

Lecture 3: Abraham, the Covenant, and the Promise Under Threat

Introduction to Biblical Theology · Dr. Thomas Schreiner · The Master's Seminary · 32 minutes

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Before you watch

Out of Babel's wreckage God calls one man, an idolater, and stakes the blessing of the whole world on him. Dr. Schreiner walks the covenant with Abraham: land, offspring, kings, and universal blessing, the night God walked between the pieces alone, and the long years when the promise hung by a thread. Listen for how often the promise nearly dies, and who keeps it alive.

The lecture, section by section

1. After Babel, one man

The world is descending, and God answers with a covenant. The covenants are the story's backbone, Adam, then Noah, now Abraham, and what men grasped at Babel, a great name, God freely promises to Abraham: a great name, a great nation, and blessing for the whole world. And nation, Schreiner notes, means kingdom; the promise is royal from the start.

2. Abraham, a new Adam

Not with absolute continuity, but truly: Abraham is a new Adam, the man through whom God begins to reclaim the world with blessing.

3. Not chosen for his virtue

Joshua 24 remembers what Abraham was when God called him: his fathers, Terah among them, served other gods beyond the River. Abraham was an idolater. Later Jewish tradition polished him into perfection, but Paul, with Abraham in view, says God justifies the ungodly (Romans 4). Abraham did not belong to God natively; he was taken by grace.

4. Land, offspring, kings, and blessing

The covenant's elements unfold. The land of Canaan, which points beyond itself to a new Eden, God's garden. Offspring, echoing the old commission to be fruitful and multiply, and Genesis 17 says more: kings will come from him. And blessing reaching every nation of the earth.

5. Isaac, not Ishmael: the promise discriminates

Not all Abraham's physical children are the children of promise (Romans 9). Abraham himself was content otherwise, O that Ishmael might live before you, but God's plan was not Abraham's plan. When Sarah demands, drive out the slave woman and her son, the New Testament cites her words as the word of God even while, Schreiner argues, her own heart in the moment was sinful: true words, wrong spirit, a complex reality. Galatians reads Ishmael's mocking as the first persecution of the promised line. Through Isaac shall your offspring be traced.

6. Genesis 22: the only son on the altar

Abraham is told to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, and Hebrews tells us what was in his mind: he reasoned that God could raise the dead. The story itself whispers it, we will go, and we will return to you. By then Abraham knew the promise ran through Isaac and could not die on that mountain.

7. A promise shaped like a miracle

The story lingers over the decades it took to receive even one son, because the point is that the promise required a miracle; Abraham had no power to produce it. Even circumcision preaches this: given in the same chapter as father of many nations, it marks the very organ of generation, a permanent reminder that the offspring come from God.

8. God alone between the pieces

In Genesis 15 the covenant is cut in the ancient way: animals divided, and the parties pass between the pieces, invoking that fate on themselves if they break faith, exactly as Jeremiah 34 later interprets the rite. But here God passes through alone, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, taking the self-malediction, the curse of the covenant, on himself alone if the promise should fail. Schreiner hears in it an anticipation of the cross.

9. Both unconditional and conditional

So is the covenant unconditional or conditional? With Gentry and Wellum, Schreiner answers: both. Unconditional, because God has sworn by himself and walked the pieces alone; the offspring, the land, the kingdom, and the universal blessing will certainly come. Conditional, because the blessing comes through obedience: because you have done this thing, God says after Moriah, and to Isaac, because Abraham obeyed my voice (Genesis 22, 26). James's justification by works belongs to this same stream, and it does not contradict Paul: works flow from faith and are necessary as its fruit. Ultimately the covenant cannot fail; for any particular person, it summons obedient faith. The lecture warmly commends T. Desmond Alexander's *From Paradise to the Promised Land* here, with one caution: merit is the wrong word for what Abraham's obedience was.

10. Faith the foundation, obedience the fruit

Abraham believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15). But his faith did not begin there; Hebrews 11 says it was by faith that Abraham obeyed and went out in Genesis 12. What Genesis 15 supplies is the ground: the foundation of Abraham's standing with God was never his obedience but his faith, and the two are inseparable because true faith always moves the feet.

11. The promise under threat, and the God above the threats

Again and again the promise nearly dies. Sarah is taken into a king's house twice, in Genesis 12 and 20, and God himself intervenes to guard the line. Abraham fears his servant Eliezer will be the heir, and God takes him outside to count stars, offspring beyond counting, and Paul says every believer is among them, children of Abraham by faith (Romans 4, Galatians 3). As for the land, Stephen says Abraham never possessed a foot of it (Acts 7); the only ground he ever owned was a grave. Schreiner pauses pastorally: God's promises are certain, but their timing and shape rarely match our expectations, and the patriarchs teach us to keep trusting in tents, waiting for what we do not yet see.

12. Jacob, Dinah, and a story on several levels

The promise passes to Isaac and then to Jacob, not Esau, and not because Jacob was the better man (Romans 9); the story is at pains to show grace choosing a schemer. Then threat after threat: a godly wife must be found so the line is preserved (the long Genesis 24), Rebekah and Rachel are barren, Esau plots murder, Laban schemes, and Jacob divides his camp in terror before Esau's four hundred men, whom God turns friendly. In the dark story of Dinah at Shechem, God sovereignly prevents an intermarriage that would have corrupted the line, yet through an act of deceit and violence he did not bless, and Simeon and Levi bear the judgment for it. The hermeneutical lesson: do not oversimplify a story. God's sovereignty and man's sin run through the same events, and God works his purposes even there.

Scripture in this lecture

Genesis 12, 15, 17, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 31, 32, 34; Joshua 24; Jeremiah 34; Acts 7; Romans 4, 9; Galatians 3, 4; Hebrews 11; James 2

Key terms

A new Adam

Abraham as the man through whom God begins to reclaim and bless the world the first Adam lost.

Justifying the ungodly

Romans 4 with Abraham in view: called as an idolater, chosen by grace, never for virtue.

Self-malediction

In Genesis 15 God alone passes between the cut pieces, calling the covenant curse down on himself if the promise should fail.

Unconditional and conditional

The covenant cannot finally fail, yet it summons each person to the obedience that flows from faith.

Faith the foundation

Genesis 15 names the means of Abraham's standing with God, faith counted as righteousness; Hebrews shows that faith already walking in Genesis 12.

The offspring under threat

The story's recurring pattern: harems, barrenness, rival heirs, and murderous brothers, with God preserving the line through them all.

Comprehension check

Circle your answers, then check them against the key on the last page.

1. What God promised Abraham, men had grasped at where?
 - A. Eden
 - B. Babel
 - C. Egypt
 - D. Ur
2. In the promise to make Abraham a great nation, nation means what?
 - A. A language
 - B. A family
 - C. A kingdom
 - D. A religion
3. What was Abraham when God called him, according to Joshua 24?
 - A. An idolater beyond the River
 - B. A priest of God
 - C. A righteous nomad
 - D. A king in Ur
4. Beyond offspring, Genesis 17 promises that what will come from Abraham?
 - A. Prophets
 - B. Priests
 - C. Temples
 - D. Kings
5. How does the lecture describe Sarah's demand to drive out the slave woman?
 - A. Pure malice, recorded as a warning
 - B. True words spoken with a sinful heart, and cited in Scripture as God's word
 - C. A mistake God overruled
 - D. A private opinion
6. In Genesis 22, what does Hebrews say Abraham reasoned?
 - A. That God could raise Isaac from the dead
 - B. That a substitute was already hidden
 - C. That the command would be withdrawn
 - D. That Ishmael would inherit instead

7. In Genesis 15's covenant ceremony, who passes between the pieces?
 - A. Abraham alone
 - B. Abraham and God together
 - C. God alone, taking the curse on himself
 - D. The elders of Abraham's household
8. The Abrahamic covenant is what?
 - A. Purely unconditional
 - B. Purely conditional
 - C. Neither, it is only a promise
 - D. Both: ultimately certain, yet summoning each person to obedient faith
9. Genesis 26 tells Isaac the blessing comes because of what?
 - A. Isaac's own goodness
 - B. Abraham obeyed God's voice
 - C. Ishmael's departure
 - D. The end of the famine
10. When does Schreiner think Abraham was first right with God?
 - A. In Genesis 12, by the faith that obeyed the call
 - B. Only at Genesis 15
 - C. At his circumcision
 - D. On Mount Moriah
11. According to Stephen in Acts 7, how much of the land did Abraham possess?
 - A. All of Canaan
 - B. The Negev only
 - C. Not even a foot, only a burial place
 - D. Half of it, shared with Lot
12. What is the hermeneutical lesson of the Dinah and Shechem story?
 - A. Violence in a good cause is righteous
 - B. God sovereignly works his purpose even through sin he does not bless, so never oversimplify a story
 - C. Intermarriage was the real sin
 - D. Circumcision guarantees safety

Talk it over

1. Abraham was called as an idolater and justified as ungodly. How does that change the way you tell your own story, and the way you pray for the person you are most tempted to write off?
2. The promise was certain, yet all Abraham ever held was one son and a grave. Where has God's timing not matched your expectations, and what did the patriarchs do in that gap?
3. Faith is the foundation and obedience its fruit, yet the blessing came because Abraham obeyed. How do you keep both truths standing in your household without collapsing one into the other?

One verse to carry

Genesis 15:6, the hinge of the story: Abraham believed the LORD, and God counted his faith as righteousness.

Go further

The lecture warmly commends *From Paradise to the Promised Land* by T. Desmond Alexander on the theology of the Pentateuch, with one caution: Schreiner would not use its word merit for Abraham's obedience. *Kingdom through Covenant* by Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum remains the companion for the covenant structure.

Lecture 3 Comprehension Check

1. B. Babel (*outline section 1*)
2. C. A kingdom (*outline section 1*)
3. A. An idolater beyond the River (*outline section 3*)
4. D. Kings (*outline section 4*)
5. B. True words spoken with a sinful heart, and cited in Scripture as God's word (*outline section 5*)
6. A. That God could raise Isaac from the dead (*outline section 6*)
7. C. God alone, taking the curse on himself (*outline section 8*)
8. D. Both: ultimately certain, yet summoning each person to obedient faith (*outline section 9*)
9. B. Abraham obeyed God's voice (*outline section 9*)
10. A. In Genesis 12, by the faith that obeyed the call (*outline section 10*)
11. C. Not even a foot, only a burial place (*outline section 11*)
12. B. God sovereignly works his purpose even through sin he does not bless, so never oversimplify a story (*outline section 12*)