



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

It's Bigger Than All of Us Implications of Being Abraham's Heirs

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Introduction

1. For centuries, the Jews had clung to the hope in the words of Isaiah 2:2-5 and others like them. The time would come, God would deliver his people, and a new king would reign over all nations.
2. But when? By the time of the first century AD, the promised Messiah and dawning of the new age still seemed far away; there was no indication that Rome was going to have its grip loosened.
 - a. Then, Jesus came on the scene and after his death his followers would declare that *he* was the Messiah and that God had established through him a different kind of rule, one that was at odds with Rome and would eventually win out over that empire and all others.
 - b. But the Jews rejected Jesus as Christ, and his followers turned to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46), something they said had been part of God's plan all along (Ephesians 3:1-12). Had God's plan somehow been thwarted after all?
3. As we will see momentarily, the New Testament answers both the question of the people's longing and the larger question of whether God had kept his word.
4. Both questions point to God's promises or, to be more specific, to the relationship in which his promises were realized, the covenants that he had with the people.
 - a. As we noted in part 1, "Biblical religion is covenant religion."¹
 - b. To elaborate, "'covenant' in the Bible is the major metaphor used to describe the relation between God and Israel (the people of God). As such, covenant is the instrument constituting the rule (or kingdom) of God and therefore it is a valuable lens through which one can recognize and appreciate the biblical ideal of religious community."²
5. The New Testament shows that we who follow Christ are participants in God's most far-reaching covenant. Knowing that should rekindle our motivation to see who we are and what we are to do.

Body

- I. Those big Jewish questions point to the Abrahamic covenant.
 - A. Luke begins his gospel against the backdrop of the longing that Jesus would finally answer.

¹ Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*, 2.

² G. E. Mendenhall and G. A. Herion, "Covenant," *Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD)*, Vol 1, 1179.

1. We see it in the angelic appearances in chapter 1 and the response of various people in chapters 2 and 3 (Luke 1:16-17; cf. 1:31-32, 54-55; cf. 2:10-14, 25-32; 3:15).
2. Zechariah's prophecy gives the anticipation a sharp focus against the backdrop of their history.
 - a) 1:68-71 reference the long-awaited promises given through the prophets.
 - b) 1:72-73 extend the memory and longing past David (v 69) to Abraham.
 - c) 1:74-75 declare implications of the fulfillment in terms of deliverance and service.
3. The question, *when* will the Messiah come? is answered in light of the covenant with Abraham.

B. But what about the second question?

1. The Jews crucified their Messiah and then tried to thwart his followers. How could this be when the promise was from "the Lord God of Israel" *for* Israel (Luke 1:69)?
2. Paul deals directly with that question in Romans.
 - a) Chapters 1-8 constitute a prolonged argument for the "righteousness" (or "faithfulness") of God. Romans 3:21-26 illustrates; note 1:17; 3:5 (see also 3:3 for a related idea using a different word; ESV translates, "Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness [πίστιν, *pistin*] of God?").
 - b) But if God's promise had been faithfully kept, why were the people of Israel rejecting it? Paul raises that question in Romans 9:3-7; 11:1 (see also 9:30-31; 10:1-4), referring back to the answer he had already given in chapter 4, and then proceeds to address several other questions raised by his argument.

C. Galatians 3:7-29 gives us a more straightforward response.

1. Writing to people who were being urged (or duped) to practice the Mosaic law, specifically circumcision, Paul pushes the argument past Moses to Abraham.
2. His underlying thesis is that it is the agreement in the covenant with Abraham, not the law of Moses, that the Christ completes (3:7-9).
3. The focus of the Law on "abid[ing] by all things written in the Book of the Law" (3:10) made it impossible for the Law to be the agent of justification (acquittal); no one had succeeded in doing that (3:10-14).
4. This followed from the nature of God and the fact of his covenant with Abraham.
 - a) The promise to Abraham had to be kept; the Law could not abrogate it (3:15-17).
 - b) The Christ was the promised offspring of Abraham who would save (3:16), and that promise would have been void if the Law had been able to provide the inheritance (3:18).
 - c) To belong to Christ was to share his status as an offspring and heir of the promise to Abraham (3:16, 29).
 - (1) The Law had a place; it coordinated with the promise and therefore had a vital role to play in bringing the promise to fulfillment (3:21-24).
 - (2) Thus, everyone who has "put on Christ" is a beneficiary of the promise and participant in the plan worked out by God beginning with Abraham (3:25-28).³

II. Implication: as heirs of Abraham's promise, we are part of something big and dynamic.

³ Other passages show both that Paul did not make this point just in situations where some were trying to bind the Mosaic law (e.g., Ephesians 2:12) and that other writers also made the point (Acts 3:25; Hebrews 6:13-20).

- A. Our desire to be part of something big.
1. I once Googled the question “did we make a difference?” and found 66,200,000 links.⁴
 - a) There seems to be a universal longing to matter, a desire extending to a wide array of concerns and projects; on just the first search page (10 links), I found concern for making a difference in:
 - (1) Urban regeneration.
 - (2) Helping the environment.
 - (3) Helping unfortunate people (Special Olympics, Ronald McDonald Houses, etc.) get concert tickets (this from the “waywemakeadifference” web site).
 - (4) An article on making a difference about AIDS in Ethiopia.
 - (5) A site devoted to telling stories about Singapore and Singaporeans that are not covered in the mainstream press.
 - (6) And making a difference with regard to the state of global health.
 - b) The “waywemakeadifference” site is devoted to Clay Aiken’s (pop singer, American idol alum) concerts and charity work; it’s there that I found this quote, attributed to Aiken: “It’s important that I make a difference in some way. It’s not necessarily how I make a difference, but I want to make sure that I do.”⁵
 2. Aiken’s sentiment is commendable, but I would point out that there are ways to “make a difference” that are not positive and that, even when the difference made is a good, some are better than others. How do we make a difference that ultimately matters?
- B. It’s here that our study of covenant should reignite a sense of excitement and passion about our identity and calling.
1. Think about it: we are part of God’s eternal plan (Ephesians 3:10).
 2. As we study the biblical story that properly speaking begins with Abraham in Genesis 12, we see the lengths God went to work it out, how he would not give up on it, and how in love he wanted *everyone* to share in it (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9; Romans 11:32).
- C. For the sake of deepening our faith and renewing our energy to pursue our mission, we must see the implications of this big story.
1. John Collins summarized it this way: “This overarching story serves as a grand narrative or worldview story for Israel: each member of the people was to see himself or herself as an *heir* of this story, with all its glory and shame; as a *steward* of the story, responsible to pass it on to the next generation; and as a *participant*, whose faithfulness could play a role, by God’s mysterious wisdom, in the story’s progress.”⁶
 2. Think about it.
 - a) Because we are spiritual descendants of Abraham, we are *heirs* of God and fellow heirs with Christ (Romans 8:16-17).
 - b) As *stewards* of this story, we have the greatest mission imaginable: to tell, urge, and influence as many as we can (including the next generation) to share in the story too (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).

⁴ www.google.com/search, accessed May 22, 2009.

⁵ <http://www.thewaywemakeadifference.org/> Accessed May 22, 2009

⁶ C. John Collins, “The Theology of the Old Testament, *ESV Study Bible*, 30.

- c) As *participants* in the story, we are part of the community of the great heroes of faith—Abraham included—a community “of whom the world was not worthy” (Hebrews 11:38), in line to enjoy hope where so many find none (Ephesians 2:12).
- 3. All this because we are part of the community that benefits from the Abrahamic covenant, “the church [through whom] the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places” (Ephesians 3:10).

Conclusion

1. I once read about Mary Giffin, who co-authored *A Cry for Help: Exploring and Exploding the Myths About Teenage Suicide*. Interviewing suicidal adolescents who had survived, she noted how “Over and over, the [suicidal] adolescents . . . groped for words to describe what they felt was a void in their lives—the lack of anything to stand for, of an altruistic goal.”⁷
2. How much more meaningful is life if we are living for the ultimate goal?
3. Because we are heirs of a covenant, God’s covenant with Abraham, we have that ultimate reason to live. Let us be motivated and renewed by that grand and glorious purpose. Let us appreciate our place as his church and surrender “to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20).

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⁷ Quoted in Rubel Shelly, *Young People and Their Lord*, 8.