham spots a ram, and he offers it to the Lord instead of his son. For the third and final time, God renews his covenant with Abraham, and he swears to bless all of the nations through the seed of Abraham (see Genesis 22:11–18).

This is similar to God's promise in Genesis 3, where he promises to bring deliverance through the "seed" of the woman (Genesis 3:15). Now God promises to save the world through the "seed" of Abraham. Ultimately woman did not bring salvation to the world: it was her "seed"—the Christ—who became man and was born of a woman. Likewise, salvation will not come through Abraham but through his seed, who is also Christ (see Matthew 1:1).

All of humanity is cursed through the disobedience of Adam. However, all of humanity is blessed through Abraham's obedience. Abraham obeys God by offering his only beloved son. In Abraham the curse of the Fall is partially reversed; through Abraham's "seed," Christ, the curse will be fully reversed.

**Three Oaths.** In Genesis 15 God promises that Abram's descendants will be delivered from bondage in a foreign nation and will be given the Promised Land (see Genesis 15:13–14). In Genesis 17 God promises that kings will come forth from Abraham and Sarah (see verse 6). And in Genesis 22 God declares that all nations will be blessed through Abraham's descendants (see verse 18).

These three covenant oaths will be fulfilled by the *Exodus* and the *Mosaic covenant*, the *kingdom* and the *Davidic covenant*, and *Jesus Christ* and the *new covenant*.

### The Obedience of Abraham and Isaac

Abraham is not the only person who has faith in God; Isaac's obedience is also implied in the biblical narrative. The ancient rabbis called this story the *aqedah* [ah' kuh duh]—the "binding"—of Isaac (Genesis 22:9). This story is as much about Isaac's self-offering as it is about Abraham's faithfulness. Isaac is a grown youth, strong enough to carry the wood up the mountain (see Genesis 22:6) and thus easily capable of overcoming his elderly father. Therefore, Jewish tradition holds that Isaac asked to be bound so that he would not struggle against his father when he was being sacrificed.

The early Church fathers understood this story as a foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Jesus. Like Isaac, Jesus is the only beloved Son of the Father who is sacrificed for the salvation of the world (see Genesis 22:2; John 3:16; Romans 8:32). Like Isaac, Jesus fully submits to his Father's will and carries the wood up the mountain (see Genesis 22:6; John 19:17). Hebrews 11:19 tells us that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son because he "considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead." Jesus rises from the dead on the third day, just as Abraham received his son back from the sentence of death on the third day (see Genesis 22:4; 1 Corinthians 15:4).

In the Church's liturgy Genesis 22 is read in connection with Jesus' transfiguration. It is during the Transfiguration that the apostles hear God the Father say, "This is my beloved Son" (Mark 9:7). This evokes God's word to Abraham:

“Take your son, your only-begotten son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you” (Genesis 22:2). The difference, of course, is that God the Father does not stop the death of his beloved Son but lets Jesus’ self-offering fulfill all of the covenants.

Little does Abraham know that his actions foreshadow how God will bring about the blessing of all the nations. In Christ Abraham’s words come true: “God will provide himself the lamb” (Genesis 22:8). Mount Moriah, the place where Abraham offers Isaac, is part of a chain of mountains outside Jerusalem. Later in Israel’s history the temple of Jerusalem is built on Mount Moriah (see 2 Chronicles 3:1). There the people of Israel offer their sacrifices—in effect reminding God of his covenant promise to Abraham—until the need for these sacrifices ends when Christ comes as the true Lamb of God. Indeed, Calvary—the place where Jesus is crucified—is one of the peaks of Moriah.

### **A Scriptural Pattern: The Elder Serves the Younger**

According to how the world thinks, an elder son is stronger than a younger son and has “firstborn” privileges. Often this very situation is the downfall of the elder. Over and over again in Scripture, the older son is prideful. Adam, the “firstborn” of creation, falls into pride. Cain, the elder brother, kills his righteous younger brother.

Abraham’s son Isaac has two sons, Esau and Jacob. But just as God chose Abraham’s younger son (Isaac) over his elder son (Ishmael), so Jacob is chosen over Esau (see Genesis 27). This is a subplot that runs throughout the Bible: The younger is chosen over the elder.

God chooses the weaker, younger brother to show that his plans are fulfilled through *his* power, not that of men. Later God preserves Joseph after his older brothers sell him into slavery (see Genesis 37, 39—47). Much later King David is chosen over his numerous older brothers (see 1 Samuel 16:13).

Saint Paul explains: God chooses the younger brother over the older “in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call.... So it depends not upon man’s will or exertion, but upon God’s mercy” (Romans 9:11, 16).

### **Into Egypt**

Just as Abram is renamed Abraham, so Isaac’s son Jacob is later renamed Israel. Israel has twelve sons, and they become the fathers of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel.

The Book of Genesis ends with the familiar story of Joseph. Jacob (or Israel) gives his son Joseph a special coat, and out of jealousy his brothers sell him into slavery. As a slave in Egypt, Joseph receives from the Lord the ability to interpret dreams. Joseph’s use of this gift saves the Egyptians and many others from famine. As a result Joseph becomes prime minister of Egypt (see Genesis 41:39–40).

Joseph is reunited with his brothers when they come to Egypt during the famine to buy food. Instead of returning to the land God has given Abraham, Joseph’s family remains in Egypt, where they live on the choicest land under his protection. Centuries later a new Pharaoh arises who sees the Hebrews as a threat.

The sons of Israel become enslaved, as God told Abraham would happen. They cry to God for help, and he raises up a deliverer, fulfilling his promises to Joseph—“God will be with you, and will bring you again to the land of your fathers” (Genesis 48:21)—and to Abraham that his descendants would be delivered from slavery (see Genesis 15:13–14). We will study this deliverer, Moses, in the next lesson.

### **Review Questions for Personal Study**

1. What are the three promises God makes to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3?
2. How do the three promises relate to the covenant oaths God swears in Genesis 15, 17 and 22?
3. What is the relationship of these covenant promises to future events in salvation history?
4. Read Hebrews 6:19—7:2. How does Melchizedek foreshadow Christ?
5. How does Abraham’s offering of his beloved son Isaac help us understand God the Father’s offering of Jesus for the atonement for our sins?
6. What can we learn from Abraham’s example of total surrender?



7. How does the phrase “the elder shall serve the younger” describe a subplot of Scripture?

**Recommended Verses to Memorize**

Genesis 12:1–3

John 3:16

LESSON FIVE

## Moses and the Israelites

There was a person named Israel *before* there was a nation called Israel. (The nation is named after the man.) Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was the father of Jacob. Jacob was renamed Israel (see Genesis 35:10). Israel had twelve sons, and these twelve sons became the fathers of twelve tribes, the twelve tribes of Israel. Then tragedy struck: These twelve tribes became slaves in Egypt.

### God's Firstborn Son

Genesis reveals that salvation history is the story of God's family. God creates Adam as his firstborn son of creation. Though Adam sins, God the Father does not give up on humanity. God promises to restore humanity through Abraham.

The families in Genesis become nations. God calls Abraham's descendants—the nation of Israel—to be his “firstborn son” among the nations. Tragically, like Adam, Israel fails to realize its calling to be a faithful firstborn son. All is not lost, however: God stoops down to Israel's level as a good father, hoping to raise the nation from its sin to a restored relationship with him.

In Genesis God warns Abraham that his descendants will end up in slavery; however, he promises to deliver them from bondage and return them to the Promised Land (see Genesis 15:13–16, 18). Exodus tells us how God fulfills his covenant promises.

Although Israel is in servitude in Egypt, God wants to do more than just give the nation *political liberation*. The Scriptures show us that the Israelites were actually in the worst kind of bondage: They were in *spiritual* bondage! The Book of Ezekiel tells us that the Israelites begin worshiping the gods of Egypt before the Exodus (see Ezekiel 20:6–9). Thus, the goal of the Exodus is more than political independence: It is to call Israel out of Egypt to worship the Lord. God tells Moses to say on his behalf to Pharaoh, “Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness” (Exodus 7:16). God wants to deliver Israel from