

## Summary for Session 4: The Patriarchs Part 1

Prep work: Genesis 12-24

DVD: Jeff introduces this session by defining “Patriarchs” as those men God used to establish the nation of Israel, starting with Abraham and continuing from generation to generation through Jacob and his sons. The Original Covenant with Adam and Eve was an implicit familial relationship that was broken at the Fall. Since the Fall, God has reached down to restore that original relationship with a series of covenants. The one He establishes with Abraham will extend throughout the rest of the Bible and even to us today. For Abraham; however, this Covenant is strengthened over time as he learns to trust God.

The end of the Early World sees the peoples scattered over the earth and speaking different languages. God calls Abram (later renamed “Abraham”) from his family in Ur (later Babylon, modern-day Iraq) to leave everything and travel West (Note that Adam and Eve were sent to exile in the East; this directional symbolism will be a reoccurring theme in the Bible). Abram is from the line of Shem, whom Noah blessed. The Book of Joshua later notes that Abram's family were pagans, but God called him out of that country and from his kinsman to give him Canaan (Joshua 24:2-3). At the time God calls him, Abram's wife, Sarai, is barren and advanced in years (as is Abram). They take their nephew, Lot, with them as they travel, and Jeff notes that this is Abram's “insurance policy” as it were, since he has no children of his own. Even though God has promised to “make a great nation of him” and give Canaan to his descendants, Abram is showing some distrust in God by not completely obeying God's command to leave everything behind (Genesis 12:1,2,7). Jeff asks us how often we find ourselves doing the same—we just have to have our own safety nets, our own backup plans. Jeff also takes some time to describe this Promised Land Abram is called to: Canaan. Canaan is a strategic property in the Fertile Crescent. Though it is only about the size of New Jersey, it was the bottle-neck of an important trade route between the north (Assyria) and the south (Egypt). Jeff says it is as if God was offering Abram control of the Internet, to put it in a modern perspective. He also notes that 95% of the action of the Bible will take place in this small piece of land. Besides promising Abram the land of Canaan for his descendants, God also promises Abram a kingdom (royal name) and worldwide blessing through his descendants (Genesis 12: 2-3). These promises will be fulfilled in the course of the story of salvation. The main problem continues to be that Sarai is barren—where will these descendants come from?

A famine strikes the land, so Abram and his group go from Bethel down to Egypt to find food. While there, Abram decides to tell everyone that Sarai is his sister, rather than his wife, so he will not be killed if they decide to take her for their own. Jeff calls this Abram's “God helps those who help themselves” philosophy—another sign he has not learned to fully trust God. The pharaoh is angry when he finds out about Abram's deceit, and Abram heads back to Bethel. Jeff points out that when you stray from God's Will, as Abram did, you should go back to the place where you departed from the way; in Abram's case, Bethel.

At Bethel, Abram and Lot choose directions to settle in and separate; Abram is now

dependent on God to fulfill His promise. When Lot is captured during a tribal war, Abram goes and rescues him, continuing to look after his nephew.

A king named Melchizedek (his name means “my king is righteous”), ruler of Salem (later known as Jerusalem) goes to meet Abram and blesses him. The Bible notes that Melchizedek was a “priest of God Most High” and that he brought “bread and wine” as part of the offering. Jeff remarks that Melchizedek was from the line of Shem and that some Bible scholars even hypothesize that he might have been Shem, himself, conferring the blessing Noah gave him directly to Abram! Melchizedek is referenced later in the Bible (Psalm 110:4, Hebrews 7:1-3) as the first priesthood and the one all should model themselves after. Even David gave bread and wine as Melchizedek did when bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and offering blessing and thanksgiving, so this somewhat obscure figure plays significantly into our idea of the priesthood even in the Church today.

Abram goes back to the promise God has made him and asks how it will be possible when he has no children—shall his servant, Eliezer, be his heir? At this point, God deepens His promise: “Count the stars, if you can. Just so...shall your descendants be” (Genesis 15:5). Jeff observes that the stars are only visible in the darkness; when it is daylight, one must take it on faith that they are there, just as Abram had to have faith that God would fulfill His promise. At this point, God makes a formal covenant with Abram, who prepares a sacrificial offering to seal the covenant. Jeff pauses the story to go into what a covenant actually means and the symbolism attached to it. Frank Moore Cross, Jr, a noted Biblical scholar, observed that all covenants extend the bonds of kinship. To make a covenant with another means to become family with them. Hence, when God offers covenants with His people, He is binding them as family to Himself. Original Sin was a breaking of this family bond, and God will continually try and restore this relationship with us through Covenant. The blood sacrifice to seal the covenant is symbolic of the blood of families. Two parties form a covenant; the sacrifice is split in two and the pieces placed separately to represent these parties. The parties walk between the two pieces where the blood of the sacrifice has pooled, signifying that the parties now share that blood (are of the same family). The covenant is now sealed. Jeff observes that the major modern-day covenant, marriage, echoes this symbolism, as the bride and groom walk between the two families, joining them into one by their union.

As an interesting note, Abram has a vision during this sealing of the Covenant in which God tells him that his descendants will be enslaved in a foreign land for 400 years, but will be released and sent away with great wealth (Genesis 15: 13-14). This foreshadows the Israelites' bondage in Egypt for 400 years, and the Passover with the Egyptians sending them off with “articles of silver and gold and...clothing” (Exodus 12:35-36). While it seems Abram has grown to trust God more, there is still one more “insurance policy” he and Sarai decide to pursue: Hagar, Sarai's (Egyptian) maid. Sarai, exasperated by her inability to have children, persuades Abram to lie with her maid and get her children this way (the language of this is resonant of Eve persuading Adam to eat the forbidden fruit). Abram does, and Hagar gives birth to Ishmael. While it is not God's plan to use Ishmael to fulfill the Covenant with Abram, He does promise that Ishmael's

descendants will be “so numerous...that they will be too many to count” (Genesis 16:10). Indeed, Ishmael is considered the father of the Arab nations, and Jeff points out that Islam, which comes out of the Arab nations, sees God as master rather than the Judeo-Christian view of God as father.

God deepens His Covenant with Abram further with the physical sign of circumcision, the changing of Abram and Sarai's names, and a specific heir promised: a son, Isaac.

Abram's name will be changed from “exalted father” to “father of many nations”:

Abraham. Sarai's name (“my princess”) will be changed to Sarah (“princess of many”) (Genesis 17:5,15).

While the couple await this promised son, Abraham finds out that God is angry with the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their extreme sinfulness, and is ready to destroy the cities totally. Abraham intercedes on their behalf, securing God's promise to withhold His plans should He find righteous people there. Perhaps Abraham is so anxious because his nephew, Lot, lives in Sodom, but God is still watching over Lot and saves his family from destruction.

Finally, the long-awaited son is born. Isaac grows and when he is yet a boy, God calls Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice to God. Abraham, now trusting God completely, takes Isaac and goes to Moriah (later the site of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, now close to where the Dome of the Rock—a Muslim site—stands). When Isaac asks where the sacrifice is, Abraham responds “God himself will provide the lamb for the holocaust” (Genesis 22:8). This faith is rewarded in the ram God points out for Abraham to sacrifice instead of Isaac, but is also a foreshadowing of the Passover Lamb God will provide at the Exodus and the Lamb of God, Jesus.

The story rounds out for this session with Isaac's marriage to Rebekah, and Jeff observes that the Bible notes Isaac married Rebekah, then loved her (Genesis 24:67).

This is the traditional Jewish focus of marital love—to love the one you marry. This seems strange for us, since the modern focus is to marry the one you love, but considering marriage was much more of a covenant between families in ancient times, it makes moral sense that once your family has decided whom you should marry, you should “love the one you're with” to quote the song. The Patriarchs will continue to marry and have children, fulfilling God's promise to Abraham.