

5. Promises to Abraham Impacted Hebrews 11, Galatians 3

Introduction: This is the third in a short series on the overview of the Bible. Today's lesson focuses on the impact that the ultimate fulfillment of the promises to Abraham had on its initial fulfillments.

Review: PPT>>> The three things God promised Abraham were land, seed and blessing.

—Land Promise Review—

Allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture, this promise has been fulfilled:

PPT>>> ESV **Joshua 21:43-45** ... the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

Did you know? Abraham never built a house in the Promised Land. He lived there in tents his whole life there. Why did Abraham live like a stranger in the Promised Land? Rhetorical. The New Testament reveals that there is metadata beyond what was recorded in Genesis. Abraham was looking for something far more significant than Middle Eastern real estate. He understood that the Promised Land was just a shadow, a type, a token of something much greater: *spiritual reality*. In fact, almost everything in the Old Testament is just a type of the reality that is in Christ and the new covenant

PPT>>> ESV **Hebrews 11:8-10** By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance ... By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

PPT>>> ESV **Hebrews 11:13-16** These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

Synthesis: The Hebrew Scriptures declare that all God's promises to Abraham were fulfilled (Jos 21:43-45). Yet the New Testament declares that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob died in faith *without* having received what was promised (Heb 11:13). Which is it? Both statements are true. Abraham possessed the physical land of Canaan, but he lived there like a stranger, in a tent, because he knew that Canaan was only a symbol/sign/type of what God had *really* promised: A heavenly country, a city whose designer and builder is God. This is an example of a prophecy that has a dual fulfillment.

—Blessing Promise Review—

God promised a physical **blessing** to Abraham, part of which included protection from his enemies and material prosperity (Jos 21:43-45). This was literally fulfilled. However, God also promised that **all the families of the earth** would be blessed through Abraham. **According to Galatians 3:6-9, 13-14, how has this been fulfilled?**

PPT>>> ESV Galatians 3:6-9 ... Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" ... And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

The promised blessing is that of justification by faith, just as Abraham had been justified by faith (Ge 15:6).

—Seed Promise Review—

What was the seed promise *initially* all about? God promised Abraham that he would have as many descendants as the stars in the sky and sand on the sea shore. The ancient Israelis or the Hebrews (or practically speaking, the Jews) were the fulfillment of this.

Allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture, this promise has been fulfilled (literarily, but not strictly literally):

PPT>>> ESV Deuteronomy 1:10 The LORD your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are today as numerous as the stars of heaven.

PPT>>> ESV 1 Kings 4:20 Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy.

According to the Hebrew Scriptures, the seed promise was fulfilled. Abraham had literal descendants but there were not literally as many of them as there are stars or grains of sand. Prophecies are often given using hyperbolic language.

According to the New Testament, what one person is the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to give Abraham "seed" (Ge 12:7)?

PPT>>> NAS Galatians 3:16 Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ.

The ultimate promised "seed" was the Lord Jesus, who according to the flesh was a direct descendant of Abraham.

The initial fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham concerned physical offspring. According to Galatians 3:6-7, what other group of people is counted among Abraham's children? See also Galatians 3:29. Any one from any ethnic group who has the faith of Abraham is a true child of Abraham (spiritual children). This is triple fulfillment.

PPT>>> ESV Galatians 3:29 ... if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

PPTS>>> The ultimate Seed, through His death on the cross, made possible the ultimate blessing of justification by faith so that Abraham's descendants can live forever in the true Promised Land (a heavenly country).

PPTS>>> Each of the "big three" promises of the Abrahamic covenant (land, seed, blessing) had at least two fulfillments:

- an immediate and then an ultimate,
- the physical and then the metaphysical,
- the foreshadow and then the reality,
- the type and then the fulfillment of the type,
- a temporary and then an eternal,
- an outward and then an inward,
- the sign and then the substance to which the sign pointed,
- the interim and then the permanent.

—Today's Lesson—

PPT>>> Pivotal Issue: What effect (if any) did the ultimate New Testament fulfillments of the promises to Abraham have on the intermediate Old Testament fulfillments? (Rhetorical question).

PPT>>> Once the final fulfillments came, how are we to view the initial fulfillments? (Rhetorical).

To determine the correct position to take on this pivotal issue, let's see what the New Testament says about circumcision, using it as a test case.

—Test Case: Circumcision—

PPT>>> 1. Based on Genesis 17:9-14, how long did God intend for the sign of circumcision to be enforced?

According to Genesis 17:14, what penalty did disobedience carry? 17:14.

PPT>>> The Issue (Rhetorical): What does the New Testament do with circumcision? Does the New Testament require circumcision of Jewish believers now that the New Covenant was come?

PPT>>> 2. How does 1 Corinthians 7:18-19 help us answer the question of the importance of circumcision under the New Covenant? According to the New Testament, circumcision does not count for anything.

PPTS>>> 3. In what light is circumcision cast in Galatians 5:1-6? See also Galatians 6:15.

PPT>>> 4. Based on Colossians 2:11 & 3:11, of what was physical circumcision a shadow? See Philippians 3:2-3. It was a shadow of the spiritual circumcision we have in Christ.

PPT>>> Philippians 3:2-3.

PPT>>> 5. How are the various New Testament declarations about circumcision (Ga 5:2-6, 11-12, 6:15, Ep 2:11-13, Phlp 3:4b-11, Co 2:9-12 & 3:11) possible in light of Genesis 17:14?

Genesis 17 clearly requires circumcision for the physical descendants of Abraham, and yet the New Testament just as clearly has no use for physical circumcision.

According to the New Testament, physical circumcision is just a shadow. The reality of that shadow is found in Christ and in the circumcision of the heart that only He can affect.

Though physical circumcision was the absolute requirement of the Abrahamic covenant, the New Testament says that outward circumcision is now in fact of no value. What does matter, according to the New Testament, is inner circumcision, the spiritual circumcision of the heart.

PPTS>>> Thus, the New Covenant's disregard for the need to keep the sign of the Abrahamic covenant (circumcision) suggests that **something fundamental has changed**. We are playing by **new rules**. There has been a shift in significance from **outward signs to inward reality**. We have already clearly seen that the Abrahamic Covenant had two fulfillments, a short term and a long term, an intermediate and an ultimate, and shadow and a substance. So too with the sign of the covenant: from physical circumcision to spiritual circumcision.

Since the New Testament clearly has no use for physical circumcision, despite what Genesis 17 requires, what does this imply about the present-day validity of the initial, physical promises to Abraham?

The initial fulfillments of the covenant pale into insignificance now that the ultimate fulfillments have come. What really matters is the promised **Seed** (Christ, Ga 3:16) and the spiritual **descendants** (those who believe as Abraham did, Ga 3:7, Ro 4:11, 16), the spiritual **blessing** of justification by faith (Ga 3:6-9), and the real Promised **Land**: a heavenly country (Heb 11:8-10, 13-16).

That the New Testament has no use for physical circumcision also suggests a similar New Testament disinterest in the other initial aspects of the Abrahamic covenant (physical land, physical seed, physical blessing). Based on the way the New Testament handles circumcision, a strong case can be made that God is finished with the unbelieving physical descendants of Abraham and with the land of Canaan (as related to the original Abrahamic Covenant).

PPT>>> Example: A flashlight is useful in the dark, but once the sun rises, the flashlight is virtually worthless. Similarly, the Abrahamic Covenant was like a flash light, shining in the pre-Christ darkness. Before the New Covenant came, it was great to have! However, once the Sun came up, after Son of Righteousness arose, the New Covenant made the immediate fulfillments of the Abrahamic Covenant pale into insignificance. Just like God has no interest any longer in physical circumcision, He may well have no further use for the literal promises made to Abraham (physical descendants and real estate). They were useful in the interim, until the ultimate promises were fulfilled. Once the substance has come however, the shadow is of far less importance, and based on circumcision, even unimportant. An automobile is used to get you where you want to go. Once you have arrived, you don't sit in the car any longer! The car is the Abrahamic Covenant. The destination is the New Covenant!

—The Physical Land—

It is a fact that the New Testament shows no interest what-so-ever in the real estate known as the "Promised Land." For instance:

PPT>>> 6. What attitude does Galatians 4:21-31 indicate toward physical Jerusalem? See *Revelation 11:7-8, Hebrews 13:10-14*. It is obviously unfavorable. This attitude lasted at least until A.D. 70.

PPT>>> James' letter was written to Jewish believers, to the twelve tribes "scattered among the nations" (i.e., not living in Judah).

Did James tell them to move back to Palestine and reclaim their Canaan?

Did he tell them that, as true believers, they were the rightful heirs of the Promised Land?

Did the author of Hebrews instruct the Hebrew believers to send money to help all Jews throughout the Roman Empire relocate to Judea?

Does the New Testament anywhere teach that the Roman Empire would fall if it ever attacked the Jews of the Holy Land? (Because even unbelieving Jews are the apple of God's eye).

PPT>>> Summary of above texts.

—The Physical Seed—

******7. What does Romans 4:11-12 imply about physical Jews who do not have the faith of Abraham? See John 8:39.** Romans 4:12 states Abraham is actually not the father of the circumcised (Jews) who do not believe.

Theological Reality: Unbelieving Jews are not Abraham's true descendants.

ESV Romans 2:28-29 ... no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

8. What can we learn about God's attitude toward unbelieving Hebrews based on such passages as John 8:39-44? See also Matthew 21:33-46, Romans 2:28-29 & Revelation 2:9.

ESV John 8:39-44 They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did ... You are of your father the devil ...

Anyone who does not love Jesus does not have God as his father, nor does he have Abraham as his father.

9. It is sometimes said that God has two peoples: an earthly people (the Jews) and a heavenly people (the church). What light does Ephesians 2:11-12 shed on the idea of God having two peoples? God only has one people: those who believe (i.e., the church), regardless of ethnic background.

10. Based on Galatians 6:15-16, who is the Israel of God?

PPT>>> Galatians 6:15-16. Neither circumcision (being a Jew) nor uncircumcision (being a Gentile) counts for anything with God. What does count is being made into a new creation in Christ. Old Testament Israel was not the church. Israel was only a type of the church. Abraham's true and promised descendants are those who have the same faith that Abraham did. Thus, the church, the new creation, is the true Israel of God.

PPT>>> Summary of the above.

How should all this affect our view of the Jewish presence in the Middle East

today? It implies that God is no more interested the modern-day nation of geo-political Israel than He is in the nation of Guatemala or any other nation in the world today. Though it is still true that God has elected people for salvation from among the Jews, they are no different than the elect from among the Irish or any other people group (Ro 11:1-10).

The Jewish presence in the physical Promised Land is a result of God's grace, not their obedience. They are not a people of faith. For example, a tee shirt was reportedly seen recently in Israel that said, "If Jesus comes again, we'll kill him again."

PPT>>> 11. Is the covenant with Abraham still in effect today? How so? The ultimate spiritual fulfillments of God's promises to Abraham are eternal. The spiritual reality is what the physical fulfillments typified. Its promises have been fulfilled both physically (short-term) and metaphysically (long-term). Perhaps the physical fulfillments are now obsolete and irrelevant but the spiritual fulfillments are forever relevant.

Conclusions

- a). The immediate Old Testament fulfillment for the land promise in the Abrahamic covenant was the possession of Canaan (or Palestine) by the Hebrews. The New Testament, however, states that Abraham never really received the true Promised Land, which ultimately is heaven (Heb 11:1ff).
- b). Similarly, whereas Abraham's physical offspring constituted the initial fulfillment of the descendants promise, the New Testament states that its ultimate fulfillment is found primarily in Christ and secondarily in Abraham's spiritual descendants (those who have the faith of Abraham, Ro 4:11-17, Ga 3:29).

12. What impact did the spiritual fulfillments of the promises to Abraham have on the physical fulfillments?

Whether these ultimate meanings allowed the initial fulfillments to still have any present application has really only been debated in the church for the past one hundred years. Historically, the church has believed those initial fulfillments to be closed chapters with no relevance for today. The destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, along with the dispersion of unbelieving Judaism, was seen as God's final hand of judgment in divorcing himself from physical Israel as a special geopolitical nation (Re 2:9).

**** = ask the class this question before having the text read aloud.

Advance Study Questions: If you send out the study questions in advance, then those exact same questions should be covered when you teach to give the brethren feedback and to encourage them to study the Scriptures at home during the week.

Teacher's Note: These lessons were designed for a 45-minute session.

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