



God Creates a Family

Genesis 12–50

Key Verse

“He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’” Genesis 15:5

Lisa Scheffler, author

What is a promise worth? It depends on who is making the promise. Are they trustworthy? Can they actually do what they promise? This week we’ll be considering what a promise from God is worth.

A lot of Christians choose one of God’s promises as their favorite Bible verse. A lot of us find hope and comfort in Romans 8:28, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose” or Jerimiah 29:11, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” But these promises are only comforting if we can trust them, and the reason we can believe them is because God is trustworthy.

The Bible’s big story allows us to witness the promises of God being fulfilled. As our story unfolds, and God’s grand plan to redeem humanity comes into focus, we’ll find our faith is strengthened by the faithful God who is revealed.

Day 1

In Episode 3 of our story we’re meeting a man and a woman who were promised something amazing. Something supernatural. Something that would change everything, not just for them, but for the whole world.

As we move along in the story, our pace through the Bible will need to accelerate. We'll still look at passages that represent key points in the plot, but we'll skip a lot of wonderful stories in between. That doesn't mean the people, events, or writings that we skip over are insignificant. Every book of the Bible deserves thorough study! But our view in this series is from 10,000 feet up, and our aim is to trace the major themes in the story from Genesis to Revelation.

This week we'll pick up our story in Genesis. Having described the events that happened at Babel, the narrator of Genesis gives us another genealogy that traces the line of one of Noah's sons all the way to Abram, our focus for the week.

Read the Word

Genesis 12:1–9 (NIV)

¹ The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. ² "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. ⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

⁶ Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.

- What does the Lord ask Abram to do? Does he do it?
- What does the Lord promise Abram?

Reflect

As we saw in Genesis 10, on the plains of Shinar, the nations tried to bridge the divide between heaven and earth in order to elevate themselves to the level of God. They wanted to make a name for themselves, unite the people of their world, and prosper on their own terms. Here the narrator of Genesis shows us that God generously gives all these gifts to Abram. The Lord promises Abram that he will make his name great, and that he will be the father of a great

nation who will bless the whole world. Abram's security will not be found in a structure made from human hands, but in the Lord who has called him.

When God tells Abram to pack up his family and move, he does so. The only guarantee he needs is God's word, even though what God is promising seemed impossible. Abram and his wife Sarai had never been able to conceive a child, and now they were past the age where that should even be a possibility. The land God takes them to and promises to give to their offspring is inhabited by another tribe of people. Yet, Abraham believes that God can and will do what he says he will do.

The land that Abram surveys will one day become the land of Israel. It is described by later biblical authors as a land "flowing with milk and honey." For them, it was the promise of a new Eden where they would once again enjoy the blessings of the Lord. When Abram gets to Bethel, he builds the Lord another altar and "calls upon his name," while he only pitches a tent for himself. He is marking this territory as belonging to the Lord, and that is the only structure he leaves behind. The land isn't his yet, but he knows it already belongs to God, and trusts that someday God will give it to his family.

God may have chosen to create a new family through Abram, but he has not rejected the rest of the world. Though he doesn't explain precisely how, all the nations of the earth will be blessed through Abram. That's God's promise then and now.

Even if you didn't grow up as a Christian, in America we are used to the idea of God being good. The ancients made no such assumption. The pagan cultures that would have surrounded Abram worshipped fickle and capricious gods who were unreliable. Yet when the one true God revealed himself, Abram knew he could be trusted. He believed the Lord even though he was an old man with a barren wife standing on ground occupied by a hostile people.

Sometimes the faith we place in God's promises can seem just as counterintuitive. Yet the more we know God, the greater our faith will be. When we encounter the living Lord who is powerful and full of love for us, we can trust that our faith is not misplaced. God is who he says he is and he will do what he says he will do.

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father teach me to trust you the way Abram did. I want to hear your voice, obey your calling, and believe the promises you have given me. I give you my life. Give me your guidance so that I may glorify you.

Day 2

God has promised Abram a son to carry on his name and a land to call his own. At this point in our story, he has neither. In fact, as the story unfolds in Genesis, Abram immediately

encounters a famine that sends him fleeing into Egypt in order to survive. His faith is tested, and he responds in fear. He is deceptive and puts his wife in danger.

Yet, God doesn't give up on Abram. Though Abram's faith wavers, God's faithfulness never does. We'll pick up the story in Genesis 15 where God reaffirms his promises to Abram. Notice the very first thing God says to Abram and how God gives his word.

Read the Word

Genesis 15:1–21 (NIV)

¹ After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”

² But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

⁴ Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” ⁵ He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

⁶ Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

⁷ He also said to him, “I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”

⁸ But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?”

⁹ So the Lord said to him, “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.”

¹⁰ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. ¹¹ Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

¹² As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. ¹³ Then the Lord said to him, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at

a good old age. ¹⁶ In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

¹⁷ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, ²⁰ Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, ²¹ Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”

- In verse 1, what does God tell Abram?
- What promises does God repeat to Abram?
- Why do you think God appears and repeats them?

Reflect

Years passed and Abram and Sarai still had no children. While they returned to the promised land and prospered, the land was not their own, and they still had no heir. God again speaks to Abram and reassures him. Not only will he have a child, but his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the desert sky.

In spite of past sins and periods of doubt, the Lord tells Abram not to be afraid. The Lord’s appearance is to give blessing, not judgment. God himself will act as his protector and his reward. The presence of God is the ultimate treasure to those created in his image. The relationship the Lord has initiated with Abram gives him security. Abram believes the Lord, and it’s his faith that makes him right with God.

Even though he trusts God, Abram asks how he can know that God will make good on his word. The Lord responds not with a rebuke, but by making a covenant with Abram.

In today’s world, there are different ways that we can seal a promise. We can exchange marriage vows, swear an oath of loyalty to the military, sign a business contract, or make treaties with other nations. While these promises are serious, people can and do break them all the time.

In the ancient world, people would cut covenant with one another. They would swear on their lives to be true to their word. The scene in Genesis 15 shows God making a covenant with Abraham. The smoke and fire were a manifestation of God himself as he moves through the pieces of the sacrifice. He takes the initiative and binds himself to his promise. God can never break his word.

The author of the New Testament book, Hebrews helps us understand the significance of God’s covenant with Abraham and how it encourages us as believers in Jesus Christ.

When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, “I will surely bless you and give

you many descendants.” And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.

People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. (Hebrews 6:13–17)

While Abram believes the Lord and trusts in his promises, the next story in Genesis 16 shows how he and Sarai still try to take matters into their own hands and help God along. God promised Abram an heir of “his flesh and blood,” yet his wife doesn’t become pregnant. So, Sarai suggests that they conceive through her maid servant. This would prove to be disastrous for everyone involved; yet, God redeems even this tragic situation.

Later in Genesis 17, the Lord returns to Abraham and once more reaffirms his promises. This time he gives Abram a new name, Abraham, which means “father of multitudes.” Sarai gets a new name too, Sarah. God assures Abraham that the covenant is not just with him, but with his descendants as well. He is not only the God of Abraham, but of all who follow.

From our vantage point, we know that Jesus Christ is the promised seed of Abraham and the offspring through whom all the nations will be blessed. All of those who trust in Jesus Christ and take part in the new covenant become the spiritual children of Abraham. Thousands of years ago, as Abraham gazed into the night sky, the stars he tried to count represented all of the redeemed, including us.

God sometimes fulfills his promises in ways we’d never suspect.

Pray

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, thank you for being true to your word. I am so grateful that your faithfulness is not dependent on mine. Save me from doubt and fear. Increase my faith and empower me to live according to your promises in every area of my life.

Day 3

As hard as it was for Abraham to wait for his son to be born, imagine what it was like for Sarah. In the ancient world a woman’s worth was largely measured by her ability to produce sons for her husband. Sarah had endured years and years of infertility as a young woman.

She'd probably hoped and prayed for decades, and now she thought she was too old, and it was too late. Yet her husband kept telling her that the Lord had promised them a child.

Sarah had doubted that God could and would do what he said. She'd even laughed at the idea. We can imagine her daring to hope, but so afraid that if the promise failed, she would be devastated. Yet God came through. Just as he promised, Sarah gives birth to a son.

When at last the time came, the narrator of Genesis allows us to experience the birth from Sarah's point of view.

Read the Word

Genesis 21:1–7

Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. ² Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. ⁴ When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

⁶ Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." ⁷ And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

- Why do you think we get Sarah's perspective on the birth?

Reflect

At last the child had come! The miracle child, the heir to the promise, the long-awaited son arrived. In his way and in his time, the Lord made another move in his grand plan to redeem humanity.

Genesis 21 tells us that the child is circumcised as the Lord prescribed. Circumcision was a ritual that would set Abraham's family apart. It was a sign of their covenant with God. It's also a reminder that fertility is a gift from God. Only God is the giver of new life. Sarah rejoices over her child with joy and genuine laughter. The Lord had been gracious to her and done what he promised.

Genesis continues on with the stories of Isaac and his sons, Esau and Jacob. From Jacob will come twelve sons who will father the twelve tribes of Israel. The promises of God — for a great nation, for the land, and that through them all people would be blessed — are reaffirmed in each generation.

Yet, relational conflict and family drama characterize Abraham's line. Although God is at work, the effects of the fall are ever present. Bitterness, jealousy, resentment, deceit, anger, hatred, and even violence threaten this family at every turn.

Jacob steals Esau's birthright and Esau threatens to murder his brother. Jacob must flee the inheritance he plotted to steal. And the drama continues. Later, Jacob favors his younger son Joseph to such an extent that his older brothers sell him into slavery in a fit of jealousy and rage.

But even these dark sins and evil intentions cannot thwart the plans of God. As Joseph eventually says to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50:20) Not only is God faithful to the covenant he has with Abraham's family, he is able to redeem the most heinous acts and use them for good.

When others harm us, or even when we inflict harm on ourselves, we can trust that God is able to redeem those situations too. When we doubt that is possible, we can look to the cross where Jesus secured the redemption of anyone and everyone who would receive it. And now we have received a new covenant in Jesus Christ, and we celebrate that covenant not with circumcision, but with the Lord's supper.

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:23b-25)

The next time you take part in the Lord's supper, remember that you are worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — the almighty God who in generation after generation is faithful to his promises.

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, thank you that you are the almighty God who is willing and able to keep your word. Thank you for bringing light from darkness and good from evil. Thank you that I can trust you.

Day 4

So far in this series, we've taken time on Thursdays to find Jesus in each episode of the story. Today we will see Christ's sacrifice illustrated in a story from Abraham's life.

Since we've followed the story from the beginning with all its twists and turns, we can imagine the joy that Abraham took in Isaac. The promises of God rested on his child. Yet, God comes to him and asks him to sacrifice his one and only son. Abraham's faith is tested to its breaking point. Yet, he trusts God completely. He is so certain of God's goodness and faithfulness that he is willing to do whatever he requires. He believes that somehow, some way, God will spare his son and keep his promises, even if that means resurrecting Isaac.

As you read this story, consider how it parallels another Father who was willing to sacrifice his only Son to take away the sins of the world. How does Abraham and Isaac's story help us understand the relationship between the Father and the Son and the love God has for us?

Read the Word

Genesis 22:1–14 (NIV)

*¹ Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"
"Here I am," he replied.*

² Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

³ Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

⁶ Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, ⁷ Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

⁸ Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

“Here I am,” he replied.

¹² “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

¹³ Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.”

- What parallels do you see between Abraham and God, and Jesus and Isaac?

Reflect

In his letter to the Romans, Paul encourages his audience to have faith in God by reminding them of God’s willingness to sacrifice to save us.

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32)

Like Abraham, God was willing to sacrifice his own Son. Like Isaac, Jesus was willing to be sacrificed.

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1–2)

Jesus endured the cross because he wanted to be reconciled to humanity. We are the joy that was set before Jesus. That’s how much he loves us. Let’s fix our eyes on Jesus no matter what. We can trust God. We can believe in his goodness and faithfulness. He has showed us over and over that not only is he able to do what he promises, we can trust him to keep his word.

Depending on what is going on in your life, you may need to meditate on that truth today and consider the lengths your Creator has gone to bring you home.

Pray

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, I admit that sometimes I find it difficult to trust you. Help me in my unbelief. Call to mind areas where I am failing to trust you in my life today, and show me what it would look like to trust you more.

Day 5

It's Friday! Today we'll put the pieces of this week's episode together and reflect on our key verse. We'll review the previous weeks as well, so we can put the episodes of the story together. We'll also think about our place in God's story and invite the Spirit to use God's Word to grow our faith.

The Story

Episode 1: God Creates

- **Key Verse:** So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)
- **Key Passages:** Genesis 1–2
- **Key Figures:** Adam and Eve

Episode 2: God is rejected

- **Key Verse:** And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." (Genesis 3:15)
- **Key Passages:** Genesis 3–11
- **Key Figures:** Abraham and Sarah

Episode 3: God creates a family

Our story had a glorious beginning with God creating a beautiful world where he would live with, his special creation, men and women created in his image. But, as we saw last week, the first humans rejected God's care and guidance and sin infiltrated the world like a contagious disease, affecting everything and everyone.

Now you might think that God would have given up on humanity to wipe the slate clean. Happily, that's not how God operates. He loves his creation and wants to restore it. He loves people and wants to bring them back home to be with him. And he had a plan to do both.

That brings us to Abraham and Sarah. They are the couple that God is going to use to create a new family who would know him and how to walk in his ways. He would make them into a great nation and give them a land of their own. And through them he would offer rescue to the world.

When God announces this plan to Abraham, he's shocked, and with good reason. He and Sarah were old, and they didn't have any children. But the Lord took Abraham outside and showed him the multitude of stars in the dark desert sky and promised that Abraham's descendants would be just as numerous. Not only that, but through Abraham, all the people on the earth would be blessed. To the old man this was far too good to be true. But Abraham decided to trust God anyway. And he did. Mostly.

Like a lot of us Abraham and Sarah had times when their faith in God was as strong and sure as the mountains of their future homeland. They not only believed God, they acted like it. But other times, their faith shifted like the loose sands of the desert. They doubted God and even tried to help his plan along instead of waiting and trusting. That didn't turn out well.

Yet God is faithful even when his people aren't. And sure enough, Sarah gives birth to a son, Isaac. God gives him all the same promises he'd given his father. These promises would be carried into the next generation by Isaac's son Jacob, and by his twelve sons whose families eventually form the twelve tribes of Israel.

It probably won't surprise you that as the family grew, the descendants of Abraham struggled in the same way that Abraham and Sarah did. They struggled to trust God, especially when their circumstances tempted them to doubt. They struggled to follow his ways when jealousy, fear, deceit, hatred, and violence threatened to tear their family apart. They struggled in the same way you and I do — to trust God.

But God has never wavered from his plan. He had given a hint of it to Adam and Eve in the garden when he promised that someday an offspring of the woman would come and crush the enemy. He gave Abraham a few more details, promising that Abraham would be the father of multitudes. As the story unfolds, so does God's plan. As we continue to follow it, a picture of God's promises will take shape, and it will look just like Jesus. You won't want to miss that, so keep following along.

Key Verse

Meditate on our key verse for the week. Read each phrase slowly and prayerfully. Allow the Spirit to speak to you through God's Word.

*“He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’”
Genesis 15:5*

Finding your place in God's story

Ask the Spirit to guide you, then consider these questions:

- As you reflect on what you've read this week, what's your biggest takeaway? For example, how were you reminded of God's goodness and faithfulness in the story of Abraham? How does Jesus fulfill God's promises to Abraham?
- How did you see yourself reflected in the stories we read this week? In what ways are you like Abraham and Sarah? How does recognizing that you are one of Abraham's spiritual descendants strengthen your faith in God and his promises?
- For what do you want to praise and thank God?
- What requests do you want to bring to your loving and faithful God?

Tune in next week!

The drama continues as Abraham's family grows into a nation. Next week we'll see God rescue his people from slavery and make them his own.