

Chapter 2 – God Builds a Nation¹

Since human beings have proved in Chapter 1 that even the best of them quickly turn away from God's best for them and choose what seems like a good idea at the moment, God now adopts a plan to build a community of people as a demonstration of what it looks like to belong to God. "Community" is a better term than "nation," since we usually associate the word "nation" with a certain place, and, although God does promise them a place to live, this community is always the people of God no matter where they are.

Abram demonstrates his trust in God's promise by leaving the place his father had chosen for them to live and taking his family and all his possessions to, as God said, "the land I will show you." This combination of trust and obedience to God is called "faith."

What does God promise Abram?

We aren't told how Abram knew about God. Since all the other religions in the area at the time involved multiple gods, we don't even know if we are supposed to think that Abram knew there was only one God.

When the text says, "God had said to Abram," what do you think Abram experienced? Have you ever had an experience that you would regard as God's "speaking" to you? What was that like?

God does still "speak" to people today and ask them to go in directions "that God will show" them.

What might God be asking you to leave behind to do something when you don't know the outcome will be?

The promise of land.

Abram generously gives his nephew Lot a choice of where to settle and Lot chooses what appears to be the best land. But Abram's generosity does not mean that God's promise of land for his descendants is threatened.

Many people see the good things in life as a finite amount of "stuff." If they give some away, they fear that there will not be enough for them and their descendants. What about you? Do you sometimes feel that way?

The promise of many descendants

¹ This chapter contains selections from Genesis, chapters 12 – 35 with some sentences of interpretation of this story from the Letters to the Romans and to the Hebrews (New Testament). Chapter 2 covers the basic story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You will sometimes see these three men called "the patriarchs," which means the "original fathers" of God's chosen people.

When Sarai is not able to have children, she and her husband adopt the cultural practice of surrogate parenting. However, unlike today, it is necessary for Abram to have sex with the surrogate, who is a slave that they picked up in Egypt in the course of their travels, and who lives right in the camp with them. God didn't tell them NOT to do that, but it turns out to create a number of problems, including the mistreatment of Hagar, the slave. Abram and Sarai do not behave justly in this situation. God intervenes twice to save Hagar and her son Ishmael proving God's concern for everyone, not just "the chosen ones." At the bottom of the page the word "Sovereign" is defined as "the fact that God has complete control over all things." For centuries Christians have disagreed over exactly what this means.

Do you think that God's "sovereignty" means that God CAUSES everything directly? People in your group will probably disagree about this and that's fine. There isn't a solution that will satisfy everyone, so don't spend too much time on this.

God's faithfulness is demonstrated by Sarah's having a son, Isaac, in their old age (or as the writer of Hebrews puts it "as good as dead.") But no sooner have the readers of this story breathed a sigh of relief, than God orders Abraham to kill Isaac as a sacrifice with the chilling echo on a mountain "that I will show you." Abraham obeys (we're not told whether Sarah was consulted) and prepares to kill Isaac (we're not told what Isaac thought about this when he finally figured it out), but at the last minute the angel ("angel" means messenger) of God stops the sacrifice and explains that God didn't want Isaac killed. God just wanted Abraham's obedience no matter what it cost him. The text adds the interpretation that "God will provide" (in this case a sheep in place of Isaac).

Sometimes when we obey what we believe God wants us to do, it doesn't look like God is "providing" for us. At other times, we see clear evidence of God's provision.

The story does not say that every time we obey God and do something hard it means that God is "testing" us. Sometimes, though, it might seem (usually in hindsight) that a hard time was a kind of "test."

Your thoughts on this?

The promise of blessing

Jacob appears to be a strange choice of the twin sons of Rebekah and Isaac to be the one through whom God will keep the promise of blessing to Abraham's descendants. He's the younger of the two; that means that he is not entitled to much of an inheritance. He's a "mama's boy;" in that culture not necessarily a

good thing. He's a trickster who manipulates his hungry brother and lies to his blind father.² His manipulating ways make his brother Esau so angry that Jacob has to leave home in a hurry to save his life. Later Christian interpretation will use God's choice of Jacob over Esau as an illustration of God's freedom to do what God chooses, regardless of human traditions and preferences. In this story, God had a plan for the role Jacob would play in the unfolding drama.

Have you ever seen God apparently blessing someone who didn't "deserve" it? Do any of us "deserve" God's blessing?

Jacob's wrestling match with "a man" who turns out to have been God, and Jacob's new name, "Israel," has been interpreted several different ways. Sayings often repeated by folks in Alcoholics Anonymous include this one: "Don't quit before you get your miracle."

What do you make of this story?

Thoughts on Christian maturity

As we grow in faith(fullness) we find that maturity does not result in an easy life with no complications. God keeps calling us to go out on a limb to be and do what God will show us (but not ahead of time). It reduces our anxiety if we learn to look for God's provision instead of assuming that God is not on the job. At the very beginning of this chapter God said that not only would Abraham receive blessings, but also that other people would receive blessings through Abraham. The old saying, "We are blessed to be a blessing," is (in one sense) true of those who respond to God's call to follow "where I [God] will show you." We learn from THE STORY to hang onto God and keep wrestling until we receive our true identity from the only one who really knows who we are: the One who created and called us.

² The favoritism that Isaac and Rebekah show toward their boys makes this what Diana and David Garland call one of the *Flawed Families of the Bible*. (Brazos Press, 2007).