

# NOTES



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## Chapter III

# Three Promises that Changed the World

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UNDERSTANDING

## WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The Bible next introduces a man who will eventually become one of the most important figures in salvation history: Abram, who will come to be known as Abraham. So critical is Abram's role in salvation history that the New Testament calls him "the father of all who believe" (Rom 4:11). As we watch God lead this good man to total trust and heroic faithfulness, we will learn what it really means to walk with God and entrust our entire lives to His plan.

### Sidebar - All in the Family

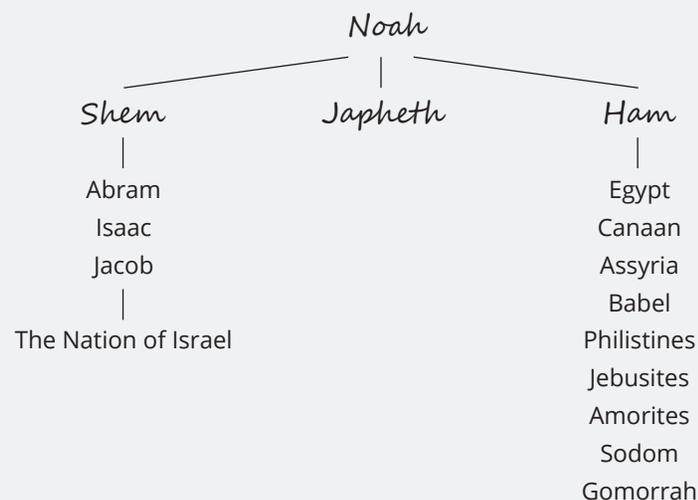
In setting up the story of Abram, Genesis chapter 10 gives us the most extensive genealogy in the Bible so far: a long list of seventy names. Commonly known as the "Table of Nations," this genealogy traces the descendants of Noah through his three sons: Japheth, Ham, and Shem. It serves as one of the most foundational passages in the Bible for understanding the rest of salvation history. Many of the nations that will come from these seventy descendants will play an important role in the drama that unfolds in the rest of Scripture.

Let's take a closer look at two important themes found in this genealogy. Ancient Israelites would have been horrified by many of the names and locations in the segment of Noah's genealogy that lists the descendants of his rebellious son Ham (Gn 10:6-20). While Abram and the nation of Israel were descendants of Noah's faithful first-born son, Shem, the names listed as the descendants of Ham represented some of Israel's most hated enemies.

Imagine how an ancient Israelite would have felt reading Genesis 10:6, which describes Ham as having two sons named Egypt and Canaan. The first son is the patriarch of a nation that would one day enslave Israel for 400 years; the latter fathers a nation that would come to oppose Israel with all its might when the Israelites return to the Promised Land.

Moreover, Genesis 10:10-11 associates Babel and Assyria with the line of Ham. Assyria vanquished ten of the twelve tribes of Israel and sent them into exile in 722 B.C., while Babel later became the home of the Babylonians, who destroyed Jerusalem and carried off the remaining two tribes into slavery in 586 B.C. The genealogy goes on to list other Israelite enemies that flow from Ham's line, including the Philistines (Gn 10:14), the Jebusites and Amorites (Gn 10:16), and Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn 10:19).

This would have been a difficult genealogy for the ancient Israelites to read, with so many of their enemies gathered into this one, long family tree.



The genealogy, however, serves a second purpose, as it points to an even deeper truth. Long before these warring nations were *enemies*, they were actually *relatives*. So the genealogy would remind readers that these foreign adversaries were not just foes of Israel, but also brothers and sisters—distant cousins in the broken family of Noah. Genesis 10 thus might have challenged the Israelites to view these nations not with vengeance and violence, but ultimately with love and mercy and a desire for healing and restoration in the divided family of man.

### Tower of Babel

The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 immediately precedes the account of the Tower of Babel in chapter 11. This tragic story serves as a prime example of the rebellion and division of the human family. Here we see an early city being built “in the land of Shinar” (Gn 11:2)—an ominous note, since this region was last mentioned as being occupied by the rebellious descendants of Ham (Gn 10:10).

Now, worse things are about to happen here. In Genesis 11:4, the people of Babel say, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” Their desire to build a city in order to make a name for themselves is reminiscent of the way Cain’s descendants built a city in order to glorify their own name, as we saw earlier in Genesis 4:17.

The passage takes on an even more ominous meaning when we understand that the Hebrew word for “name” is *shem*—the name of Noah’s first-born son and heir. As the eldest son of Noah, Shem would have been given the role as head patriarch of the covenantal family when his father died. But now, the descendants of Ham in Babel seek to make a name, a “shem,” for themselves. This does not mean that they are striving for fame. Rather, they are rejecting the blessed line of Shem and wanting to set up a ruler for themselves. We have already seen in the previous chapter that Ham himself tried to overthrow Shem when he “looked upon his father’s nakedness.” Now Ham’s descendants continue their father’s rebellion as they reject God and the blessed line of Shem, striving to make a name, a “shem,” for themselves.

What’s more, the people in Babel put themselves in the place of God, using God-like language reminiscent of Genesis 1:26 where God said, “Let us make man in our image after our own likeness.” Three times the people in Babel say, “Let us make bricks.... Let us build a city.... Let us...make a name for ourselves” (Gn 11:3-4, emphasis added). They desire to build a rebellious, secular civilization united around their own name and the tower they are building. They are truly building “the city of man.” But God comes back with a final “let us” as he confuses their language and scatters the people: “Come, let us go down and confuse their language, that they may not understand each other’s speech” (Gn 11:7).

Genesis 10 and 11 clearly underscore the division of the human family the results from breaking covenant with God. But during the rebellion of Ham's descendants, at least some in the godly line of Shem continue to follow the Lord all the way down to the tenth generation, in which we meet a man named Abram, who is dwelling in "Ur of the Chaldeans."

### Three Promises that Changed the World

Here, salvation history takes a dramatic step forward as God calls this man to follow Him in faith. "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (Gn 12:1).

God desires to reunite all the nations into one covenant family through Abram and his descendants, which He will accomplish in three stages, summed up in the three promises. These three promises provide an outline for the rest of salvation history, a table of contents for the rest of the Bible: "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 by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gn 12:2-3).

These three promises not only have great meaning for Abram; they prophetically point toward the most significant turning points in all of human history:

1. First, God promises that Abram will become a *great nation*.
2. Second, God says he will make Abram's *name* great.
3. And finally, God foretells how the *entire* human family will be blessed through Abram.

Let's take a closer look at these three promises, and we will see how Genesis 12 is God's answer to the problem of humanity's division in Genesis 10 and 11.

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#### The Three Promises to Abram

Promise:                      Fulfilled by:

Great Nation   ←→   Moses

Great Name   ←→   David

World-wide Blessing   ←→   Jesus

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The promise that Abram will become a *great nation* points to the Exodus story, where his descendants, the Israelites, will be delivered out of slavery in Egypt. At the beginning of the book of Exodus, Israel had become a great and numerous people, but without a land of their own. It is only when Moses leads the Israelites to freedom and to the Promised Land that they can finally rule themselves and become a great nation, thus fulfilling this first promise made to Abram.

The second promise about God giving Abram a *great name* will be fulfilled in King David's dynasty, when the universal importance of the kingdom of Israel will be established for the ages. In the Scriptures, this "great name" is royal language referring both to personal fame and to possessing a name that endures through the centuries, because it is associated with a lasting dynasty (see Ps 72:17). To reign as king in Jerusalem, one had to be a descendant of David and possess David's royal family *name*. This point is reinforced when God first established David as king and said to him, "I will make for you a great *name*" (2 Sm 7:9)—thus showing how David's dynasty is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abram to make his family's "name great" (Gn 12:2).

The third and final promise is that of a *worldwide blessing*, in which “all the families of the earth” will be blessed through Abram’s descendants. In other words, God will use Abram’s family as His instrument for bringing blessing to all the nations on earth. This promise will ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who, while living in the Promised Land as a royal descendant of David, will become the savior of the world, reuniting the scattered and divided families of the earth back into the one universal covenant family of God.

A great nation. A royal dynasty. And becoming the instrument for bringing God’s blessing to the whole world. That’s a lot to be promised in one short conversation with the Lord!

But Abram must go on a long journey if his family is to receive these great blessings. And the journey is not merely a physical one. True, Abram will need to leave his home in Mesopotamia and travel to an unfamiliar land in Canaan. But the more challenging journey Abram needs to make will take place deep inside him—a *spiritual* journey of walking ever more closely with the Lord.

Put yourself in Abram’s sandals. He is asked by God to leave his land and his extended family to go to a far away, unfamiliar place. What’s more, this new country would not be expected to be a warm and welcoming one for Abram, since it is a land inhabited by the Canaanites—descendants of Ham and rivals to Abram’s great ancestor Shem (Gn 12:5, 10:6).

Nevertheless, Abram takes this big leap of faith, trusting in God’s plan for him. At the age of 75, he uproots his family, travels to this new land and worships God there, building altars for the Lord and calling on God’s name (Gn 12:4-9).

But this is just the first step of Abram’s walk with the Lord. All throughout his life, Abram will be invited by God to take increasingly larger steps of faith. Through various trials and ordeals, Abram will learn to surrender more of his life to the Lord and to trust ever more in God’s care for his life.

We see those tests beginning as soon as he arrives in Canaan. Let’s consider some of the trials that Abram faced in his early days in the land and observe how these ordeals challenge Abram to trust in the Lord like never before.

After arriving in this land, Abram faces his first unexpected ordeal. A great famine breaks out, and he has to put his family through another major relocation, this time to Egypt—where another rival descendant of Ham dwells (see Gn 12:10, 10:6).

Imagine the soul-searching Abram must have done. Back in the land of Ur, he convinced his family that God has called him to move to a foreign country where he will be blessed. And yet, upon their arrival, they experience famine, not blessing. His family may have been tempted to question the authenticity of Abram’s calling, or to question the goodness or the power of God. Abram himself may have begun to wonder why things didn’t turn out the way he had expected.

But the famine is only the beginning of Abram’s troubles. He faces a second and more personal trial after he arrives in Egypt, when Pharaoh finds Abram’s wife, Sarai, attractive and desires her for himself. This not only poses a problem for Abram’s marriage but puts his own life at risk: He is worried that Pharaoh will have Abram killed and take Sarai for himself (Gn 12:12).

In fear for his life, Abram does not disclose the truth to Pharaoh

about his marriage; instead, he tells Pharaoh that Sarai is his sister (a partial truth, since Sarai is Abram's half-sister; see Gn 20:12). As a result, Pharaoh looks favorably upon Abram and showers him with many gifts, including sheep, oxen, asses, donkeys, and male and female servants (Gn 12:16)—all for the sake of Sarai. These worldly gifts appear to be a great boon for Abram at first—but as we will see later in the narrative, they prove to be a snare, for among these gifts given to Abram is woman named Hagar, an Egyptian servant with whom Abram will commit adultery (Gn 16).

Abram also experiences several other trials, including division within his family, a dispute about his land, his nephew Lot getting into trouble, and Abram going to battle with five other kings. (For more on these, see *The Real Story* pp. 41-43.) Faithfulness was not easy for Abram. Feel the weight of all that has happened to Abram since he first trusted God and left his home. His obedience to God seems to have landed him in one trial after another. Abram may be considered a living example of what the great sixteenth-century mystic St. Teresa of Avila meant when she said, "Lord, if this is how you treat your friends, it is no wonder you have so few of them!"

### Count the Stars

In Genesis 15, Abram finally expresses his frustration for the first time. The Lord appears to him and offers a reward: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great" (Gn 15:1). An offer that would make any one of us thrilled actually leaves Abram confounded. He is rich with wealth, livestock, and possessions, and yet his material prosperity only underscores the one problem that has haunted him for years: He is advanced in age and continues to be childless. God's offer to reward Abram only highlights more acutely how he has no one in the next generation with whom to share these blessings. Abram

sadly responds, "O Lord God, what will thou give me, for I continue childless" (Gn 15:2). He must have had in mind the first promise God made to him many years ago: that his descendants would become a great nation (Gn 12:2). At this stage in his life, however, Abram must have wondered whether that promise would ever be fulfilled. How would his family become a great nation if he didn't have a single descendant to become his heir?

### Walk by Faith, Not by Sight

God next does something that will challenge Abram to view the difficulties in his life from a more spiritual perspective, and to trust that God is faithful and truly with him in the midst of his trials. Most of all, Abram needs to trust that God will be faithful to his promise, even if he cannot see from his human perspective how it will all work out. It took great faith for Abram to leave his homeland for the land of Canaan, but God wants to form Abram into a man of even greater faith.

God calls Abram outside of his tent and says, "Look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them.... So shall your descendants be" (Gn 15:5). This moment has a profound impact on Abram's faith. The Bible says, Abram "believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gn 15:6).

Why this sudden transformation in faith? Why did Abram's attitude abruptly change from doubt and discouragement to strong belief in God's promise that he will have a son? The Bible gives one small detail in this account that sheds immense light on the nature of Abram's newfound faith. The narrative tells us that, some-time after Abram counted the stars in the sky, "the sun was going down" (Gn 15:12). Remember that God told Abram to "number the stars if you are able



DISCUSSION

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*Genesis 12:1-4, 12:10-20, 15:1-6, 15:12*

*Please read aloud:* The Bible next introduces a man who will eventually become one of the most important figures in salvation history: Abram, who will come to be known as Abraham. So critical is Abram's role in salvation history that the New Testament calls him "the father of all who believe" (Rom 4:11). As we watch God lead this good man to total trust and heroic faithfulness, we will learn what it really means to walk with God and entrust our entire lives to His plan. Here, salvation history takes a dramatic step forward as God calls this man to follow Him in faith.

### Read Genesis 12:1-4

1. What three things does God promise to Abram?

*Answer: First, God promises that Abram will become a great nation. Second, God says he will make Abram's name great. And finally, God foretells how the entire human family will be blessed through Abram.*

*Please read aloud:* God desires to reunite all the nations into one covenant family through Abram and his descendants, which He will accomplish in three stages, summed up in the three promises. These three promises provide an outline for the rest of salvation history, a table of contents for the rest of the Bible:

*Note to the Leader: On a piece of paper write out the three promises to Abram:*

*Nation*

*Name*

*Worldwide Blessing*

Now let's consider how each of these promises is fulfilled in the history of God's people.

2. First, the promise of a nation. Let's think ahead to other stories in the Bible. For God's people to become a nation, they must have a land to call their own. Does anyone know when this happens in the Bible? When do God's people receive land?

*Answer: The promise that Abram will become a great nation points to the Exodus story, where his descendants, the Israelites, will be delivered out of slavery in Egypt. At the beginning of the book of Exodus, Israel had become a great and numerous people, but without a land of their own. It is only when Moses leads the Israelites to freedom and to the Promised Land that they can finally rule themselves and become a great nation, thus fulfilling this first promise made to Abram.*

*Note to the leader: Write Moses on the chart:*

*Nation*

*-> Moses*

*Name*

*Worldwide Blessing*

3. Now, the second promise: In the Scriptures, this "great name" is royal language referring both to personal fame and to possessing a name that endures through the centuries, because it is

associated with a lasting dynasty. Where do we see royalty, that is kingship or dynasty, introduced in the Bible?

*Answer: The second promise about God giving Abram a great name will be fulfilled in King David's dynasty, when the universal importance of the kingdom of Israel will be established for the ages. To reign as king in Jerusalem, one had to be a descendant of David and possess David's royal family name. This point is reinforced when God first established David as king and said to him, "I will make for you a great name" (2 Sm 7:9)—thus showing how David's dynasty is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abram to make his family's "name great" (Gn 12:2).*

*Note to the leader: Write David on the chart:*

Nation → Moses  
Name → David  
Worldwide Blessing

4. The third and final promise is that of a *worldwide blessing*, in which "all the families of the earth" will be blessed through Abram's descendants. In other words, God will use Abram's family as His instrument for bringing blessing to all the nations on earth. How is this promise fulfilled in Scripture?

*Answer: This promise will ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who, while living in the Promised Land as a royal descendant of David, will become the savior of the world, reuniting the scattered and divided families of the earth back into the one universal covenant family of God.*

*Note to the leader: Write Jesus on the chart:*

Nation → Moses  
Name → David  
Worldwide Blessing → Jesus

*Please read aloud:* A great nation. A royal dynasty. And becoming the instrument for bringing God's blessing to the whole world. That's a lot to be promised in one short conversation with the Lord!

But Abram must go on a long journey if his family is to receive these great blessings. And the journey is not merely a physical one. True, Abram will need to leave his home in Mesopotamia and travel to an unfamiliar land in Canaan. But the more challenging journey Abram needs to make will take place deep inside him—a *spiritual* journey of walking ever more closely with the Lord.

5. Put yourself in Abram's sandals. He is asked by God to leave his land and his extended family to go to a far away, unfamiliar place. At the age of 75, he uproots his family, travels to this new land and worships God there, building altars for the Lord and calling on God's name (Gn 12:4-9). What do you think this must have been like for Abram? And why was he willing to make this kind of change?

*Allow the group to discuss. Emphasize Abram's faith. See also CCC 145: "The Letter to the Hebrews, in its great eulogy of the faith of Israel's ancestors, lays special emphasis on Abram's (Abraham's) faith: 'By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go.'"*

*Please read aloud:* But this is just the first step of Abram's walk with the Lord. All throughout his life, Abram will be invited by God to take increasingly larger steps of faith. Through various trials and ordeals, Abram will learn to surrender more of his life to the Lord and to trust ever more in God's care for his life.

We see those tests beginning as soon as he arrives in Canaan. Let's consider some of the trials that Abram faced in his early days in the land and observe how these ordeals challenge Abram to trust in the Lord like never before.

### Read Genesis 12:10-20

6. What is the first thing that Abram and his family experience as they set out to the land that God promised? And what effect might this have had on Abram's faith?

*Answer: After arriving in this land, Abram faces his first unexpected ordeal. A great famine breaks out, and he has to put his family through another major relocation, this time to Egypt (see Gn 12:10). Imagine the soul searching Abram must have done. Back in the land of Ur, he convinced his family that God has called him to move to a foreign country where he will be blessed. And yet, upon their arrival, they experience famine, not blessing. His family may have been tempted to question the authenticity of Abram's calling, or to question the goodness or the power of God. Abram himself may have begun to wonder why things didn't turn out the way he had expected.*

*Please read aloud:* But the famine is only the beginning of Abram's troubles. He faces a second and more personal trial after he arrives in Egypt, when Pharaoh finds Abram's wife, Sarai, attractive and desires her for himself. This not only poses a problem for Abram's marriage but puts his own life at risk: He is worried that Pharaoh will have Abram killed and take Sarai for himself (Gn 12:12).

7. What does Abram do in this situation?

*Answer: In fear for his life, Abram does not disclose the truth to Pharaoh about his marriage; instead, he tells Pharaoh that Sarai is his sister (a partial truth, since Sarai is Abram's half-sister; see Gn 20:12).*

8. At first, how does this lie work out for Abram?

*Answer: As a result, Pharaoh looks favorably upon Abram and showers him with many gifts, including sheep, oxen, asses, donkeys, and male and female servants (Gn 12:16)—all for the sake of Sarai.*

9. Eventually, Pharaoh finds out about Abram's lie and sends him on his way. However, Abram keeps the gifts he received from Pharaoh. It appears that the lie has paid off. Is this what the Bible is trying to tell us? If Abram lied, why isn't he being punished? Why does God allow him to actually benefit from his lie?

*Allow the group to discuss. Share the following answer only after your discussion.*

*Answer: The Bible is often subtle in explaining the consequences of a certain story. These worldly gifts appear to be a great boon for Abram at first—but as we will see later in the narrative, they prove to be a snare, for among these gifts given to Abram is woman named Hagar, an Egyptian servant with whom Abram will commit adultery (Gn 16).*

*Please read aloud:* We aren't going to get into all the trials that Abram experiences, but it's important to note that many trials befall him. Abram experiences trial within his own family in a conflict with his nephew Lot, as well as a "World War I" when five kings attack him in battle. (For more on these, see The Real Story pp. 41-43.)

10. What does this teach us about following God? Why does God allow us to experience these kinds of trials?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Please read aloud:* Let's continue the story of Abram:

### Read Genesis 15:1-6

11. So, Abram, finally expresses his frustration for the first time. What is he concerned about? What do you think is on Abram's mind?

*Answer: He must have had in mind the first promise God made to him many years ago: that his descendants would become a great nation (Gn 12:2). At this stage in his life, however, Abram must have wondered whether that promise would ever be fulfilled. How would his family become a great nation if he didn't have a single descendant to become his heir?*

12. What does God tell Abram to do in the passage? And how does Abram respond?

*Answer: God calls Abram outside of his tent and says, "Look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them.... So shall your descendants be" (Gn 15:5). This moment has a profound impact on Abram's faith. The Bible says, Abram "believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gn 15:6).*

13. But why is this such an important moment? Why this sudden transformation in faith? Why did Abram's attitude abruptly change from doubt and discouragement to strong belief in God's promise that he will have a son?

*Allow the group to discuss. Note to the leader: Don't reveal the answer just yet.*

*Please read aloud:* The Bible gives one small detail in this account that sheds immense light on the nature of Abram's newfound faith.

### Read Genesis 15:12

14. How does this passage change the way we view God's interaction with Abram? What time of day was it when Abram went outside to look at the stars?

*Answer: God asked him to do this before the sun was set. In other words, God asked Abram to count the stars in broad daylight.*

*Please read aloud:* This radically changes our perception of this scene. This one small detail about the sunset coming after Abram was sent out of his tent to count the stars means that Abram actually walked outside in the middle of the day, when he could not see anything but the sun!

From this perspective, Abram's extraordinary faith becomes much more apparent. God was asking Abram to have faith in what he could not see. Abram knows the stars are there in the sky, even though he cannot see them, and now he realizes that God is calling him to have similar faith in His promise that he would have many descendants—even though he cannot yet see a single son.

15. What does this story teach about faith? How does Abram teach us to "walk by faith, not by sight" as St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:7?

*Allow the group to discuss. Please see CCC 143-165 for more on the topic of faith.*

*Please read aloud:* We will continue Abram's story in the next chapter.

