

BASIC BIBLE PRINCIPLES

GOD'S PROMISES TO ABRAHAM

Abram, whose name God changed to Abraham, is, after Jesus, the most important man in history. To him God made promises that are the basis of salvation to eternal life for all people. The Bible record of Abraham's life shows that his attitude to God's Word pleased God. He is the spiritual father of all who respond to God in faith as he did.

What promises did God make to Abraham?

The promises are detailed in Genesis chapters 12 to 22. They include four key points:

- a land—whose location and extent is clearly defined
- Abraham's descendants
- one special descendant
- blessing for all mankind.

We look at each in more detail.

The land

Abraham was called by God from Ur of the Chaldees to go to a land that God would show him (Gen. 12:1-3). When Abraham arrived in the land of Canaan God said, "Unto thy seed will I give this land" (vv. 5,7). That land is defined: "all the land which thou seest [from Bethel], to thee will I give it . . ." (13:15). It is further detailed as "this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates" (15:18). Genesis 15:19-21 lists the nations that inhabited "all the land of Canaan" (17:8).

Abraham's descendants

Abraham had two children. Ishmael is the ancestor of the Arab nations and Isaac is the ancestor of the Jewish nation. God promised blessing to both these children, but chose to make the inheritance of his covenant with Abraham through Isaac and his descendants (17:20,21). Indeed, when God changed his name from Abram to Abraham He described him as "a father of many nations" and promised him and his descendants through Isaac everlasting possession of the land of Canaan (17:4-8).

The Jews of Jesus' day valued their descent from Abraham: "We be Abraham's seed" (Jno. 8:33), they claimed. However, Jesus points out that true descent from Abraham depends on character: "If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham" (v. 39). Paul states in Romans 4:13-17:

"For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith . . . Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all, (as it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations) . . .".

Abraham's special descendant

When Abraham was called to offer Isaac as a sacrifice he obeyed. God's angel stopped the actual sacrifice and pronounced God's verdict on Abraham's actions:

"By Myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: that in blessing I will bless thee, and in

multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed My voice" (Gen. 22:16-18).

This final promise to Abraham confirms that Abraham would be a father of many nations. It suggests two kinds of descendants. Natural descendants are those "as the sand which is on the sea shore", and spiritual descendants are those "as the stars of the heaven". The spiritual descendants are those who show the faith of Abraham and receive the destiny promised him (Gal. 3:7; cf. also Dan. 12:2,3).

The promise also refers to a descendant who would "possess the gate of his enemies", that is, conquer them. The New Testament identifies this person as Jesus, "the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Mt. 1:1). Paul teaches, "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Gal. 3:16).

Blessing for all mankind

Abraham was also promised that "in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 22:18). The seed (descendant) that makes this possible is Jesus. The primary way in which Jesus brings blessing is through forgiveness of sins. The Apostle Peter, speaking to Jews, said,

"Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. Unto you first God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities" (Acts 3:25,26).

Following this, the Gentiles were offered salvation through belief in Jesus. This gives them access to the promises made to Abraham:

"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13,14).

The promise of the Spirit is that through belief and baptism into Jesus Christ we share in God's promises to Abraham:

"For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (vv. 26-29).

An opportunity for us

Abraham is described as "the heir of the world" (Rom. 4:13) and "the Friend of God" (Jas. 2:23). God's promises to him require that he will be raised from the dead at Jesus' return and inherit the Land of Promise. Those who have believed in Jesus, obeyed the gospel and displayed faith like Abraham will also inherit with him, as Jesus said:

"And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 8:11).