

The Covenant of Abraham (by John Piper)

In the beginning God the Father, through the agency of his eternal Son, created out of nothing (creation – *ex nihilo*) all that is not God by the word of his command; and moment by moment he holds in being all things by that same word of power so that everything which comes into existence is his peculiar creation. Therefore, God *owns* all things, has a *purpose* for all things, and on him all things *depend* absolutely. As the owner of the world he has the right to do with us as he pleases. What pleases him is the fulfillment of his purpose to fill the earth with the knowledge of his glory. Therefore, the full-time vocation of all God's creatures should be to glorify him by acknowledging his lordship and by living in complete, childlike dependence on his mercy to give us everything that is good for us.

But in Genesis 3 the story is told how our first parents became enamored by the possibility of not relying on God's merciful provision, not living for his glory, and not advancing his purpose in creation. Lured by Satan, they chose rather to reject God's loving counsel and to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and become like God. The moment of man's fall into sin was the moment when childlike dependence on the heavenly Father began to seem distasteful, uncomfortable, unfulfilling. And the fall was complete when the desire of man to rule his own life and promote his own glory became so strong that he scorned the wisdom and power and love of God by rejecting God's provision of abundant life. And with Adam fell the whole human race. We all come into the world with a nature that is prone to sin. From the dawn of human history through all generations the essence of sin has been self-reliance and self-exaltation. It is not merely the heinous crimes of men that inflame the righteous wrath of God, but also the seemingly innocent self-deification behind these crimes that robs God of his glory. Therefore, there is a terrible enmity between man in his natural condition and God. The natural heart will not submit to God ([Romans 8:7](#)), but seeks its own glory ([John 5:44](#)) and, therefore, deeply resists the call of God to turn and become like little children and enter the kingdom ([Matthew 18:3](#)). And from God's side, his righteousness will not allow him to be indifferent to the defamation of his glory, for he says, "How should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another" ([Isaiah 48:11](#)). Hence the terrible gulf and enmity between fallen man and holy God. And hence the helplessness of humanity under God's righteous condemnation.

One Man Through Whom to Bless the World

And now we arrive at a point in history which will prove to be of such tremendous importance as to shape the course of the world both in this age and the age to come. But, like many of God's mustard-seed size actions, it is obscure and seemingly insignificant. It is the kind of action scarcely anyone would have thought of who wanted to redeem the world, reclaim creation from the curse of sin, and fill the earth with God's glory. God zeroes in on one man, Abram, a worshipper of false gods ([Joshua 24:2, 3](#)) in the land of Ur, and says, with unbelievably far-reaching implications, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse, and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed" ([Genesis 12:1–3](#)). In completely sovereign grace God comes to this undeserving idolater and says, with life-creating authority, "I am going to bless you, and through you bring blessing to the whole world." And with that begins the history of the people of Israel.

To see how amazing this beginning is, contrast it with what might have been. For example, why didn't God send Christ into the world to die for sin and rise again in Genesis 12, instead of enduring the 2,000 year roller-coaster relationship of Israel's apostasy and repentance? Why didn't God then issue the Great Commission to go to all the nations, instead of dealing almost solely with Israel for two millennia? I raise these questions only that God's mysterious freedom might strike us. Remember he is not following someone else's script. He wrote the book! He could have designed redemptive history anyway he pleased. And, contrary to all human expectations, for his own wise purposes, God set his favor on a single man, Abram, and commenced an amazing 2,000 year history that would, in the fullness of time, bring forth Jesus Christ the Redeemer for all the world.

The main thing that I want to show this morning is that God's 4,000 year old relation to Abraham is of immense importance for your life as a believer today. Everything written about Abraham "was written for your instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures you might have hope" ([Romans 15:4](#)). To accomplish this, I have asked three questions concerning the covenant God made with Abraham. 1) What were the promises made to him in this covenant? 2) What conditions had to be met if these promises were to be realized? 3) Who are the heirs of these promises today? I will try to answer these from Scripture and show that the answers should make you very happy to follow Christ in the obedience of faith.

The Promises Made to Abraham

First, what promises did God make to Abraham? I find it helpful to group the promises into three categories. First, God promises a great posterity (this is why Abram's name was changed to Abraham in [Genesis 17:5](#)); it will be numerous, and will have a land all its own. [Genesis 12:2](#), "I will make of you a great nation . . . and make your name great." [Genesis 15:5](#), "Look toward heaven and number the stars if you are able to number them . . . So shall your descendants be" (cf. 13:16; 18:18). [Genesis 13:14](#), "Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land which you see I will give to you and to your descendants forever." [Genesis 15:18](#), "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates'" (cf. 12:7; 15:7; 17:8). That is the first group of promises: for a great posterity and a land to dwell in.

The second group of promises is more general and goes beyond posterity and land. In [Genesis 15:6](#) it says, "Abram believed the Lord, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." God justifies Abram because of his faith, and justification is an act of God full of promise. Ever since God had chosen this ungodly Aramean and promised to make him a great nation ([Genesis 12:1-3](#)), he had remained childless. The promise seemed hopeless ([Genesis 15:2](#)). But God, who delights in doing the humanly impossible, says to him in [Genesis 15:4, 5](#): "Your own son shall be your heir . . . Look toward heaven and number the stars if you are able to number them . . . So shall your descendants be." God is going to act *for* Abraham. Therefore, Abraham looks away from himself (in a grand reversal of Adam's sin) and trusts God to keep his word. That act of faith so honors the glory of God's trustworthiness and power and mercy that God responds with the incomparable gift of justification: he declares Abraham to stand righteous before him. Not that Abraham will never sin again. He will. But he has now been forgiven for all his sins, past and future, in the sense that God will not bring him into condemnation for them (cf. [Romans 4:1-8](#)).

But if there is now no condemnation for Abraham because of his free justification by faith, then we can see clearly that [Genesis 15:6](#) is full of *promise*. "God reckoned his faith to him for righteousness" means that God is not against him, but for him for the rest of his life and to all eternity. The way God expresses this exhilarating truth to Abraham in [Genesis 17:7](#) is by promising to be his God: "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you . . . *to be God to you* and to your descendants after you." If God is your God, he works for you with all his power, and so Abraham's justification by faith is a promise that God is for him, he will be God to him and work for him with great mercy and faithfulness. This is true both in this fallen age and in the age to come.

For example, near the end of his life Abraham sent his servant back to the land of his birth to find a wife from his own people for his son Isaac. When God led the servant straight to Rebekah and she was gracious to him, the servant bows and worships the Lord. Then he says in [Genesis 24:27](#), "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master, Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master." In other words, when God reckoned Abraham's faith for righteousness, he forgave all his sins and engaged to pursue him with goodness and mercy all his days.

That is a great promise. But it is not all. If God is an eternal God and all his power is at the disposal of his love for Abraham, then surely this implies the promise of resurrection and eternal joy with God. The Sadducees in Jesus' day did not believe in the resurrection of anyone. One day they query Jesus about this and he answers in [Matthew 22:31f.](#), "As for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living." The point of that quote of [Exodus 3:15](#) ("I am the God of Abraham . . . ") is that when the eternal, all-powerful creator is God to you, death cannot destroy your relation to him. Therefore, God's justification of Abraham by faith is full of promise: it means he is forgiven and freed from condemnation, and that God is his God and will work for him to bless him in this age and give him eternal life in the age to come. God is his shield and very great reward ([Genesis 15:1](#)). That is the second group of promises to Abraham.

The third group amounts to this: all this blessing promised to Abraham will be enjoyed someday by all the families of the earth. God's purpose is to bless the world with the blessings of Abraham. He is to be a conduit, not a cul-de-sac, of God's blessing. [Genesis 12:2, 3](#), "I will bless you . . . so that you will be a blessing . . . and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (cf. 18:18; 22:18). Therefore, even though God has begun his redemptive, reclaiming process with a single individual, he has in view the world. He has a plan, a clear purpose for the centuries, and it reaches even to us, as we will see in a moment.

The Conditions of the Promises

But before that, the second question we need to answer is, What were the conditions of the promises to Abraham? There is a good deal of confusion over this matter of whether the Abrahamic covenant is conditional or not. But the confusion is not necessary and arises from a false assumption, namely, that if a covenant is conditional it cannot be certain of fulfillment. Or to put it another way, if a person must meet certain conditions in order to benefit from God's promises, then the fulfillment of those promises cannot be irrevocable and sure. But that is not true. It is a false assumption based squarely on the conviction that man is autonomous and self-determining. But if, as [Ezekiel 36:27](#) says, God puts his Spirit in man and *causes* him to walk in his statutes (and thus fulfill the conditions of the covenant), then a

promise can be *both* conditional and certain of fulfillment. If God commits himself to work so that Abraham fulfills the conditions of the covenant promises, then there is no inconsistency in saying that the promises are sure, steadfast, irrevocable, *and* conditional.

This is exactly what we find in Genesis. First, in [Genesis 12:1–3](#) and [15:4, 5](#) the promises are made without any conditions being mentioned. They appear to be absolute and certain of fulfillment. But in [Genesis 22:16–18](#) we read that the fulfillment of the promises is conditional upon Abraham's obedience. He has just obeyed God in offering Isaac to him on the altar. The angel of the Lord stopped his hand and said, "'By myself I have sworn,' says the Lord, '*because you have done this* and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all of the nations bless themselves, *because you have obeyed my voice.*'" The promises will be fulfilled *because* Abraham obeyed God. Therefore, the fulfillment of the promises was conditional upon Abraham's obedience.

Another crucial text in this regard is [Genesis 18:19](#) where God says, "I have chosen Abraham, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, *so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.*" If the promises made to Abraham and his seed are to be fulfilled, then his household must keep the way of the Lord. The promises are conditional. But they are not uncertain. They were stated absolutely in [Genesis 12:1–3](#) and [15:4, 5](#). And here in [Genesis 18:19](#) the point is that God chose Abraham to charge his household in such a way that they will fulfill the conditions of the promises. The promises are both conditional and sure.

And no one should jump to the conclusion that this makes the covenant of Abraham a covenant of works. Works are deeds done in self-reliance to earn God's favor by showing oneself meritorious. But the obedience which Abraham had (though not perfect) was the inevitable outcome of his faith in God's gracious promise. He obeyed God and offered his only son Isaac on the altar not to earn God's favor, but because he was so confident in God's promise to give him posterity through Isaac ([Genesis 21:12](#); [Hebrews 11:17–19](#)) in spite of everything. Obedience is the necessary outcome of truly trusting in God's promises, and so obedience is made a condition of inheriting God's promises which are granted by grace and through faith. This means that the covenant of Abraham is just like the new covenant under which we live. For it too is conditional—not on works, but on the obedience of faith. [John 3:36](#) says: "He who does not *obey* the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him"; and [Hebrews 5:9](#), "Christ became the source of eternal salvation to all who *obey* him." The Covenant of Abraham and the New Covenant under which we live today are one covenant of grace, because in both gracious promises are made to sinners who receive them through faith—a faith which banks so completely on the wisdom and power and love of God that it inevitably obeys his commands.

The Heirs of the Promises

And that brings us finally to the question: Who are the heirs of the promises made to Abraham and to his seed? Who are the beneficiaries of the blessing of Abraham? In [Genesis 17:4](#) God says, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations." This seems to say that the seed of Abraham will not be restricted to the Jewish nation. He will father descendants who belong to many nations (cf. [Romans 4:17](#)). This is probably the way [Genesis 12:3](#) will be fulfilled: "In you all the families of the earth will be

blessed" (cf. [Galatians 3:8](#)). In other words, it is the seed of Abraham that will inherit his blessing ([Genesis 17:7](#)); the seed will include many nations ([Genesis 17:4](#)); and therefore, many nations or families will be blessed through Abraham ([Genesis 12:3](#)); many nations will be the heirs of his promises.

When we turn to the New Testament, things that were only hinted at in the Old Testament become very clear. Paul is confronted with the agonizing situation that many of his Jewish kinsmen have rejected Christ and are accursed under God's condemnation for unbelief. Yet these are the seed, the physical descendants, of Abraham. How can this be? Has the word of promise to Israel fallen? He gives his answer in [Romans 9:6–8](#): "It is not as though the word of God has fallen. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel; and not all are children of Abraham just because they are his descendants; 'but through Isaac shall your descendants be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants." Paul's answer is that God's promises to the descendants of Abraham have not failed, even though many Jews are unbelieving and therefore accursed, because the promises were never made to every physical descendant of Abraham. Just as Isaac, not Ishmael, was the child of promise, and Jacob, not Esau, was the child of promise, so also throughout Israel's history there has been a true remnant within Israel who are the heirs of the full covenant blessings. The rest are not the seed of Abraham because, even though they trace their physical descent to him, they do not share his faith and obedience. That is why John the Baptist said to the unrepentant Jews, "Do not say, 'We have Abraham as our father!'" ([Matthew 3:9](#)), and Jesus said to the Jews who rejected him, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did" ([John 8:39](#)). In other words, many Israelites (most Israelites) are not the seed of Abraham which will inherit the promises.

That did not make Paul happy. He loved his kinsmen, as we should. But Paul saw God's hand in it all: the unbelief of Israel meant the gateway into the covenant blessings was swung wide to the nations ([Romans 11:12](#)). And God granted to Paul to understand and make explicit what was hinted at in those chapters in Genesis. This is what Paul taught in Galatians 3:

The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed!" So then, those who have faith are blessed with faithful Abraham (vv. 8–9) . . . In Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham comes upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (v. 14) . . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring (seed), heirs according to the promise (vv. 28, 29).

Who then are the heirs of the precious and very great promises made to Abraham and to his seed? You are. To whom can it be said: Your sins are forgiven; God is for you; with all his power, goodness, and mercy he will pursue you all your life, and you will rise from the dead; your name will be great; your assembly as the stars of the heavens; you will possess the gates of your enemies, and the land of Israel and all the earth will be your inheritance; and you will fill the new world with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord? To whom can all this be said? To you, the children of Abraham through faith in Christ. "For all things are yours . . . whether the world or life or death or the present or the future, all (the promises!) are yours, for you are Christ's and Christ (the seed of Abraham) is God's ([1 Corinthians 3:21–23](#)). Amen.