

GENESIS 1:1 — 2:25; 3:20

CREATION

Story Notes

File no. 1

This book must be the most ancient of historical records. It is a gathering of family records (perhaps oral) from earliest times from those with good reason to keep their family history. God had spoken to them about their origins and their future in him, and each generation wanted to trace their link to that word. If Moses is the person who gathered and shaped this material, then the whole story of our origins is brought to us through the lens of being saved by God from Egypt.

The first section of the book is a Prologue to these family stories..

Genesis 1:1—2:3

In a carefully worded statement, we are told how the heavens and the earth came to be, that is, everything that isn't God. The Spirit hovered over the dark formlessness and emptiness. ('Hovers' is used again of God hovering over Israel in Deuteronomy 32:11.) The tone is majestic: God speaks, and everything happens. Simply, God created everything, so everything belongs to him and everyone is answerable to him. We can't get behind or around this. We are accustomed to finding a cause for things, but when we come to this, we cannot comprehend the mystery.

God asks Job, 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?' (Job. 38:4). As the self-conscious part of this creation, we find we have eternity in our hearts but not so that we can find out the end from the beginning (Eccles. 3:11). God made us so that we would seek after him and find him (Acts 17). He is the beginning.

Within our worship of the Creator, of course, science has a legitimate task to enquire about the nature of creation. In fact, knowing the Creator encourages all enquiry because we know there is a carefulness and order and personal purpose behind all that exists. If it appears that it has taken millennia to bring our cosmos to its present form, then, so it may be. And if it appears that there is spontaneity to development of life forms, and a randomness in their selection, then that may well be the appearance. What is clear from this creation story is that everything is attributed to God.

God speaks, ten times, first, to give everything form (the first three days), and then to fill up what he has formed (the second three days). He separates light from darkness, waters above from waters below, and then, land from the sea. Then, he makes a sun and moon and stars to be the light, fish and birds for the sea and sky, animals and man for the dry land. Anxious humanity needs reminding that God did not create the world to be chaotic, or empty (Isa. 45:18; Jer. 5:22). He has given it form and fullness.

In later times, Israel has reason to wonder about the stability of the creation. Their enemy, Edom, is threatened with desolation (formlessness) and emptiness (Isa. 34:11). So is Israel when they abandon their Lord (Jer. 4:22-23). But God still says, 'For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it empty, he formed it to be inhabited!): "I am the LORD, and there is no other"' (Isa. 45:18). In spite of its unworthy inhabitants, God purposes to keep his creation as he planned it to be, a home for his people and a place where they can discover his glory.

Israel's early neighbours had very different creation stories. Some of these had the gods arguing among themselves, and making humanity to be their servants to provide them with food. This story is written in a way that confronts the idolatries of Ancient Near Eastern peoples, as, of course, it confronts all other attempts to worship the creation rather than the Creator. It may be that the reason our creation story speaks of the greater and lesser lights is to avoid giving them status as gods. Other nations could not get behind the creation itself, and so, they worshipped these entities. In this story, God makes light, and only later, makes a sun and moon to be this light. Our minds wish to find some explanation for this but we should be warned not to do so. At the end of history, there again will be no sun or moon because God himself will be the

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light of his creation (Rev. 21:23; 22:5). It will end as it began. We should not worship the creation but the Creator (Rom. 1:25).

'Man' or mankind as male and female, is the high point of this story. We are made in God's image, to be like him, to represent him as lord in the creation and to be his sons and daughters (cf. 5:3). The image is 'male and female, so being the image involves a relationship, not only with God but with one another as males and females, a matter that will be clarified in the next chapter.

It would be impossible to be this image without being alive to God, and God being alive to us. It is in this relationship that he shows us who he is and what he is about in the creation. He has made us in his image, not to compete with him but to be filled up with his giving. In this way, others will be able to look at us and give glory to God, because that is the glory they will be seeing.

Knowing the Creator should be the most natural thing for creatures to do, but it comes to us as the prologue of a book in which God must deal with those who reject him and who make idols and who abuse their place in the world (i.e. the rest of this book of Genesis, and then, the next four books which record God redeeming of his people).

All of what God makes, he calls good, and when all is finished and placed under the dominion of man, it is 'very good'. The next chapters will have the Serpent questioning this goodness of God in the ordering of creation. It is the constant temptation of Satan to have us believe that the creation is not good, with the inference that its Maker is either evil or weak. James warns us not to be deceived on this point (James 1:17).

God's blessing of creatures, and of the man and the woman, is the way creation will proceed, the way of its fruitfulness. The creation does not develop from its own resources. Rather, God causes it to prosper so that it can fulfill the purpose intended for it.

We need to know that it is in Jesus Christ, the second and final Adam, that we can be sure of this blessing in all our life (Ephesians 1:3).

God 'finished' the creation on a day when he did nothing. This is clearly the meaning of chapter 2, verse 2 (as in the NRSV or ESV translations). The matter is important because God rested on this day, and blessed it and sanctified it. Because this is the only day that doesn't end with an 'evening and morning' formula, we must still be in this seventh 'day'.

God's 'rest' cannot mean inactivity because he who keeps Israel never sleeps (Ps. 121:4), but it does mean that God is entirely at rest about what he has made and about its progress and outcome. This is how he wants the creation to proceed, by humanity being completely at rest in himself as Creator and Lord. Israel was later commanded not to live as self-creators, or as slaves, but to rest in God as their Creator and Redeemer (Ex. 20:10-11; Deut. 5:13-15). They were to have a day of rest as God did. Humanity may now share in the purpose and goal of creation by resting in God being Creator and Finisher of all things (an activity that requires all our energies – as in Heb. 4:11).

Later, God called the Temple his resting place (Ps. 132:7f, 13f), the place where Israel could meet with him and share his rest. Perhaps this is clearer if we understand that Jesus also finished his works, on the cross (John 19:30), and we cannot have rest until we receive, thankfully, all that he has done there.

The rest of history is the day of God's rest, a day in which we are called to live, knowing him as our Creator. God blessed this day, so it must be a time for fruitfulness, that is, for God's plan to be fully worked out. He also sanctified it, so it must be the 'day' to use for God, to take the creation with us into his purpose, that is, to use the sanctified time to sanctify what God has made.

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Genesis 2:4-25

For the first of ten times, we read 'These are the generations of ...'. Moses may well be the one who collates these family histories – family records made by those who had reason to keep them. In the midst of their lives, God speaks to them, giving them hope by his promises. This future will be worked out in their families and so they remember their connection to these promises. Chapters two (from v. 4) to four are really one story, telling us what happens to 'the heavens and the earth' whose beginnings form the prologue to Genesis. Later stories will mention particular names but this story is the story of all humanity.

This story provides personal details, within the account of creation already given, showing the starting point for Adam. At this stage, there is no rain for the fields, but a gushing spring waters the arable ground. From this ground, and with a view to caring for it, God forms the man. This creature, though crafted from dust, comes to life by nothing less than God's own breath, giving him understanding (Prov. 20:27) and consciousness of God (Job 32:8). It is a life (a 'soul') that only God can sustain and restore (Ps. 23:3) and only Christ can raise from death (1 Cor. 15:45).

Man is formed but he needs a habitat and starting point for his task, not creation in general but a specific setting - God's garden. Before this garden is planted, there is unemptiness to the ground: no bush, no rain, no man, and only a mist (or spring) to water the ground. Man is central to all that creation will become, beginning here with his work in this garden.

The 'God' of chapter 1 is now called 'the LORD God' (Yahweh Elohim) or 'the LORD', a name more fully revealed in Exodus (3:15), a name that expresses God's covenant bond with his people. What happens in these chapters reveals the LORD in a covenant relationship with his creation, and man as the breaker of this covenant. On the other hand, and wonderfully, the section finishes with men and women learning to 'call on the name of the LORD' (4:26).

Four rivers proceed from this Garden of God to water the earth, and this is recorded between two verses that tell us about God putting Adam in the Garden. The connection suggests that as Adam and his seed follow these watercourses, the whole earth will be inhabited, subdued, sanctified and become wholly God's garden. We may call it the 'Edenising' of all creation.

God's Garden is abundant in fruits, and Adam is commanded to enjoy them. Two trees are given special mention. The first one tells us of God's intention to give immortality to his creatures. How appropriate for the man whose life is given by God (a *living* soul) to have a tree of *life* to secure the eternity of that life. Only God has immortality (1 Tim. 6:15-16) but we are made to receive this gift from him so that we may fully reflect him.

The other tree will give Adam opportunity to say 'No!' to any knowledge of good and evil that does not arise from God's word. Only God is good and we are dependent on him to lead us into all that is good. If Adam remains a lover of God, he will remain in the blessing of God. As in Psalm 1, he will be like a tree planted by streams of water, and all he did will prosper.

For the first time, God refers to something being 'not good', that is, until he has made the woman. We are now shown the significance of our being created 'male and female' (1:27). The creation of the beasts and birds is for the man, but they cannot complement him as a being made in God's image. Woman is created from him to be like him, yet not him, so that he has someone to love, and a true helper in the task of tending and extending Eden. The delight of the man is evident in the poetry that springs to his lips. God has made this couple, male and female, to represent and express him, in faithful union and in unashamed purity.

GENESIS 2:8–17; 3:1–24

THE FALL

Story Notes

File no. 2

Genesis 3:1-24

Chapter two has set the scene for this encounter: a garden full of food, a tree whose fruit would give them eternal life (the man was not told that he could *not* eat from this tree), and a wonderful partner to whom he was bonded in covenant love and with whom he would share the task God had given to him.

The word 'covenant' does not appear until chapter 6, verse 18, but it there appears that 'covenant' is the way God relates to his creation from the beginning and the creatures he has made in his image reflect this in their 'covenant' of marriage (so Mal. 2:14).

Every part of this creation is contested by the contrary word of the Serpent and rejected in what the man and woman choose to do. Satan suggests that the LORD is not generous but mean. He says that the LORD is unreasonable to restrict knowledge of good and evil to himself. He denies that God will carry out his threat of death. He calls God a liar and by his lie, leads the man and woman into death.

The partner God gave to the man is deceived and becomes a partner of the Serpent rather than of her husband. The man who had received the word of God listens, instead, to the creature God had formed from him, and, through her, to the created Serpent whom he had named and over whom he had authority. He knows exactly what he is doing. He wants to be 'as God'.

The world that was abundant and had expressed God's faithful love is now regarded as something in itself: good to see and to eat and to make one wise. The man and woman are operating without the Father (1 John 2:16). They have sought to live outside of the life assured by God's command, and they die, that is, they are dead to God. The Presence of God is no longer sweet but terrifying. They don't want God to find them, and they are ashamed of the loss of glory they now feel.

Their relationship with each other is shattered by the man's need to accuse his wife in order to excuse himself, and the woman can no longer be real because she denies that her being deceived is blameworthy.

Remarkably, although everything is now different, God has not changed, and, because he is faithful to his creation, life will proceed. Their life is still ordered by God's word. They will have the same task as before, though now, with the addition of pain, hard labour and competitive relationships (implied in the words 'desire' and 'rule' in v.16).

They are dead to God but with a promise that what the Serpent has done will be overcome through a child to be born to the woman. They may live by faith in this promise.

Later on, we read that Samuel came to know the Lord when he heard the voice of God (1 Sam.3:7). Perhaps we should understand that while death has come, the couple may still live by hearing the word of God.

Adam, it seems, receives this promise because he calls his wife Eve, confident that she will be a 'life-giver' through her seed.

God clothes the man and the woman so that they will not have to live with the shame of what they have done. From this point, the human race has never needed to live with the shame of their fallen humanity, if they will understand and be grateful for what God has done. Signs of forgiveness and justification will remain in Israel's history until their fulfillment in the covering provided for us by Christ's righteousness.

Physical death will now come to them, and this will remain until a Second Adam has overcome death (1 Cor. 15:22). Death is God's judgement, but then, it is also his preservation of a future for humanity. The knowledge that we will die is so we may 'get a heart of wisdom' (Ps. 90:9-12).

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And then, God will guard or 'keep' our inheritance for us in heaven, the inheritance that the man and woman failed to guard in Eden (1 Pet. 1:4).

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GENESIS 4:1-16

Genesis 5:1–5; Hebrews 11:4

CAIN AND ABEL

Story Notes

File no. 3

The story of 'the heavens and the earth' passes quickly to the next generation. What becomes of this human family to whom so much has been given? They now live with pain, the curse and death, but not with shame, if they understand their clothes aright, and not without hope. What joy, then, when sons were born, the 'seed' promised to the woman!

The character of these men is not revealed so much by their occupations as by their worship. Cain brings what he has, but Abel brings his 'first fruits'. To Israel later on, this would signify gratefulness. There may also be a hint that blood must be spilt to rightly acknowledge what is deserved by sinners who approach God. Whatever, it is clear that God who looks at the heart received the worship of Abel, but not that of Cain.

The writer of *Hebrews* says that Abel's offering was 'by faith' (Heb. 11:4), which must mean faith in God's promise. Cain, on the other hand, was 'of the evil one' (1 John 3:12), believing the false word of the Serpent and resenting the privations of his hard life. Cain's 'fallen face' suggests the shame he still feels, the hatred he has for God and the anger against the one whose deeds are a witness to God's goodness (his brother's deeds were good). He becomes like the one to whom he listens.

Cain's murder of his brother need never have happened. The Lord reasoned with him. Sin is reckoned to be external to Cain, a crouching predator to be mastered. But Cain is not listening to God and he does the will of his false master.

God's reasoning with Cain continues, but there can never be mercy without justice. His brother's blood cries out to be avenged, so, the very ground that received Abel's blood will bring added hardship to Cain's life. But what hurts Cain most is the hatred he now expects to receive from his fellow man. He thinks that other people are like him and that they will be vindictive towards him. Again, the God who is slow to anger protects Cain from human reprisals. Vengeance belongs to God (Rom. 12:19), and the sanctions he announces *against* those who may hurt Cain are more severe than for the murderer! Would that the world could see how gracious God is!

The verses describing God taking vengeance (Isa. 35:4; 61:2) and being the God of vengeance (Nahum 1:2) and saints asking God to take vengeance (Ps. 79:10; 94:1; Rev. 6:10) are unequivocal. Vengeance does not belong to us but it does belong to God, but his vengeance is towards those who have rejected his mercy.

The family of Cain proceeds as it began, in arrogance and irreverence. It develops an impressive culture, but underneath it all is always a seething aggression against any who threatened this. There was no Sabbath rest for this family. Seven generations later, Lamech threatens to outdo God's measure of kindness seventy times with his malice.

The promise of a seed to destroy the Serpent could not be thwarted by all this bitterness. A son is appointed (the word 'appointed' sounds like Seth in Hebrew) to replace Abel. Seth also has a son, and, in this setting of future generations being assured, true worship of God is established. Calling on the name of the Lord in thankfulness and entreaty is the true activity for all human beings. He alone has made all things and he alone can give grace and hope to enable humanity to live as the image of God.

GENESIS 6:1 – 9:19

Genesis 5:1–32; 2 Peter 2:5

THE FLOOD

Story Notes

File no. 4

The family narrative beginning in chapter five tells the story of Adam, through his son Seth. He is the seed appointed by God to proclaim the hope in which humanity must live.

Adam has a son in his image and likeness, that is, in the likeness of God. No 'fall' has been able to diminish the regal quality and calling of God's creation (c.f. 9:6-7). The succeeding generations are listed, but now, with the constant reminder of death as each generation comes to an end.

On the other hand, these families, by successive births, have the promise of a coming seed proclaimed to them, and two stories carry more detail concerning this hope. If the seventh generation through Cain produced Lamech, the seventh generation through Seth, produces Enoch, who 'walked with God'.

Enoch's grandson, Lamech, gives expression to hope rather than to desperate anger. He calls his son 'Noah', which sounds like the Hebrew word for 'rest', perhaps expressing the hope that his son will be the seed who will bring rest from the cursed earth. He is a very different Lamech to the one in the line of Cain. Through Enoch and Lamech, and through the birth of children, God gave witness to his continuing blessing on creation. However, this would not be without the coming of a judgment.

Chapter six begins with an account of the desperate state to which God's creation has come. The description may reflect pagan beliefs about spirit beings ('sons of God') 'marrying' earthly women through idolatrous religious practices. Women involved in such cult prostitution at their temples would give birth to infants that would become tyrants (compare the Nephilim of Numbers 13:31-33). Perhaps they believed they could attain immortality in this way, the gift lost in Eden. Another possibility is that the godly line of Seth ('sons of God') freely intermarried with the godless line of Cain ('daughters of men'). Either way, the hope of humanity rising to its full character and calling has evaporated.

God says there will be a terminus to his 'abiding' in or 'striving with' man. This may mean that God is reducing the average span of life to 120 years, or it may indicate that a date has been set for a final judgment, that is, 120 years to the coming of the flood. God will meet this intransigence of man with his judgment. Jesus uses this event as a warning of his own coming again to judge the world (Matt. 24:37-39).

So Lamech's longing for rest is eclipsed by God's expression of dismay. There is no good intention in any human being, not anywhere, and not ever. There is no man to whom God can look as a faithful covenant partner (c.f. Isa. 50:2). God regrets that he created man, his heart revolting from his creation as man's heart had revolted from God. By this, God makes it clear that what happens next is not because of Noah or because of any human being, but because the Lord looked with grace upon this one man. Through the story that follows, we see that the life of every creature in our present world is preserved by grace (as will be clear in 9:16).

Genesis 6:9—9:19

The next narrative continues for several chapters but needs to be seen as a whole. It shows how God continues his covenant with the creation through Noah (c.f. 6:18 and 9:8), and how the whole earth remains in the hands of its Judge, no matter how complete its corruption of that creation is.

For the first time in the Bible, a man is called righteous. In the New Testament, John says Abel was righteous (1 John 3:12), a fact demonstrated by his offering a sacrifice 'by faith' (Heb. 11:4). Righteousness, from the beginning, is not primarily a person's behaviour (although it includes

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that) but is God's gift to those who trusts him. God does not remember their sins but regards them as fully acceptable to him. Noah walked with God, like his great grandfather Enoch. Through faith in God and belief in his judgement of the creation, Noah was received by God and stood out in his generation as blameless. All true behaviour arises from reliance on God's grace. The New Testament calls Noah a preacher of righteousness (2 Pet. 2:5), meaning that he bore witness to God's judgment by building an ark, and to his salvation by being rescued from it. Noah is a witness that God is good and that anger and violence are never appropriate responses to the difficulties of life.

In contrast to Noah, the people of the earth are willfully corrupting the earth, with violence in particular, just like Cain and his line. However, God will establish his covenant with Noah. This is the first time we are told about God being in covenant relationship to his creation but the word used suggests that the covenant is already in place and that it is now being 'established'. (The usual word for making a covenant is 'to cut' a covenant.) The way this story repeats elements of the creation story ('fill', 'breath of life', 'birds, animals and creeping things') suggests that God will continue to show his covenant faithfulness to creation, 'keeping them alive', even though most of humanity must be destroyed. Noah will be a second Adam.

Then Noah's obedience in building the ark is recorded, and it is the covenant LORD who addresses him. Animals later nominated as 'clean' in Israel's law are to be included in sevens rather than single pairs of animals, not for food, as yet (see 9:8), but possibly, for sacrifice. Noah's relationship with God is grounded in faith—in his goodness as Creator and in his promise to destroy Satan's work, and is expressed in obedience. So, God's blessing on his creatures continues, but this blessing only has validity in the context of the coming judgment.

A sort of de-creation follows: the separated waters from above and below join to create a flood until no dry land remains. The immensity of this should not escape us, particularly as Jesus Christ uses the example to warn us of coming judgement (Luke 17:26-27). The uncontrollability of waters, of sea or flood, is always a terror to us, and is so represented in the Scriptures (e.g. Ps. 69:1-2; 107:23-32). At such times, we know that this earth is not ours but God's and that he brings judgement on those who do not do his will. The world that would not know God is utterly destroyed.

Now God 'remembers' Noah, not as we would—after forgetting—but as God does, assuring us in human language that he has us in mind, is coming to us in salvation and that he will fulfill his promise. The same language will be used again in the Exodus story (Ex. 2:24f and often in the prophets). Then, a sort of recreation happens as dry land appears, birds find foliage and creatures are sent out to swarm.

Noah offers a sacrifice to the LORD. The terms used anticipate Israel's whole burnt offerings (Lev. 1) in which they give thanks by offering one of the best of their flock or herd. God has brought humanity back to reliance on himself, washing away its evil. The narrative returns to the covenant name—LORD, as Noah acknowledges God's revelation of himself, full of grace and faithfulness, and the LORD acknowledges his faithful covenant partner.

The same LORD who had been grieved in heart now says 'in his heart' that he will never do this again. His reason is the same as for destroying the earth: the intention of human hearts is always evil (cf. 6:5; 8:21). How necessary for us to know that the continuing gift of creation and our relationship to God is because of his heart and not because of ours. The only people alive are Noah and his family, but they are no better than the people God destroyed—Noah's worship not-with-standing. Noah has indeed found grace in the eyes of the Lord, and now, this promise is extended to all future generations.

The terms of this covenant are important, coming as they do between the promise (8:20-22) and the establishing of the covenant (9:8-17). They are important, especially, because all present and future creatures are the objects of God's gracious preservation. We are to multiply and fill

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the earth (vv. 1, 7), suggesting to us that the rivers of God's provision will continue to take us out into the whole creation. Within this repeated command we are told that beasts and fish will now fear humanity, perhaps because they are now all 'fair game' for food, or perhaps because their human lords are such unruly creatures. But it remains that all life (represented by its blood) belongs to God, and this is to be ceremonially acknowledged in not eating blood. Violence against God's image by a beast will be avenged by God (as in Exod.21:28), and violence of man against man is to be avenged by man. God has already forbidden personal malice but this may refer to lawful governance. We are to take very seriously the truth that we are the image of God and never despise another person (e.g. Prov. 14:31; 17:5; 19:17; 22:2).

Now, the promise of God is established as a covenant. The same assurance given to Noah (6:18) is extended to all. The word covenant is used seven times and called an everlasting covenant, and confirmed with a sign that God will always see. We need to know that God 'sees' this sign as we see it because many threats will challenge belief in the goodness of God—many 'clouds'. While water continues to refract into rainbows, God assures us that he will maintain the order of creation. This continues to be important in Israel's history (Jer. 31:35f) and in the preaching of the gospel to pagan communities (Acts 14:15-17). God has removed all valid reasons for any one to distrust him, and every excuse for violence against our fellow man.

These provisions still anticipate the coming of the Son who is the one who establishes all this mercy in an eternal covenant of grace. Isaiah notes that the coming day of God's salvation will be like the days of Noah (Isa. 54:8-10), a day in which he will no longer be angry with us.

Noah tills the soil, like Adam before him. Here is a new beginning for the human race, but the future is assured, not for the well behaved, but for those with faith.

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GENESIS 11:1–9

THE TOWER OF BABEL

Story Notes

File no. 5

The family history of Noah is now opened up. It shows how the ambition of Babel is checked and the purpose of God to fill the earth is accomplished. Unlike other family histories, this section has no hopeful ending, but it does prepare the way for the very different family history of Terah that follows.

The families of Shem, Ham and Japheth have received the blessing of God and been told to populate the earth (9:1, 7). They are under a covenant of grace made with every living creature (9:15) and so have all that is necessary to fulfil this command. However, according to the prophecy of Noah, Canaan, a son of Ham, is cursed (9:25), and Japheth's prosperity will happen in the context of Shem (9:27). The family history tells us how this works out.

Firstly, the names listed may refer to cities or peoples, and 'son of' can mean a nation derived from a person and 'father' can tell us what tribes derived from another nation. Some of the identities can be located precisely. The sons of Japheth move North and West and give rise to Greek and Scythian tribes. The sons of Ham give rise to some who can be clearly identified as Israel's neighbours and enemies. The sons of Shem move towards the Persian Gulf and include Eber from whom the Hebrews arise (see Exod. 1:15).

Most space is given to the sons of Ham. Nimrod is given special attention as the first mighty man or hunter; he is noted for his building, hunting and warring, greatly praised qualities in Mesopotamian kings. All this is 'before the Lord' an expression probably used as a superlative. His name may mean 'to rebel' which fits with him beginning his exploits at Babel in Shinar (see 10:10; 11:2).

Secondly, all the families are dispersed to form their various 'clans, languages, lands and nations' (vv. 5, 20, 31). The reason for this is linked specifically to Nimrod of Ham's family (vv. 8-10 with 11:1ff), the people who set themselves against God's purpose. The timing of this is identified with Eber (father of the Hebrews) of the family of Shem (vv. 21, 25), through whom God would bless all the peoples of the earth. The judgement to come would be with a view to the nations seeing the truth in what he revealed through the line of Shem.

Thirdly, from all this, it is clear that there are three possible destinies for nations. The first is to be the chosen people through whom the promised blessing will come to the world. God will be 'the God of Shem' (9:26) and reveal himself to them by speaking to them and caring for them. On the other hand, where there is irreverence and insubordination such as that manifested by Ham, wild ambition will follow (10:8-9) and God will confront this (11:5-7; cf. Rom. 1:18). The house of Japheth does not receive a direct revelation, but may live in the family privileges of Shem's household.

As the stories of Abraham and then Israel open up, it becomes clear that this is what happens. The nations deriving from Ham (e.g. Egypt, Philistines and Canaanites) become enemies of God's people because they reject the God revealed through them, but nations further afield (Greek and Scythian tribes) may rest in Israel's tents, that is, they may come to Israel as sojourners whom Israel is later told to welcome, and through them, they will benefit from the covenant made with Israel (Exod. 12:48-49). The destiny of a nation does not need to become the destiny of each person within it. A Moabite may become an Israelite (Ruth 1:16), and a Hebrew may reject God. However, nations have their identity and destiny according to whether they receive the revelation sent out by his servants (c.f. Matt. 25:31-46).

Genesis 11:1–9

Now, we see that God intersects with the ambition of the nations. The people of Shinar are the family of Nimrod (11:2 with 10:9-10) and this family expresses in concentrated form what happens to all peoples when they forget God and his commands.

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The story is told in a way that focuses attention on its central point—'the Lord came down'. The narrative begins with all peoples having one *language*, and people *settling, conferring, planning*, and *building* a *city and tower*, and all of this to oppose the command of God to spread across the earth.

The Lord *came down* to see what is happening and to undo all that they planned. He (in reverse order to the action of the builders) sees the *city and tower*, and their *building*. He makes his own *plan*, so that they will *not confer*, and will be *unsettled* because they now have many *languages*.

Their cry 'Come! Let us build...' expresses pride and ingenuity, and fear inspired ambition. Then, although a tower is built with its 'top in the heavens', the Lord must 'come down' to see what they are doing. They are still far from God, and God quickly frustrates what he acknowledges to be their amazing cleverness and resilience. His purpose is not vindictive, but rather, that they will still find him. Paul will later tell us that God determines the places and periods of nations 'that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him' (Acts 17:26–27).

God's purpose for his earth to be filled with people who call on his name cannot be thwarted. Babylon becomes a model for all later societies who organise themselves to be able to live without God (Isa. 13:19; 14:13; 47:8-13; Rev. 17—18).

The time will come when the need for this limit on our civilization will be removed. Diversity of language for the present may be a cause of fear (Deut. 28:49) but a day will come when we will have one pure tongue to praise God (Zeph. 3:9-11) and there is a witness to this on Pentecost day (Acts 2:5-12; cf. Isa. 66:18-19).

The good news of God must always be seen in its context of the nations and their feistiness. Wherever there is no gospel and no knowledge of the Father, peoples and nations become touchy and aggressive, seeking to establish their own identity, and they must be held in with constraints. But the purpose of God is that the disfunctionality of life without a covenant Father will drive us all to Christ and his good news.

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GENESIS 11:27 — 13:4

Acts 7:2–5; Hebrews 11:8

GOD'S PROMISE TO ABRAM / ABRAM GOES TO EGYPT

Story Notes

File no. 6

We come now to the story of Abram. He is a descendant of Noah who had walked with God (6:9) and built an altar to him (8:20) but the generations that followed travelled to the Persian Gulf area (10:30) and to Ur in particular. However, in the generations that followed, as Joshua tells us, the family had become idolaters (Josh. 24:14-15).

To fulfill his promise of blessing through the Shemites, and the 'Eberites' (Hebrews) in particular, the Lord appeared as the God of glory to Abram (Gen. 15:7; Neh. 9:7; Acts 7:2). The revelation came to Abram, but it is the father, Terah, who 'takes' his son and wife Sarai, and his deceased son's son, Lot, to Canaan. However, they stop at Haran (apparently named after the deceased brother).

The story proceeds quickly to a further separation from family. Abram hears again, 'Leave your country and family for the new land I will show you'. Everything will come to Abram by God's promise rather than by him preserving his possession.

There is to be a blessing for the world, because God will make a great name for Abram and a great nation from him. This will happen by God blessing him (as with fruitfulness in the creation story). The blessing will flow to 'all the families of the earth'. That is, in all families of the earth, there will be those who bless Abram (e.g. 14:19). There is a curse for those who do otherwise! (E.g. the tribe of Ham if they continue as did the family of Canaan.) So Abram and Sarai leave their family, and Lot travels with them.

By giving this promise, God makes a clear distinction between the manner of his working and the working of Babel. Where they sought a name for themselves, here God will make a name and renown for Abram. Where they built a tower up to heaven, here Abram builds altars at Shechem and Bethel (like Abel and Noah—4:4; 8:20) because God receives him and speaks to him, and actually appears to him (12:7). He calls on the name of the Lord (12:8) in continuity with the earlier generations to whom the Lord made his promises (4:26). True religion is again alive.

In particular, there will be a son who will receive a land (12:7). So the promise first made in Eden continues (3:15). Always, there is a son to come who will bruise the Serpent's head and secure the blessing for all creation, but now, this son will have an inheritance, a homeland. Ultimately, this inheritance includes the whole earth (Rom. 4:13).

However, drought takes Abram down to Egypt, to the country of Ham. This is not the land God has promised to him and Abram resorts to deception about his wife's identity in order to protect himself. He has made an arrangement with her to act in the manner of other Bedouins and tell a deceptive half-truth about Sarai, in fact, his half-sister, being his sister (20:13). Perhaps he sought time to escape during the necessary negotiations that would ensue. He is enriched by his deception, but there is no blessing here. God had said that the tribes of Japheth would 'dwell in the tents of Shem' (9:27), not Shem (Abram) in the tents of Ham (Egypt). With Sarai in an Egyptian harem, the seed and the blessing promised by God is under threat, and God acts for the sake of his own name (c.f. Ezek. 36:22) to fulfil his promise about the seed. Abram is soon on his way, back to Bethel, where worship and prayer are restored (13:4). But in the midst of this by-path, and further discovery of the way of blessing, God has enriched him. Like Abel, Enoch and Noah, God has raised up a person with whom he has communion.

GENESIS 13:1 – 14:24

ABRAM AND LOT / ABRAM HELPS LOT

Story Notes

File no. 7

Abram encounters strife amongst his retinue and Lot, and generously gives Lot the opportunity to take whatever he pleases for grazing land. The story is all about land (mentioned seven times), the Promised Land, but the story is framed by reference to Abram at worship (13:4, 18). He is now acting by faith and appears to understand the generosity of God. Lot, on the other hand, lives by sight rather than by faith (13:10). He hungers for something like Eden (a false wish since being sent from Eden) or like Egypt (a land not of blessing but of reliable irrigation—cf. Deut. 11:12). However, the people of these cities are wicked (an evil described more graphically than anywhere else in Genesis), and reminiscent of the days of Noah (6:5; 8:21), and already, as before, the sentence of doom is over Lot's choice. The area in question is within the borders of what is promised to Abram (10:19), but the Lord will destroy the cities towards which Lot moves.

How different is the life of Abram. He is to look out on the land in any direction, all its length and breadth. It will all belong to him and to his offspring, repeated three times for emphasis. Abram is not to live on the basis of the present but with reference to the promise of an offspring through whom the blessing God will come to all nations.

Genesis 14:1-24

We now find out what happens to Abram in his Mamre tent and to his allies, and to Lot who has moved into Sodom. An alliance of five kings around Sodom rebel against a 12-year tribute obligation to four Northern kings led by Chedorlaomer. The latter, in a wide-ranging action, move in to secure their earlier conquest. In the process, the troops of Sodom and Gomorrah become mired in bitumen pits (material used earlier to secure the tower of Babel) and lose, not only the battle, but also, many of their people and much of their property.

However, from the point of view of our story, substantial incursions have been made into the land promised to Abram. Surrounded by the world's love to conquer on the one hand, and its descent into debauchery on the other, family connections mean that Abram becomes involved. However, it is God's purpose to make Abram a blessing in the midst of what would otherwise seem like an unfortunate bypath and to wonderfully confirm his word to his chosen servant.

Abram is enriched in property, emboldened by the promise of God and ready to rescue his nephew. Using his own men (and perhaps assisted by his allies), he brings back all the people and property that had been lost, along with Lot. In later years, this victory will be a great encouragement to Israel who would often be threatened by neighbours.

The King of Sodom, the main beneficiary of this victory, comes to barter with Abram. At the same time there comes another King. He is unknown until now but he knows this 'God Most High' who has blessed Abram. He recognises that this God has given Abram the victory and blesses him. How helpful to Abram to be confirmed in this way! Abram immediately recognises Melchizedek as a priest of the God who has spoken to him and has granted him victory. He honours him with a tenth of his possessions. In the law, later given to Israel, tithing will be the way of acknowledging the place of the Levitical priests in enabling Israel to draw near to God. This action of Abram also anticipates the fact that Israel's Davidic kings will one day give homage to a greater King who would also be a priest—like this Melchizedek (Ps. 110).

Abram recognises the very different spirit of the King of Sodom and refuses to be enriched by him in. He has vowed to have nothing from this wicked king and will trust the promise of God alone.

Melchizedek means 'king of righteousness' and he is King of Salem, meaning peace. He comes from no-where so to speak, and is a priest with greater credentials than the later Levitical priesthood. These points are noticed by the writer of Hebrews who sees this King of Salem as

ABRAM AND LOT / ABRAM HELPS LOT con't

the prefiguring of Jesus Christ who is both King and Priest, who is not bound by a human history and is very great, both in his person and in his accomplishments. This later 'Melchizedek' establishes righteousness and peace, makes final purification for sin and leads his people into the presence of God.

Abram cannot yet know all this, but he has been visited and encouraged by a messenger of the covenant who represents this coming victory, and he has acknowledged that there is a Priest greater than himself.

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GENESIS 15:1–21

A SON FOR ABRAM & A LAND FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

Story Notes

File no. 8

This story is linked to the blessing of Melchizedek by a repeat of the root word for 'shield': God has delivered or shielded (the verb) Abram, and God is his Shield (noun). However, the promise of God is not focused on his safety but on a coming son through whom all the nations will be blessed. This causes Abram to protest that he still has no son. A slave cannot be his heir, according to the promise given by God and he asks, 'What will you give me...?' If God is his Shield, it must have reference to the future as well as to what has just happened. God speaks (and the phrase becomes a standard introduction to God's revelation to the prophets). His promise will be fulfilled. Abram is shown the stars, perhaps to awaken him to the magnificence of the Creator who can put all this in place. Through this word of the Lord, Abram believes that God will give him his own son and this faith is reckoned as righteousness. The issue here is not just Abram getting what God has promised but being approved by God. Anyone who knows that they are justified by faith knows that there is nothing that can replace this blessing. It is one thing to have the answer to a prayer from God; it is another entirely to be received and accepted by him. This gift takes away our fears that God may be random in his kindness and it assures us that our future is in his hands. We should note that Abram's faith is not righteousness or it would not need reckoning as such. He is righteous because God reckons him to be so but the reckoning happens because of his faith.

At times, asking the Lord for confirmation of a promise is reproved, but not here. Abram knows he is righteous before God, and so, for a second time, asks a question. He needs to know this God and know the bond that will ensure a fulfilment of the promise. He needs to be assured at the deepest level, perhaps sensing the challenges to this plan of God that may be ahead. Abram calls God 'Sovereign Yahweh', a name used by Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Samson, David and Solomon at critical moments of covenant making and covenant threat, and often by the prophets. Well may we delight that Abram asked for this confirmation because the covenant that follows is the bond into which all Christians have been brought (Acts 3:25). We have the same certainty of an inheritance that is now promised to him (Gal. 3:28-29).

So begins the making of a covenant with Abram; not the 'establishing' of what is already in place (9:9) but the 'cutting' or making of a new covenant (15:18). Here is something new for the human race. Abram must bring a range of creatures (later used for sacrifices) to be severed. The symbolism seems to mean that the parties standing between the pieces of flesh will be treated as these severed animals if they break their word (Jer. 34:18-19). On this occasion, however, Abram does no more than keep carriage away (this may suggest the attacks that will be made on this covenant), until, at sunset, a deep sleep and a great darkness come over him. In such a state, God tells him about the sufferings that will precede their possession of the Promised Land, the victory and prosperity that will then come to his people, his own peaceful future, and the length of time needed until the present people of the land have come to the point where judgement of them is appropriate. What profound things to know!

Abram is immobilised by sleep and dread darkness, and natural darkness also comes. The concerns of the present world are far away. In such a moment, the movement between the severed beasts does not include Abram. A smoking fire and a flaming torch represent the presence of God. Only he will ensure the success of the covenant, and only he will become liable when this covenant is broken. Abram only sees and hears. Abram's descendants will possess all the land from the Nile to the Euphrates, no matter what nations are there at present.

This is the covenant of grace fulfilled by our Lord Jesus, who, as the Son of God, as God among us, bears the fault of the covenant we have broken, makes purification for sin and brings many sons and daughters with him in to the fulfilled covenant. We could not make or sustain a covenant like this, but God has made and sustains this bond. Abram could not know how this covenant would

SON FOR ABRAM & A LAND FOR GOD'S PEOPLE con't

be fulfilled but the effect of it on him is stunning. God has made this covenant, and Abram is a passive participant; that is, passive in its making and a participant in its outworking. The promise made earlier is now a covenant in which God has bound himself to this man and what will happen through this man. God will forever be, the God of Abraham and his progeny, and the God of his Seed, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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GENESIS 16:1–16; 17:1–8, 15–22

Psalm 105:9

HAGAR THE SERVANT GIRL / 'WALK BEFORE ME'

Story Notes

File no. 9

Abram has been promised nationhood (12:2), and a progeny to inherit the land (12:7; 13:15-16) and '...your very own son shall be your heir' (15:4). All this has been secured to him by the bonding of a covenant made by God.

But now, the promise is contested, in the first instance, by a lapse of time. Sarah is the first of three generations of women who will have trouble bearing children (Rebekah and Rachel will follow), and the promise depends on having children. After ten years of waiting, Sarah thinks she knows the answer to the problem: using her slave girl to bear a child for her. Abram agrees with her. The words used are reminiscent of Adam's listening to Eve (3:17) and suggests that he has lost his certainty in God's power to be his Shield (as in 15:1).

Hagar conceives and immediately fulfils the proverb: that the earth trembles under (among several other things) 'a maid when she succeeds her mistress' (Prov. 30:21-23). She despises Sarai and Sarai complains to Abram. Given that Hagar is Egyptian, there may be a suggestion of the harsh treatment Abram's descendants will receive in a land that is not theirs (15:13). For the moment, however, Sarai is given a free hand to deal with the one who remains her slave, and pregnant Hagar must run for her life. This is the human side of the story, and it shows that the story of the Lord's abundant goodness must often be played out in the midst of rivalry and harshness. As Hebrews says (10:36), 'you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.' But what is the covenant Lord doing?

In the first instance, we could say that God is frustrating what is merely a human plan, but there is more. The angel of the Lord appears for the first time in Scripture. (He will also appear to Abraham on Mt. Moriah.) In the form of this angel, God sees her, and tells her to return and submit to Sarai. In the light of all that Hagar comes to represent (Gal. 4:24-25), this is very suggestive: there will be no blessed future for the world outside of the promise made to Abram. But there is a blessing for Hagar in the tents of Abram (c.f. 9:27). She is a witness that all nations may find the blessing of God through his chosen people.

So Hagar returns, but now, knowing the God who sees her affliction, who has been kind to her and not killed her, and with a name for her son: 'God hears'. God himself, through Hagar, will proclaim the truth that Abram needs to know. Ishmael's prospects seem bleak, given the prophecy about his wildness of character and the hostility he will attract. However, his mother's testimony is acknowledged by all as an objective revelation in the name given to the place where the Lord met her: 'The well of the Living One who sees me'. She also returns with a promise that her son will become the father of a multitude.

Abram acknowledges the name given to his son. As the Lord has heard Hagar in her affliction and been kind to her, so he has heard Abram in his cry for the fulfilment of the promise and covenant. The kindness of God has been reaffirmed to this family as they wait for the fulfilment of the promise. We may say, 'Everything that happens is not only inevitable but indispensable.' Nothing is wasted as God's leads his people towards the fulfilment of his promises.

We hear nothing of what happens in the next 13 years. Then God appears to Abram again (17:1, 22 with 12:7), and the story focuses on what God says to him. Twice, Abram falls down before God, once, in worship, and then, in amazement.

'God Almighty' has come to *give* the covenant, or to make it happen—that is, the covenant made or *cut* earlier (15:18). His name must be 'Abraham' as witness that he will be the father of a multitude and the covenant will now include kings from Sarai, and, for the first time, Canaan is mentioned. But this time, Abraham is also called to act, to *walk* before God and be *perfect*. Other usages of these ideas suggest that walking before God is trusting him and letting the

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promises work their way out in one's life. Being perfect means not adopting the ways of other idolatrous nations (cf. Deut. 18:13; Matt. 5:48; Col. 1:28).

Then God says he will *establish* his covenant with Abraham and his offspring, to be God to them eternally. This, indeed, is a great undertaking. Paul makes it clear that the singular 'seed' makes the promise apply to Christ (Gal. 3:16). That is, the promise made in Eden is affirmed. The child by whom Satan will be overthrown will be born to Abram's descendants. We may say that the purpose of the people now being born is to bear this child for the blessing of the world (c.f. Rev. 12:1-2).

Abraham is commanded to keep the covenant by circumcising himself and all his family. The passage speaks about my covenant, the sign of the covenant, a covenant in your flesh that is eternal and about uncircumcised people who have broken my covenant. The action is obviously important but it's meaning is not explained until later. Israel must circumcise their hearts (Deut. 10:16), that is, to do what Abraham is asked to do, 'walk before God and be blameless'. What this means is filled out in the giving of the law.

Sarai's name is also changed, or perhaps given the (then) up to date form of Sarah, meaning 'princess'. Nations and kings will come from her. Now Abraham 'falls on his face' again, this time, to laugh, and it is difficult to blame him for doing so! He wants Ishmael to live before God, perhaps meaning that he wants him to be the promised son because it is to this that God says 'No.' God will establish his covenant with Isaac, that is, with 'laughter'! Ishmael will have his multitude and his nation but the *everlasting covenant* of blessing for the world will be with Isaac.

Abraham is not reproved, so perhaps there is no scepticism in his reply. We are reminded of the disciples, who, on seeing the resurrected Jesus, 'could not believe because of their joy and amazement' (Luke 24:41). God seems to enjoy the delight in what he is about and the name of Isaac will be a constant reminder to us all of the delight God has, and gives, in fulfilling his promise of grace. Paul says 'he grew strong in faith, giving glory to God' (Rom. 4:19f), showing us all how to live with the promise of God that he can justify us, make us his faithful people and give us the inheritance he has promised.

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GENESIS 18:1–22

ABRAHAM'S THREE VISITORS

Story Notes

File no. 10

God *appears* to Abraham again, clearly, not long after the previous visit. The account is full of delightful ambiguities. It is the LORD (Yahweh) who comes; Abraham sees three men but addresses 'the Lord'. He feeds 'them' and 'they' ask after Sarah. But the LORD announces Sarah's coming pregnancy. He speaks again to Abraham but *the men* leave him and Abraham remains before the LORD. While the details may not be clear, Abraham is eager in his hospitality. He runs to meet the messengers and urges Sarah to be quick with the meal! The passage as a whole reveals a man who is warm hearted to guests and ready to acknowledge the Lord being with him. Hebrews suggests that these two things go together, when, recalling this incident, we are told to show hospitality to strangers because some have entertained angels in this way (Heb. 13:2).

Abraham is called a 'friend of God' (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:6; James 2:23). He is secured in his generosity by God's promises and bond, and so, predisposed to friendship with his neighbour. This fact of friendship with God continues among God's covenant people. The Mosaic covenant is sealed with a meal in God's presence and none of Israel's elders dies in the encounter (Exod. 24:9-11). Then, Israel worships by offering peace offerings that are both a sacrifice for sin and a meal in God's presence (Lev. 3). They celebrate the fullness of life God is providing for them. Given that it is a sacrifice, it links with Christ being our Peace, through whom hostility with God and ourselves, and between others and ourselves is annulled and through whom we are constituted as the household of God (Eph. 2:14, 19). We are called to the table of the Lord Jesus, to eat his body and drink his 'blood of the covenant' (Matt. 26:26, 28). This sense of intimacy with God should never leave us, and, if it does, Christ still stands at our door, ready again to share a meal with us and us with him (Rev. 2:20).

When the Lord says to Abraham that he would return in a year to see Sarah with her own child, it is Sarah's turn to laugh! 'Nothing is too hard for the Lord' she is told. Her fears about being overheard don't need to be covered up. Nothing is wrong with this kind of laughter. Perhaps God delights in lightening things up a bit with his surprises! In any case, Hebrews assures us that she, like Abraham, believes the promise and receives power to conceive (Heb. 11:11). Would that God would give us all an 'Isaac'—a witness of his justifying us, and put a barely believing smile on our faces! (See also: 21:6; Ps. 126:2; Luke 6:21.)

The tone of the story changes dramatically—from friendship to judgement, and yet, the two incidents belong together. God reasons that it would be improper not to involve Abraham in his dealing with Sodom and Gomorrah. The lord 'does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets' (Amos 3:7).

Abraham's immediate concern is to save Lot and his family. He has had to save him from his involvement in those cities once already and, in fact, will save him this time with his prayers. Then again, Abraham has already been shown the mystery of God's judgements regarding the Amorites. Their iniquity is not yet full, so Abraham's inheritance is not yet ripe for delivery (15:16). God now assures him that every care will be taken with Sodom and Gomorrah to see that their iniquity is indeed 'full' before judgement falls. But God already knows what he will do (v. 17). He is 'slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' but he 'will by no means clear the guilty' (Ex. 34:6-7). The impending judgement is a witness to the judgement that will fall four centuries later, the time when Abraham's seed will have their inheritance.

Abraham is to be the means of blessing for the nations, but then again, he is the basis of their being cursed if they reject the blessing offered through him. Righteousness is vital for the health of any nation (Ps. 33:5; Prov. 14:34; 21:3). God will not send his blessing to cover over a cesspit of evil.

GENESIS 18:22 – 19:29

2 Peter 2:6–10

ABRAHAM PRAYS FOR SODOM / SODOM DESTROYED

Story Notes

File no. 11

Abraham joins God in his enquiry about the status of these cities. He wants assurance that the God of all the earth will do right. He has reason to believe that Lot and his family are righteous (righteous, that is, in the only way Abraham understands: by faith). In fact, Lot's righteous soul is vexed, Peter says (2 Pet. 2:8). Will God sweep them away with the ungodly?

Those who are justified by God must be deeply assured that every act of his is just because, if it is not, our own justification is of no value (c.f. Rom. 3:25-26). Abraham has learned that God is patient and full of mercy and dares to believe that the righteousness that comes down from above is 'open to reason' (James 3:17). He dares to believe, and receives confirmation, that a city with 10 righteous people in it is not yet ripe for destruction.

Walter Brueggemann says, 'God is not an indifferent or tyrannical distributor of rewards and punishments. Rather, God actively seeks a way out of death for us all' (on Genesis, p. 175).

Lot, like his uncle, welcomes the two strangers, though they need convincing that they need his hospitality or protection. Then, the entire male citizenry show how ripe they are for judgement by pressing to have these visitors for their sexual pleasure. Lot is well known in the town now and appears to have been trusted in settling disputes (the 'gate', as in verse 1, is the place ancient cities conducted hearings of disputes), but when he confronts their passionate demands, they complain about his being an outsider (v. 9). The natural person cries out against any who attempt to bring his or her way of life into question (c.f. 1 Pet. 4:3-4).

Offering his daughters in preference to his guests shows how important he regarded showing hospitality to these men, but also, how much he must compromise himself to remain in this city.

We now see how little these angels needed Lot's hospitality. They must miraculously rescue him from his own townspeople, bringing him inside his house and striking the mob with blindness. Yet still these 'brute beasts' clamour for the door! (C.f. 2 Pet. 2:12; Jude 10.)

Now Lot hears the verdict of God's judgement against the city in which he has chosen to live. It is to be destroyed, as was the whole world in the time of Noah (6:13). But this is a laughing matter to his proposed sons in law. At the end of this memorable night, it is still a matter of delay for Lot, and, by God's mercy (and through Abraham's prayer), he must be forcibly removed! How slow we are to appreciate the reality that this world lies under God's judgement! Amos refers to the same problem in his time (Amos 4:11) and Jesus has the same problem with the cities he visits when he came to save us from the wrath to come (Matt. 11:22-24). It remains so now (Jude 21).

The Lord is merciful to Lot (v. 16) and he acknowledges God's favour and steadfast love (v. 19), but still prefers the security of any city to the vulnerability of the hills. From God's point of view, the hills are the place to go (v. 17), but Lot fears disaster there (v. 19). One writer says, 'Not even brimstone will make a pilgrim of him' (Kidner). His request for one little city to be spared is granted, one of the cities of the valley that would otherwise have perished (v. 25 with 13:12). This again is God's favour to him.

Then God overthrows the cities of the plain. But Lot's wife lags behind and gazes at what she has cherished. She loses all the benefit of the Lord's favour. We should not hesitate to enter the kingdom of God because God will do this again at the return of Christ, when the iniquity of the whole earth is full (Luke 17:28-32; Rev. 18:9-10).

This story has been about Abraham standing in the presence of the Lord, now witnessing the judgement that will later come on all the Amorites, but in the midst of this, God remembering his covenant by saving Lot (v. 27-29).

GENESIS 21:1–21

Genesis 25:12–18

THE BIRTH OF ISAAC

Story Notes

File no. 12

Sarah conceiving and giving birth in her old age fulfills God's promise, a fact mentioned three times in the opening verses of this chapter. Abraham names him 'he laughs', that is 'Isaac' and circumcises him, both things as commanded by God (17:10, 19). His earlier laughter (17:17), and Sarah's (18:12-15) was in disbelief, but it is now Sarah's laughter of joy, shared by all who hear of her child. Here is God's grace, bringing his people from unbelief of his promises into the participation in the fulfilment of them (so John 15:11; 16:20-24; 17:13).

But laughing takes a different form when the family celebrates the weaning of Isaac. Ishmael's laughing is clearly not friendly, and Sarah, seeing a threat to her son's future, insists that he and his mother be evicted. Sarah sees the situation more truly than Abraham and God instructs him to do what his wife asks. If Ishmael takes the place of the promised child, human endeavour will have taken the place of the work of God. This point becomes vital to Paul because he sees that if the law is trusted as a means of justification, the work of God in Jesus Christ, the Seed of Abraham, is despised (Gal. 4:28-30). 'Cast out the law as a means of justification,' he says, 'and trust in Christ alone!'

Sarah may have been rightly discerning, not just spiteful, as to the significance of her child (she bore the child 'by faith'—Heb. 11:11) and have tutored Abraham faithfully as to Ishmael's not staying in the house. Remember that Abraham loved Ishmael (21:11); remember that Abraham has not been honourable in his treatment of Sarah; remember also that Isaac's wife will also intervene in regard to the 'right' son being the inheritor.

The smallest incidents may betray a disdain of living by God's promise. What people have and trust, whether wealth, virtue or acclaim, they will wield to make sport of those who rely on God alone. We should not patronise Abraham, He is our father and engaged in the battle of all battles.

Abraham sent Hagar and son off with baggage, a similar occurrence to the event in the next chapter. Is this giving up of a son preparation for the pinnacle of faith to which Abraham must come?

God still has an inheritance for Ishmael because he is a son of Abraham, and he fulfills his promise to Abraham by caring for the fleeing Hagar and Ishmael. The angel of the Lord visits her, just as he had when she was first sent away (16:7), to say that the boy's cries (and hers) have been heard and that he will become a great nation. There can be no return to live with Abraham now that the child of promise has been born. He grows up in the wilderness, and, as promised earlier, he will be 'a wild donkey of a man' (16:12).

The manner of God providing for Hagar and her son (vv. 17, 19, 20; cf. v. 22) shows that no one has reason to complain of God's dealing with them. All may call on God. Luther suggest that God says to Hagar: 'You were cast out solely that you might be humbled and learn that what you have you do not have by some right because Abraham was your husband, but that you have it out of pure grace. This had to be taught and made known to the entire world by your example' (Works 4/ 67).

This man of faith must not place his trust in anything but God's promise, not even the life of his only beloved son.

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GENESIS 22:1–19

John 8:56; Hebrews 11:17–19

ABRAHAM OFFERS UP ISAAC

Story Notes

File no. 13

Both Abraham and Sarah have laughed at the thought of their having a child in their old age, but God has changed their incredulity to joy and the boy's name, 'he laughs' now reflects this work of God. Then, in painful circumstances, it is made clear that the son of Abraham's flesh cannot take or share the inheritance of blessing with the child of promise (21:10,12). At this same time, the local community of Canaanites have recognised that God is with Abraham in all that he does. It is 'these things' that form the background to this story. On the one hand, this narrative shows that God can give Abraham a son effectively raised from the dead (Heb. 11:17-19), and on the other hand, shows what it means for a man to be one with God in the accomplishment of his purpose.

The command to Abraham is a test, to see if he fears God, but it would not be a test if Abraham knew this (c.f. Job 1). He must offer to God what is dearest to him, and also, what is the sole means of the fulfilment of the covenant made with him for the blessing of the world. He has already had to relinquish Ishmael and learned that God will provide for this son (21:11-13), but now, it is *his son, his only son, the son he loves*—a point that is repeated through the narrative (vv. 2, 12, 16) besides numerous references to his 'son'.

James tells us that Abraham was justified by faith, and that he was a friend of God, but that his faith was perfected by the work of offering up his son. He says, provocatively, that Abraham was justified by his works (Jam. 2:21-23), meaning that his faith was working through love (Gal. 5:6). It is this covenant of friendship that is being tested.

While Isaac will be the offering, it is Abraham who must make it and who will suffer deeply. We cannot miss the connection with God the Father who gives up his Son, his only Son, the Son whom he loves (John 3:16). It is not we who initiate faithful love, but God, a point that Abraham well knows. It is God's faithful love that elicits our own.

Abraham does not hesitate. 'Here am I', he says. Human sacrifice was practiced by the Canaanites as a measure of their devotion to the gods. Would the worship of Abraham and his descendants be less than this?

Child sacrifice was tragically practised by Jephthah because of a vow (Jude 11:31) but was otherwise condemned by the prophets (2 Kings 3:27; Jer. 19:5). Israel's worship acknowledges that every firstborn son belongs to the Lord and that, in lieu of his being offered to God, a sacrifice was offered for his redemption (Exod. 13:2, 12; 22:29; 34:19f).

For Abraham, who now lives by God's promise alone, there is no question. He sets out early next morning.

God specifies the place as Moriah. He goes in faith (Heb. 11:17-19), telling his servants that they will return, and explaining to his son that the Lord will provide an offering. But his intention is settled and he prepares to strike his son. Now 'the angel of the Lord' calls to halt his intention. The test is complete. God acknowledges that Abraham fears God. God's promises will be fulfilled by him alone.

Abraham's life is demonstrably, not simply doing something for God, a life in which he remains in charge, but belonging to God and letting God work his purpose out as he obeys.

A ram is provided as a substitute, so that, in a way Abraham could not have envisaged, the Lord provides himself with an offering. Abraham names the place, 'The Lord provides' (sometimes translated 'Jehovah Jireh'). Later on, Israel takes up this confession of faith in a saying: 'On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided'. In so saying, they join Abraham in his faith, but now, with reference to the worship they offer at the temple. David sees that Mount Moriah will be the

ABRAHAM OFFERS UP ISAAC con't

place for Israel's worship (2 Chron. 3:1), where, again, the Lord will provide the offerings to make atonement for their sins (Lev. 17:11).

There is no suggestion that Abraham believes his son will be an offering for his sin, only that he is to obey God in this respect. No man can offer anything to ransom his soul (Ps. 49:7-8).

Once again, the angel of the Lord speaks to Abraham, reaffirming the covenant of blessing. It now includes the overcoming of his enemies, but is also now linked to the faithfulness of Abraham. In him, there is now a faithful covenant partner to whom God can point and say, 'It is because of this man that I will keep my covenant.' This also is the work of God rather than of Abraham, but it points to Christ as the Man in whom the covenant is secured for all believers.

So Abraham returns to his travelling party, as he had announced earlier, and then to Beersheba, where more of his family history is brought to him.

The apostle Paul, recalling Abraham's not withholding his son, says that the God who does not withhold his son but freely gives him up for us, will, much more, freely give us all things (Rom. 8:32). Allen P. Ross says, 'Belief that the Lord will provide enables the true worshipper to sacrifice without reservation.' Paul urges us, by the mercies of God, to present our bodies a living sacrifice to God (Rom. 12:1).

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JOB 1:1 — 42:17

JOB

Story Notes

File no. 14

Job 1 & 2

The writer of this story is not interested in how much tragedy could happen to one person in one day—two enemy attacks and two deadly storms. It has already shown why. Satan hated God and the witness of Job to God. He did not believe that God could attract pure worship. But God loved Job, was proud of him and confident in him. In fact, it was this delight of God in his servant that precipitated the disasters. God's confidence was vindicated: Job worshipped still and did not doubt the goodness of God.

As on the first occasion, it was God who precipitated the further contesting of Job's true worship. On this occasion, his wife joined ranks with Satan in goading him to curse God. His helper in serving God turned to divert him, but he rebuked her, acknowledging the appropriateness of receiving both good things and calamity from God. What would his friends say? They could not say anything at first because Job's suffering was so great.

Job 3

Job wished that he had not been born and spoke bitterly against the day of his birth, cursed it for allowing him to see life. He could not remember any good and had no hope for the future. Then he said it would be better to be still born or abandoned and allowed to die rather than to have come to this. He would then share greatness with all the other dead, and the lack of consequence of any good or evil. All his zest for life was now turned on dying. The terrors that had been kept at bay (consider the possibility of his children cursing God which he made offerings for) had now settled on him. He had no reason to want to live. This bitter cry completes the scene against which the debate must now emerge. Here is a man who was righteous but with nothing to show for it.

But if the story is styled to set the coming debate in a situation of extreme crisis, it could not have been written without the taste of bitterness, which comes in deepest sorrow. Who but one created in the image of God could feel such pain?

Job 4 & 5

Eliphaz saw Job's suffering from the outside. He saw Job's impatience and his lack of hope (4:5–6) and this stirred him to tell Job how things should be—that righteous people would not be abandoned.

Job 17:1–5

Job said his friends or others who scoffed would be judged—they had no understanding, and so, had no message for those in distress. With no human help, he looked to God to be guarantor for him (17:3).

Job 17:6–16

Those who were upright had been appalled at Job's plight and resisted the wrong accusation against him (17:8–10). Eliphaz had said (15:22–23) the wicked despair of seeing light again, but Job would not embrace this end in death. The wisdom around him was, in fact, not wisdom. His God would acknowledge him.

Job 19

Job said his friends had wronged him by their accusations. They had no evidence of his sins other than God's 'fault finding' (vv. 4–6). God was his enemy (vv. 8–12) and God had set his family and community against him as well (vv. 13–22). But he refused to let go the hope of vindication from God—in this world and in his present flesh. He did not identify what he meant by a Redeemer standing on the earth but made it clear that the only place vindication would be

JOB con't

effective was on this present earth. His tormentors would suffer wrath for their wrongful accusations. They had joined Satan in his failure to understand love.

Job 38 & 39

God did not answer Job with an explanation of himself but questioned Job. God had not acted inappropriately and did not need to explain himself. He asked Job about the creation, a creation in which evil was a reality (38:13, 15). He asked Job about his own place in it. Could he comprehend or control it, or bring on a flood at its appropriate time (38:34). Did Job understand why an ostrich was made with no understanding, or could he create a creature like a horse with so much nobility.

We don't actually get closer to God, but we can become more amazed at the distinction between God being creator and ourselves living in space and time as his creatures. Far better to live as creatures and gladly accept our humanity. In fact, we already have proximity to him—by his love and his coming to us as Creator. This enables us to live contentedly as creatures, all the while exploring with fascination and with diligence and with purpose but never with the intention to become something we're not.

Job had asked that he might be in court with God to plead his case. Now, God had summoned him and asked him to quit himself like a man. But God would do the questioning and Job must respond. Now Job knew that he was of small account, and that he will not answer. But Job was in God's presence; he had held conversation with God and heard his voice.

Seeking for explanations of things that cannot be explained turns us humans into devils. Well may the circumstances of this life drive us to ask that we may have an encounter with God, though they take us to the very edge of our humanity. By faith we believe there is a God who will justify us, that is, bring us into His presence as sons and daughters who are beloved and approved.

Although Job was reproved, God had responded to his servant and vindicated him by speaking to him, to give him the wisdom that he lacked. In this court, Job's well being depended only on being a creature before God.

Job 40 & 41

God granted Job's wish to be a whole man in God's presence. But Job had sought to be justified by finding fault with God (40:8). At the end of the story Job would be justified before God, but not on the grounds of finding fault with God. God's second questioning of Job was more probing than the first. It dealt not just with human evil in the world but with whether Job can do what he wills with the proud and the arrogant and the evil, and whether he can abase them. If Job could do this, then God would acknowledge that Job could actually bring victory not only to himself but to the whole creation, for nothing less is necessary for the peace of the earth and for its coming to its goal. With this in mind, we can better see the majesty of Jesus' claim to have come to destroy the works of the devil.

Behemoth and Leviathan were creatures of God and were used as symbols of proud and wicked humanity because they were uncontrollable. Behemoth was the first of God's great acts and could only be approached by its Maker. How would Job survive in this Leviathan's presence? How would he tame it so that a girl could lead it on a rope? The purpose of God in the earth is not just the suppression of the evil, but bringing all things to serve the purposes of God. Only Christ has been able to approach Behemoth and only Christ has faced the fury of Leviathan. On the cross He faced the fury of this entire evil world so as to be its Master.

Job 42

Job had nothing more to say. His desire to be in God's court and to justify himself was gone. He was no longer concerned with his place in God's presence but with God Himself.

JOB con't

Job's three friends had been silenced, Elihu had been ignored, and now Job himself was silent. But Job's three friends were instructed to seek the prayers of Job and to offer an offering that they may be spared from the wrath of God for their failure to truly represent the truth of God to Job. But now, Job, having seen God, could faithfully represent the truth of God to his friends, and pray for their salvation.

In the days before Christ brought life and immortality to light, the appropriate ending for a person's life was that they would see their children and children's children, and prosper in this life and be surrounded with their friends. When Job had prayed for his friends, these gifts were given to him as God's witness to his favour on his life.

Clearly there are mysteries in this life, particularly mysteries that are focused in times of suffering and that cannot be unravelled and must be left with God. God showed Job that he was God, that only he could be God, and that to know this was peace and fruitfulness in this life.

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