

Open Heart, Open Bible

Genesis and Luke's Gospel

Linking Theme: Covenant

Passage for weekly reading (week 6):

Genesis ch.'s 18 – 24.

Covenant blessing = Covenant responsibility

This week's readings open with Abraham experiencing nothing less than a divine encounter. The three men are angelic visitors, and one of them is the Lord Himself in this guise, although they appear as three fairly ordinary men. It is clear from Abraham's reactions that he knows this is no usual meeting (Hebrews 13 v.2). V.10 confirms that one of them is speaking as of God Himself. The covenant is repeated in v.18, together with the response that the patriarch must make in v.19, the call to righteousness.

The contrast to righteousness is given by Sodom and Gomorrah, and Abraham's prayers for the people of these cities show God's reluctance to judge a people by destroying them. His intercessory pleas for the cities are coming from the heart of God anyway (an O.T. example of praying in the Spirit). Only when a people's heart is irrevocably set on evil will He finally judge them. It is a sort of worst-case scenario that requires worst-case treatment.

We are now left with only two angels (19 v.1) and, here again, Lot senses their holy presence (v.2). He was, don't forget, "a righteous man" (2 Peter 2 v.7), who hated the perversion around him, but was powerless to stem its tide. Jude v.7 refers to the eternal punishment that has befallen those who perished in the stream of molten sulphur. The sordid affair of Lot's daughters has reverberated down the centuries in its effects upon Israel as a nation – the Moabites and Ammonites were always hostile to God's people, and succeeded time and again in corrupting them with their idolatrous practices (Numbers 25 vs. 1-3; 1 Kings 11 vs. 1-6).

Ch. 20 recounts a similar incident to 12 vs.11-13, Abraham lying to protect Sarah. He is not yet perfect! The Lord intervenes directly via the dream given to Abimelech, and covers the situation to the extent that Abraham is allowed to pray for the king and his concubines. God honours the prayer. Perhaps then Abraham realised that he should fear God and not man! At last the child of promise is now born to Sarah, and the rather bitter laughter of 18 v.12 gives way to the joyous laughter of 21 v.6. The Lord affirms His promise to Hagar to make her son the father of a great nation, and supernaturally provides water for the two of them to

drink, at a time when Hagar had given up hope. Nevertheless, Ishmael's descendants would live in hostility to their brothers, as the word of God had said (16 v.12 and 25 v.18). (Ishmael is the father of the Arab nations – that “hostility” continues to be in obvious evidence today.) Abraham, having secured Abimelech's agreement to his possession of the well at Beersheba, finds respite there “for a long time”.

Having struggled to trust the Lord with his nearest and dearest, Abraham is now given the sharpest possible test. The wording of 22 v.2, and the command accompanying it, makes this chapter in Abraham's life a clear foreshadowing of the ultimate sacrifice of God Himself many centuries later in the person of Jesus. The first of Jehovah's compound names is also given to us as the narrative unfolds – Jehovah Jireh, the God Who provides (v.14). He provided the ram to be sacrificed in place of Isaac, and He later provided the Lamb whose death would be accepted in place of ours (John 1 v.29). Mount Moriah, the place where Abraham was told to go, is sited in the near vicinity of Golgotha, the “Place of the Skull”, where Jesus was crucified. It is also the exact location of what later became the site of Solomon's Temple (2 Chronicles 3 v.1), the place where David had vowed that he would not sacrifice to the Lord that which would cost him nothing (2 Samuel 24 v.24). Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son of promise, but the Lord was simply looking for his obedience. It is the same for us. The actual cost has already been met – as John Newton said in one of his hymns, “'tis mine to obey, 'tis His to provide”!

The blessings promised to Abraham are now made the subject of the divine oath, spoken out in v.16. The covenant promise has passed from conditional blessing, to a God-given guarantee. God will watch over the outworking of His word, and no failure on Abraham's part, or on the part of his descendants, will prevent the Lord from fulfilling it. It has entered into the realm of Messianic prophecy, which God will fulfil irrespective of human cooperation or failure. The word to Abraham actually carried this sort of weight from the beginning (ch.12), but God awaited the offering of Isaac to declare His absolute commitment to bless “all nations on earth” through our spiritual forefather. This is a wonderful example of divine/human interaction in the outworking of the eternal plan.

The main point in the record of Nahor's sons by Milcah is to note that Bethuel becomes the father of Rebekah, introducing her before the account of ch.24. In this narrative, we read of the journey of Abraham's chief servant to find a wife for Isaac. The story is a lovely illustration of God's clear guidance given to a faithful man on a mission for his master: “**I being in the way, the Lord led me**” (24 v.27 A.V.) Abraham has the satisfaction of seeing his son of promise marrying the wife of the Lord's choice before he dies.

Food for thought / discussion / prayer

1) Coming into covenant relationship with the living God may bring us into great blessing but it also carries much responsibility – from those to whom much has been given, much will be required (Luke 12 v.48). The blessings spoken over Abraham’s life amounted to a huge responsibility in the things of God (as Noah before him). Much has been written on the comparison between him and Lot, his nephew. Lot continued to have a heart for God, but was powerless in his chosen situation. He was “under the circumstances” rather than on top of them. What is our approach to life? Are we “under” our circumstances, or are we learning that we can “reign” in Christ Jesus? (Romans 5 v.17). How can we “reign”?

2) The testing by God of Abraham (Gen.22) is one of the best known passages in the O.T. because of its obvious similarity to the self-sacrifice of God Himself in Jesus. For the first time, the Lord gives His oath as the divine underwriting of the covenant promises already made to the patriarch. What is the difference between the covenant and the oath, from God’s point of view? Why should an oath be necessary? Does this oath have any bearing on us, as New Covenant believers? (See Hebrews 6 vs.13 – 20).

3) Another aspect of the testing of Abraham is that, having been blessed, he will be tested, so that the blessing is seen to be genuine. It is the same for anyone who would live the life of faith (Job 23 v.10; 1 Peter 1 v.7). The Lord wants to reproduce the life of Jesus in and through us. Nothing must stand between us and Him, not even our firstborn son (see Matthew 10 vs.37–39). Am I willing for that? Are you?

Next week’s passage: Genesis 25 – 30