

STORIES FROM GENESIS: CHOSEN AND BLESSED

By Andrew Wilson
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Genesis 17: 1-11, 23
Romans 4: 18-25

Last week Lee kicked off our new sermon series, “Stories from Genesis,” with a great message about the call of Abram. For both Jews and Christians, that story in chapter 12 captures a crucial moment in spiritual history. There for the first time God forms a special relationship with a chosen few. He makes audacious promises – promises that are accompanied by extraordinary demands. Yet God also speaks as one who is tender, and caring, and eager to be known.

God calls Abram – later known as Abraham – to travel with his family out of Harran, in modern day Iraq, to a land God will show him. God promises to make Abram’s family into a great nation. He promises to bless everyone on earth through him. And even though Abram is already a rich 75 years old, and even though he and his wife Sarai have no children, and even though all of their friends are pleading with them to stay, Abram says yes to God’s call. He and his family head into the desert and God leads them to Canaan – the land that will eventually become the nation of Israel.

Abram and his family have had a lot of big adventures and God gives them plenty of reasons to doubt him. Again and again, it looks like God has forgotten about Abram and that God isn’t going to fulfill his promises. A famine forces Abram and his family to live for a time in Egypt. Then, after their return to Canaan, Abram has to fight for his family’s survival. He successfully defeats an alliance of kings, and his wealth and influence grow, yet his family is still threatened on every side. Most alarming of all, through all of these challenges Abram and Sarai remain childless. At one point God appears to Abram in a vision where he reaffirms his promises. He tells Abram explicitly that Sarai will give birth to their son and Abram once again believes God. Yet sometime later, at Sarai’s urging, Abram has a son with Sarai’s servant, Hagar. Not surprisingly, Ishmael isn’t the great blessing that Sarai and Abram hope he will be. Sarai and Hagar fight, and an angel of the Lord reveals that Ishmael will become “a wild donkey of a man” who will stir up trouble wherever he goes.

That’s the background to today’s reading from chapter 17. There we learn about another encounter between Abram and God. It’s actually the fifth in a series of such encounters and it happens 24 years after Abram’s arrival in Canaan. This time God spells out the details of his covenant in terms of what he will do for Abram, and what Abram must do in response. He repeats his original promises: He’ll secure the land for Abram’s descendants. They’ll become a great nation that will bless all other nations. But God adds important new details.

First, Abram is to walk with God and be blameless.

Abram’s behavior hasn’t been perfect – for example, Abram lied to Pharaoh and told him Sarai was his sister instead of his wife. But we learn in Genesis, chapter 15, that when Abram believed God it was

“credited it to him as righteousness” (15:6). The crucial idea here is that Abram was accepted by God, and blameless in his eyes, not because he was perfect, but because he had faith.

In his letter to the Romans, chapter 4, Paul points to Abraham as the ultimate example of faith that leads to salvation. Paul explains that we shouldn’t think of Abraham as a virtuous hero who was more deserving of grace than we are. God showed Abraham favor, Paul explains, not because of his perfect obedience, but because he had faith. He trusted God to do what, in human terms, seemed impossible.

Paul gets to the heart of the matter in verses 13 through 15:

It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath.

- Romans 4: 13-15

So, the reason God saved Abraham – the reason God forgave him and overlooked his sin – the reason God declared him righteous, and blessed him beyond measure, was simply because of his faith.

All of this helps us to understand how sinners like Abram and Sarai or like us might walk with God and be blameless. We do by stepping out in faith.

During this fifth encounter God also gives Abram a new name, one that reminds him that his identity is defined by the covenantal relationship that he has with God. Instead of Abram, which means “Exalted Father,” he’s now called Abraham, which means “Father of many.”

In this encounter God talks for the first time about circumcision. Every male who is part of the covenant community is to be circumcised. Circumcision, God makes clear, is the outward sign of a person’s submission to the covenant. It’s the physical reminder to God and his people that they belong to each other, and that the people must *choose* to walk with God or be banished from the community.

At age 99, Abraham responds to God in a way that proves his deep faith yet again. “On that very day,” we read, “Abraham took his son Ishmael... and every male in his household and circumcised them” (17:23). And Abraham himself was circumcised. (By the way, you may think that was no great sacrifice. But if you think that, it’s probably because you’re not a guy, and you’re comparing circumcision to childbirth. All I can tell you ladies is that when the doctor circumcised me after I was born I couldn’t walk for a year.)

Finally, in this encounter God declares that his covenant with Abraham’s family is permanent. It will last until time is no more.

Through the ages many Christians have suggested that the Jews destroyed the covenant when they rejected their Messiah, Jesus. Paul categorically rejects the idea that the Jews are no longer favored by God. "Did God reject his people?" Paul asks in Romans. "By no means," he writes. "As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies... but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gift and his call are irrevocable" (Romans 11: 1, 28).

Paul's point is that the Jews who have rejected Jesus are still loved by God, and are still the children of God. A God-fearing remnant still remains. They've rejected the Savior, but there's still hope for their redemption.

Over the next couple of months we're going to see how God fulfilled his promises in the lives of Abraham and Sarah and their immediate offspring. But today we're going to widen our scope. We're going to ask a big-picture question. Approximately 4,000 years have passed since God made all of these promises to Abraham. For Christians who worship the God of Abraham, therefore, it makes sense to ask: How have things worked out for Abraham's children? Has God made them a great nation? Have they been a blessing to others?

If the greatness of a nation or people is measured in terms of population, neither Israel nor the Jews qualify as great. Israel is the only Jewish state, yet there are only 6 million Jews living there. That's about 5 million fewer people than are living in the Dominican Republic. Approximately the same number of Jews – 6 million – live in the United States. The worldwide total is between 14 and 16 million, which is close to the number of Jews that were alive before World War II and the Nazi-inspired Holocaust. To put it in worldwide perspective, less than 2 tenths of one percent of the world's population is Jewish.

But of course there are other ways to measure the influence of a nation and a people.

One factor is longevity. The picture changes for the Jews when you consider this perspective. In his book, *A History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson uses the history of the city of Hebron to illustrate Jewish hardiness. Hebron is located about 20 miles south of Jerusalem. For the Jews, Hebron's significance has always been way out of proportion to its small size. It was the place where Abraham moved his tents after he separated from his nephew, Lot. It was the place where Abraham bought a burial site for Sarah, and where Abraham himself was buried. And it was the place where David was anointed king.

When Jerusalem fell, the Jews were driven out of Hebron and the Edomites moved in. Next came the Greeks, then the Romans, then the Arabs, the Franks and the Mamluks. In 1518 the Ottomans massacred the Hebron Jews, but a tiny colony of scholars was reestablished at the synagogue. The British conquerors arrived in 1918. In 1929 the tiny Jewish community in Hebron was attacked by the Arabs. The Arabs attacked again in 1936 and the Hebron Jews were virtually wiped out. During the Six Day War in 1967 Israeli soldiers entered Hebron, and by 1970 a modest Jewish settlement had been reestablished there. And although Hebron is now part of the Palestinian territories, there are several hundred Jews living there today.

With this history in mind, Paul Johnson poses a series of rhetorical questions: Where are all these people who once claimed Hebron? Where are the Canaanites and the Edomites? Where are the Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Franks, the Mamluks, and the Ottomans? They've all vanished into the pages of history. But the Jews are still in Hebron.

There's a joke that's told among Jews that lampoons the astonishing tenacity of the Jews. Question: What's the difference between a Rottweiler and a Jewish mother? Answer: Eventually, the Rottweiler lets go.

Of course in our world we're most likely to measure the influence a people in terms of their cultural, economic or scientific contributions. In that regard, the impact of the Jews is completely out proportion to their size in terms of population. Most people are aware that a large proportion of Jews have prospered financially, and that Jews are often found at the upper levels of business or professional life. But most people have only a vague inkling of the magnitude of Jewish accomplishment. We don't have time to explore this massive topic, but a few statistics will help to illustrate the point.

A recent survey of the world's venture capitalists by Deloitte and Touche compared various nations in terms of their levels of technological innovation. Tiny Israel ranked second only to the United States. Germany came out roughly tied with Israel even though it is ten times larger.

Another category of comparison among nations was the number of venture-backed companies that had been created. In the year 2008 Israel produced 483 such companies, while Germany produced about 100.

A study conducted at the renown Massachusetts Institute of Technology concluded looked at the accomplishments of recent graduate. It indicated that Jewish graduates were 5 times more likely to start technological enterprises than other MIT graduates.

The economist George Gilder has studied technology trends for more than 40 years. He estimates that while Jews are less than two tenths of a percent of the world population, they comprise roughly a quarter of the world's premiere capitalists and entrepreneurs.

Another way to trace Jewish contributions is to look at coveted prizes such as the Nobel Prize. In the second half of the 20th century 29 percent of all Nobel Prizes were awarded to Jews. Jews have also received an incomprehensibly large percentage of the prizes in specific fields of science. Jews won 51 percent of Wolf Foundation Prizes in Physics, 28 percent of Max Plank Medals, 38 percent of Dirac Medals for theoretical physics, 37 percent of the Heineman Prizes for Mathematical Physics, and 53 percent of the Enrico Fermi Awards.

Charles Murray conducted a wide-ranging study of human accomplishment. Using a complex calculus that was fed by dozens of historians, Murray concluded that the Jews of the world contributed roughly 25 percent of the notable intellectual accomplishment in the modern period.

Why have Jews been so abundantly productive in the fields of science and technology? One factor of course is intelligence. Not surprisingly, multiple studies of human IQ have confirmed that Jews not only tend to have higher IQs than other people, the proportion of out-performance rises as you go higher up the scale. Put another way, the number of Jews of genius level IQ is way out of proportion to any other ethnic group on earth. I know we're not supposed to make these kinds of comparisons in church or in any other context, but it seems to me they're relevant to the questions we're asking today: Are the Jews a blessed people? Have they been a blessing to the world?

We haven't even mentioned the spiritual contribution of the Jews. As Paul reminds us, we Christians are indebted forever to God's chosen people. Jesus' human ancestry is traced through the Jews. His coming of course is the most conclusive evidence of the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham. But we need to remember that the earliest Apostles and martyrs of the Church were all Jews. And that all of the books and letters of the Old and New Testaments were written by Spirit-filled Jews.

In spite of all these factors, there has been a disturbing tendency in the Church to underemphasize the importance of Jewish contributions to the life of faith. Worse than that, Christians through the ages have often actively participated in the persecution of the Jews. Christian anti-Semitism can be traced back to the early years of the Church, and is linked to some of the Church's most influential leaders. Obviously we don't have time to dig into this worthy subject, but it's helpful to recall a few examples from history.

John Chrysostom was the beloved Patriarch of Constantinople during the second half of the fourth century. He said this in one of his homilies:

Jews are the most worthless of men – they are lecherous, greedy, rapacious... they worship the devil. It is incumbent on all Christians to hate Jews. [Homily 1:3-6; 4:1]

In the year 415, Cyril, the Patriarch of Alexandria, attacked synagogues in his city with an armed force. He killed some, expelled the rest, and gave the victims' property to an angry mob.

Richard of England – the one known as "Lion-hearted" – expelled the Jews from England in 1189 and confiscated their property.

Thomas Aquinas, the foremost theologian of the Late Medieval Period, wrote these words in the year 1247:

It would be perfectly licit to hold the Jews, because of their crucifying our Lord, in perpetual servitude.

During the fifteenth century, Spain and Portugal used the institution of the Inquisition to legislate religious conformity. Jews were forced to become Catholics or face permanent exile.

During the seventeenth century Jews were driven out of Vienna, Frankfurt and Prague.

During the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jews in Russia and Poland were subjected periodically to various forms of persecution sponsored by the state church, by the state, and by local clergymen. The Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe were often places of extreme privation.

We all know the story of the Holocaust of the late 1930s and the early 1940s, when the Nazis exterminated six million Jews. What we tend to forget is that many of the Churches in Germany either closed their eyes what was happening, or, in some cases, actually participated in the campaign.

We'd all like to believe that the Church has learned the lessons of history, repented of its sins, and exorcised the spirit of anti-Semitism. But sadly, the evidence suggests otherwise. Many Christian denominations have joined forces with secular opinion-makers in the West to isolate and vilify the nation of Israel. For example, in 2004 and again in 2014, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA voted to engage in selective disinvestment of companies that do business with the state of Israel. The rationale given was that Israel was acting with extreme malice in its dealings with the Palestinians. Of particular concern to the General Assembly was the decision the Israelis made to build a wall in Jerusalem for the purpose of protecting its citizens from suicide bombers.

Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are very much alive in our world. Again, we don't have time to examine this topic in depth, but the trends are unmistakable. They're on display on a weekly basis at the United Nations where 46 percent of all the resolutions produced by the Human Rights Council have been directed against Israel. The trends are also on display in most of the countries of Europe. A 2013 survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights shows that almost a third of Europe's Jews have considered emigrating because of anti-Semitism.

What does all of this mean for us today? The lessons, I think, should be obvious I think to Jews and Christians alike. There are three of them.

The first lesson is that God has been faithful. He has fulfilled his promises to Abraham in ways that absolutely boggle the mind. To put it in the most politically-incorrect language I can muster: the Jews have been a greater blessing to the world than any other people on earth. No other people can compare with them. Their history and their contributions have been miraculous. God has been using them throughout history to bless the world.

The second lesson is that Jewish excellence too often has brought out the worst in people. Throughout history, Jewish accomplishment has tended to inspire envy and resentment. That's the ugly explanation for anti-Semitism. That's the main reason why even Christians who ought to know better struggle to get along with the children of Abraham. God help us if this church should ever participate, either actively or passively, in the persecution of the Jews.

And the third lesson is deeply relevant to our life here and now. It's that God's blessing isn't just for the Jews. That blessing extends now to everyone who has faith in Jesus. Abraham and Sarah are our spiritual parents, and all the promises that God made to them apply to us as well. God wants to use us to bless the world. God promises to use us to bless the world. As Lee reminded us last week, we don't have to be smart or rich or exceptional in any way. The only thing God requires of us is that we walk with him in faith. That means stepping out in obedience and moving in the direction the Spirit is leading us. It means making an effort to be a disciple even if you feel weak, and even if you sometimes fall flat on your face.

God has made us his children so we can bless his world. And the question we should be asking today as we come to the table isn't: "Is God faithful?" The question we should be asking is: "Do I trust him? Do I trust him enough to step out in obedience?"

God of Abraham and Sarah, we're amazed at your love for us. We're amazed at the power of your great name.

Some of us woke up today feeling discouraged and defeated. We doubt your power to transform our lives and make us productive for you. Send your Spirit to minister to our hearts. Help us to believe in the power of your blessing.

Some of us are hurting deeply and are wondering where you are. Work through our pain and work out your plan for our lives. Help us to trust you when your plan doesn't seem to make sense.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we worship your great name. We thank you for making us your beloved children. Take away everything in us that's getting in your way – everything that's keeping you from blessing us, and making us a blessing. Amen.