



April 27, 2025
The Abrahamic Covenant

Group Study: The Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:1-3)

Discussion Questions

1. What does God's call to Abraham teach us about faith and obedience?
2. How is the promise to Abraham not just for him but for “all the families of the earth”?
3. What are some modern examples of people being called out of familiar places to trust in God's promises? Has this happened to you?
4. How does this covenant help us understand our identity as God's people today?
5. What does it mean for us today to “be a blessing” to all nations?

—

Good Faith Bible Study

Kathy and Nathan Maxwell

April 27, 2025

"The Abrahamic Covenant"

Genesis 12:1-3

<https://goodfaithmedia.org/bible-studies/>

“The gracious God’s broad new strokes to bless the earth come suddenly and brilliantly upon the canvas of sacred history.” Buried 200 pages deep into his commentary on Genesis, the notable Old Testament interpreter Bruce Waltke pens not only a memorable expression, but also really manages to hit the nail on the head. It truly is as sudden as it is brilliant. One moment, Abram is, well, just some guy – a footnote in some Chaldean family tree. And then, in the span of three verses, we zoom in on Abram, flip on the spotlight, and witness the transformative call God places on his life.

It's a narrative lightning bolt, and the effect reverberates to the ends of scripture. Jump ahead – way, way ahead – to the book of Acts, and there you'll find serious discussion among the early Christ followers about what it means exactly to be counted among Abraham's descendants. If you're listening to this podcast and consider yourself among that community of Christ followers, then you, too, are in the direct line of sight of that sudden and brilliant moment. It's a remarkable thing to ponder, really – especially since it all goes down before Abram even has a chance to utter a single word in the story.

But as worthwhile as it is to stop and appreciate the singular nature of the Abrahamic covenant – to reflect empathetically on the experience of such a life-altering encounter with God's calling – the focus of this lesson supplement is really more on the promise of divine blessing. Waltke's turn of phrase here is equally exceptional: "the gracious God's broad new strokes to bless the earth." It's not simply that covenants are a big deal in the Bible, and that God's covenant with Abraham is one of those "load bearing" parts of the biblical metanarrative. Yes, in these few verses God does initiate the enduring trajectory of the divine-human relationship, and well, that is a big deal. But the language of God's call to Abraham also sets some guardrails on the role that Abraham and his descendants were destined to play in that redemptive history. It really is crucial for us to understand what's happening in Genesis 12:3 in particular, and to remain tethered to the fundamental parameters it sets out, if we want to pull off something like a Christian life lived well.

To get there, we're going to wander into the grammatical weeds a tiny bit. Don't worry, no linguistic tyranny, "I'm doing well – not good," "i before e" sort of thing. We just want to unpack the expression that the NRSV translates, "... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). What exactly does that mean?

Well, we already know from the lesson that some form of the word "bless" occurs five times in the span of these three verses – which, as it turns out, is just as many times as all the preceding chapters combined. So "blessing" is a key concept. Just as an aside, the renowned Old Testament interpreter David Clines believed that the central theme of the entire Torah – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – was essentially the promise of divine blessing. But what did the ancient writers mean by blessing?

In its most basic sense, "blessing" communicated the numeric increase of fruitfulness. No, we're not talking about bubble gum with longer lasting flavor, and it was a little more of a whole-human concept than a good salary. Blessing was really anything that amounted to more of the power of life – a harvest, an increase of the herd, a spouse, the birth of a child, even the establishment of a good reputation – whatever meant the tribe could thrive for another generation. So, while we're not suggesting anything in the orbit of a "prosperity gospel," underneath the word "bless" there is some notion of the divine prospering of human life. The intended recipients of this blessing are all the "families" – or tribes, peoples or kin groups of the earth.

So, let's just register the point, then: From the first inkling of the Bible's covenantal story, God is ultimately up to a good thing in the world – to give life. And that blessing is meant for, well, everybody. The covenantal story remains tethered to this ultimate aim, and it's truly an unstoppable force in the narrative. At the end of Genesis, Joseph will even see it in the treachery of his brothers: "As for you," he responded, "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Genesis 50:20). The Gospel of John draws a similar conclusion about the cross: "For God so loved the world that he

gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). This point, well, I know it’s an obvious thing to say. But sadly we have drifted from this ultimate aim a time or two since God started everything with Abraham. As you consider the habits of your faith, and observe the practiced Christianity in your community, it’s worth asking – and re-asking: What does this have to do with giving life to everybody?

And that leads us to our last little linguistic detail. Like most languages, English verbs have a “voice” aspect. In the active voice, the subject is doing the action of the verb, like “chased” in the sentence, “The dog chased the squirrel.” In the passive voice, however, the subject receives the action of the verb, as in, “The squirrel was chased by the dog.” (Don’t worry – no squirrels were harmed in the making of this example.) Anyway, the Hebrew of the Old Testament has a third option, called the reflexive voice. This is where the subject is doing the action to itself – something like, “The dog was chasing itself.” (If you must know, the dog has since retired from its chasing career without ever having caught a squirrel or its own tail.)

The tricky thing about Genesis 12:3 is that the verb “bless” could either be passive or reflexive – and there’s not really a decisive way to know which is correct. So it could mean something like, “... and all the families of the earth will be blessed by you.” But we could also just as well translate it as, “... and through you all the families of the earth will bless themselves.” This ambiguity has occasioned a bit of discussion about how the language of the covenant actually imagines human roles. What is Abraham’s agency in God’s gift of blessing? Likewise, what part do “all the families of the earth” play, and how tightly coupled is their role to Abraham and his descendants?

As you might have already guessed, there are a number of competing perspectives in that discussion. Your own perspective on the matter is not inconsequential to how you perceive the ultimate aims of your own faith, and so how you go about practicing it day in and day out. For the moment, however, our goal is much smaller. We just want to point out that no matter how you translate the sense of Genesis 12:3, God’s promise of blessing is in some fashion mediated through Abraham, and Abraham’s descendants inherit this role. Put another way, covenantal thinking understands the people of God as conduits through which God gives life to every tribe. John Goldingay, one of the Baptist tradition’s most beloved Old Testament interpreters, puts it like this: “What is clear here is that God’s ‘choosing’ or ‘election’ of Abraham is not designed ultimately to exclude other peoples but to include them. Belonging to the non-elect does not imply belonging to the anti-elect.”

The first few verses of Genesis 12 suggest that God intends to work through you to give life to everybody. That’s the way it’s always been, from the very first syllable of the covenantal metanarrative. At both the individual and corporate level, Christian practice has sometimes drifted from this fundamental anchor, and the result has always been brokenness, violence and death. If you find yourself participating in something, it’s worth asking: Am I acting as a means through which God can bless all the families of the earth? You might be tempted to think that’s way too lofty talk – you’re just some person and nobody in particular. Maybe you’ve got a track record for screwing up pretty hard on the whole “servant of God” thing. But don’t forget: It wasn’t any different for Abraham, and the ripple effect of your faithfulness, your willful belief in God’s grace, could be no less consequential.

