

God's Big Story: The Birth of a Nation

Genesis 12:1-5; 15:1-6; 17:1-8; 22:1-18

**A sermon preached by Dr. Calvin Warpula
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Do you like stories? It seems that everybody likes a good story. I remember as a child reading biographies that were the stories of great Americans. I think I read every one in the series in our school library. I remember going to bed at night when I was 11 years old and my 8 year old brother asking me to tell him a story. As a young teen I loved to read Hurlbert's Story of the Bible. It made the Bible from beginning to end a big story. When I started preaching, I noticed the power of story telling. On the way to church my children used to say to me, "Daddy, tell a lot of stories today." When church was over, I would asked them what they learned and they would start re-telling the stories I had told. I notice now that when I begin a story that everyone's ears seem to perk up and interest grows. Some of the great preachers of the past century were famous story tellers as they preached biographical sermons of the men and women in the Bible. In fact, there are some teachers of preachers today who say that preaching is primarily story telling.

Story telling is a big art now in our country. Every year in Jonesborough, TN there is a national convention of story tellers. Storytelling is big on television. Many of the most popular shows are stories of people's lives and their entanglements and involvements. Among the Spanish speaking most of the television programs are telenovas, or stories. The big movies are stories. When it comes to books, novels are stories.

But this is not just in America; it is all over the world. All peoples and cultures love stories and have their stories that they tell and pass on from generation to generation.

The people of the Bible are no different. God's people, the Hebrews, had their stories about creation, and God's working in people's lives, that they passed from generation to generation.

When Jesus came, he taught in story form. One out of three sentences that Jesus taught is a story. We call them parables.

The Bible Is God's Big Story

This book, the Bible, is God's big story. It begins with the creation of the heavens and the earth and continues for thousands of years until the last chapters describe the new heaven and the new earth. This is God's story from creation to re-creation, from paradise lost to paradise regained. Because of the sin of the first man, Adam, sin entered our world, and through Adam's federal headship of the human race, the consequences of sin and the propensity to sin passed on to all humanity. But God's story tells us of the coming of Jesus Christ who lived among us, died on a Roman cross, was buried, and resurrected three days later. The apostle Paul calls Jesus the second Adam. Hear Paul in Romans chapter 5 [read selected verses from v. 12-19]. What was lost in Adam was restored in Jesus Christ. Hear Paul again in I Cor. 15:20-24, 44b-49 [read].

This shows you that God's story is one big long connected story from creation, Adam, through Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection, and his coming again at the end of time and in the resurrection of the dead.

Genesis Tells Us about God, the World, and Ourselves

God's story begins with the first verse of the Bible: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The first two chapters of Genesis tell us about God, about the world, and about us.

About God we learn that he is eternal. He is the only necessary being that exists; everything else is contingent, or it could easily not exist. God is the ultimate reality. God is not part of his creation. God acts in space and time. God leaves his fingerprints on creation. It is good. Here we see God is personal; he creates, he speaks, he blesses, he loves and he judges. But God is not just active in creation; God is active in every page of this book. The Bible says [read Col. 1:15-17].

About the world, we learn the matter is not eternal. Matter is dependent for its existence upon God. The universe cannot explain itself. Without God, nothing makes sense. Creation tells us that the world is sacred space. God made it for us. It is his. We are just his stewards to manage and take care of it.

About us, creation by God says that we are made in the image of God. We have conscience, morality, responsibility, emotions, thinking and

reasoning processes. We are made from the dust of the ground and because of sin we will go back to the dust.

This book, the Bible, literally “the book,” tells us God’s story. The first subject of the first sentence of the first book of the Bible is God. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” God is the author, the force and the course of history. The name of God is found 35 times in the first 35 verses of the Bible. God is the author of Scripture, these sacred writings, and of science. He caused both to come into being. God is one, is undivided, is truth, and thus there cannot be any contradiction between the data of Scripture and the data of science. There may be an apparent, but not real, contradiction, until we know all there is to know about science and about Scripture, but the contradiction is not real but only apparent because of our lack of knowledge about one or both. The contradictions that are claimed to exist by some really are contradictions in the interpretation of the data, not the data itself. God is the author of all truth. He made all facts. The law of contradiction in logic says that something cannot both be true and not true at the same time in the same frame of reference.

Sin Brings Consequences

Chapter three of Genesis tells us that man sinned against God. Man deliberately, freely and purposefully disobeyed God. But don’t blame Adam and Eve too harshly. If it had been you and me in the Garden and we saw that the fruit was good for food, and was a delight for the eyes, and would make one like God or to be his own god, and that it would give one amazing powers to accomplish dreams and do big things, then we probably would have eaten the fruit, too. Sin is disobedience rooted in selfishness and a desire to be independent of God and to do things our way instead of God’s way.

So Genesis three tells us that God judged the serpent, the woman and the man. In his commentary on Genesis, Victor Hamilton describes what happened to man:

The serpent held out to the couple the prospect that being like God would bring with it unlimited privileges, unheard-of acquisitions and gifts.

Alas, rather than experiencing bliss, they encounter misery. Rather than sitting on a throne, they are expelled from the garden.

Rather than new prerogatives, they experience a reversal. The couple not only fail to gain something they do not presently have; the irony is that they lose what they currently possess: unsullied fellowship with God. They found nothing and lost everything.

[Victor Hamilton, The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1990, p. 208].

God still loved man. Even though man had sinned, he was still in the image of God because in the 9th chapter of Genesis God said, [read v. 6]. God clothed man with animal skins to give him protection from the elements and expelled him from the Garden of Eden. To prevent man from eating of the tree of life and living forever in his sin God placed angels there and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Man was now cast out into a world that worked against him. Suffering, pain, disease and death are all results of the fall of man. Adam and Eve bore a child. This was the first baby born in the world. Can you imagine their joy and delight? They were created full-grown and thus had never seen a baby human. They then had another child and named him Abel. And they had many other sons and daughters as well. The sin in the Garden brought discord, jealousy, ill-will, hatred, and even homicide. Cain got angry and struck and killed his brother. The first human death in history. God punished Cain but let him live just like he had mercifully let Adam and Eve live after their sin. Of necessity the children of Adam and Eve, since they were the only humans on earth, married each other and more and more children were born. Over the years communities and cities grew as man spread over the earth.

Sin Corrupts All Mankind except Noah's Family

But sin and disobedience spread also. Man became exceedingly wicked with all forms of evil so much so that God said [read Gen. 6:5-8].

God still loved and care for his creation. He loved man and wanted to save the righteous who still believed in him. God only found Noah and his three sons and their wives, eight people in all that were righteous so God gave them the plans to build the ark to save the human race. Noah believed God and obeyed him. After years and years of work of building a 450 ft long boat on dry ground about 500 miles from enough water to float it, God brought male and female pairs of the different kinds of animals to the ark.

Noah had stocked the ark with plenty of food to care for his family and all the animals. God shut them inside the ark and caused a flood to cover all that part of the world encompassing the entire human race. Noah and his family were saved from the devastating flood. After about fifteen months in that floating barge, God caused the waters to recede and Noah and the entire ark's occupants walked out into a brand new world purged of sin and evil people. The human race started all over again in a brand new world.

But some time thereafter, sin was found in Noah and his family. And the downward spiral began again. The family of Noah had children and grandchildren and great grandchildren and so on over the years until man had spread back over this part of the world. The pride and selfishness of man soon wanted to build a large tower where many could stay together and not inhabit the rest of the earth. Man wanted to make a big name for himself. Again, he wanted to be his own god. God frustrated man's plans by diversifying his language and of necessity man scattered to far away places.

God Calls Abram to Begin a Nation

God's story is continuing through all this. God wants to form a group of people that honor him. He wants to build a nation of people that know him personally and love and obey him and remember his laws and covenants.

This begins to take shape then in Gen. 11:27 where the Bible says [read 27, 29, and 30]. The account in Genesis then says, [read vs. 31-32]. But Genesis does not tell us a fact that Stephen, a preacher of God in the book of Acts in the NT, tells us. Stephen said [read Acts 7:2-4]. Stephen said there was a call of God while Abram was still in Ur of the Chaldees. The original move from Ur to Haran was because God called Abram in Ur and told him to leave. Now God might have intended for Abram to go all the way to the land of Canaan but for some reason he stopped half way there in the land of Haran. We don't know how long Abram and his family lived in Haran but it was until his father, Terah, died. Then the Bible tells us in Genesis 12 that God said [read 12:1]. This then is the second call of Abram.

At this call, notice what God said to him [read 12:2-3].

God is the actor here. He says, "I will make ...I will bless...and I will curse." God is taking charge. He has big plans for Abram and his family and ultimately for the human race. This is God's big story continuing where he takes one man and from him will bless all the nations of the earth.

Abram is 75 years old. His story occupies the next 13 chapters of Genesis over a hundred-year period until he dies in chapter 25 at age 175.

Out of this man, Abram, God will build a great nation. Abram is both the father of the Hebrews (the Jewish people) through his son, Isaac, and of the Arab tribes through his son, Ishmael. Throughout the remainder of the OT and on into the NT, Abram is recognized as the great example of a dynamic, living, obedient faith to do whatever God said, no matter what. Abram is honored in the NT in 11 NT books. His name is mentioned 74 times in the NT. The first verse of the NT says, on page one of Matthew, and verse one: “The book of the generations of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” The New Testament tells us that the seed or offspring of Abram spoken of here in 12:3b is Jesus Christ. The genealogy of Jesus in both Matthew and Luke’s gospel is traced through or to Abram. Paul says in Galatians that Jesus is that seed of Abram. Listen to Gal. 3:6-9, 16], 26-29]. Paul says in Romans chapter 4 that Abraham is the father of all who believe. Hear Paul again [read Rom. 4:16-17]. . Today, Abraham is revered as a great man of God by three world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It can be safely said that Abram is the greatest man in the OT, greater even than Moses, Samuel or David.

Abram Believes God in Spite of All That Contradicts

Why is that? What made this man so great? Why is he honored so much?

The answer: Abraham believed God and put that faith into action in his life. Abram’s faith was not just intellectual assent that says, “Yes, God exists.” It was a faith that controlled his entire life. It was a faith that trusted God implicitly and obeyed him no matter what God asked of him.

You can see this in his move from Ur to Haran and then on to Canaan. Abram was living in Ur. Now you may think that was some backwater desert camel stop but it was so, so much more. Sir Leonard Wooley excavated Ur from 1922 to 1934. Ur was a high level culture and civilization. It had indoor water and plumbing and even flush toilets. It was a city of wealth and gardens and extravagance. Ur was a city of moon worshippers with a king and temples. Abram’s father, Terah, and probably Abram himself was an idolater. The Bible says in Joshua 24:2 {read it}. God appeared to Abram and told him to leave the city. Now if God told you that, the first thing you would ask, is “Where to?” But God told Abram to leave all that luxury and go to some unknown country. Heb. Chapter 11

devotes 12 verses to Abraham's life. Hear Heb. 11:8: [read it]. Abram did not even have a GPS or a roadmap. He did not know where he would end up. He would leave his family, his work, everything he had built and established in Ur, his business associates, his income sources, and go out into the great vast unknown. Why? Because God told him to.

We don't know why Abram stopped in Haran. Maybe it was because of his father, Terah. We do know that Abraham left some relatives in Haran. When Terah died, God spoke to Abram again and told him to leave there and go to a "land I will show you."

That's when God gave him the sevenfold promise of Gen. 12:3-4.

Abram arrived in Canaan but he was on the move through that land, too. Everywhere he camped he built an altar to offer sacrifices and to worship and praise God.

You can see Abram's faith in his wait for an offspring out of which God had promised to build a great nation. You cannot have many descendants unless first you even have one descendant. Abram had none. The text says his wife was barren and infertile.

In chapter 15, God spoke to Abram and said, "Do not be afraid. I am your shield. , your very great reward." God promises Abram his presence and protection. But Abram asks a question, "God, I need an heir. I have no children. I am in my 8th decade of life and still have no children, not even one. I guess I'll have to let my servant Eliezer inherit everything I have." Then the Lord said, "No, [read 15:4-5].

Then v. 6 says, "Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness." Abram's faith was his righteousness. His faith and trust in God. Not his works, not law keeping, not merit, not his accomplishments or his achievement, none of those things, just the fact that he trusted God. God said that's what I want—just believe in me totally.

In chapter 17, when Abram was 99 years old, 24 years had passed since the promise of an heir and yet nothing had happened. God once more made the promise that Abram would have many descendants. [Read 17:1-2].

God spoke again and Abram fell face down to the ground. God said [read 17:3b-8]. Abram's name is changed to Abraham. Abram means "God is exalted father" and Abraham means "father of many," a reference to the many descendants that God had promised him. God also promised that his descendants would one day occupy all this land.

In vs. 15 and 16 of this chapter, God said, [read them]. Sarai's name was changed to Sarah, both of which mean "princess," but it showed that

some changes were coming. Abraham was now 99 and Sarah was 89 years old.

Here's this old couple. Their reproductive abilities have dried up, yet God promised that they would get pregnant and have a son. Both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the idea of them, an old, childless couple having a baby. That's why God said to name the child, "Isaac," which literally means "laughter." Just imagine, today. If you were in your late 50s or early sixties and were told you were going to have a baby, you would probably laugh, too, or would you cry?

Was Isaac miraculously conceived, like a virgin birth? No. God gave that old couple the ability to have a marital relationship and from that Sarah got pregnant. How could it be? Paul in Romans 4 addressed this incredulity: [read Rom. 4:17-22]. The writer of Hebrews addressed it also in chapter 11: [read vs. 11-12].

Both of these readings emphasize that Abraham believed that what God had promised, God was able to do, and he would do. Faith is trusting God when everything else contradicts.

Abraham Passes His Greatest Test of Faith

Perhaps the greatest example of Abraham's faith is in Genesis, chapter 22. Here God gave one of the strangest commands he ever gave to any person. God told Abraham to kill Isaac, the promised child who was now a teenager or older. God told Abraham to offer him on the altar of sacrifice. What a strange, conflictive command? Why would God, for heaven's sake, want Abraham to kill this child of promise that he had waited for 25 years to receive? How in the world is God going to build a nation if Abraham's only son is dead? What is going on here?

Did Abraham question God? No. Early the next morning, he set out to do exactly what God said. When they reached the mountain of Moriah, Abraham said to his servants, [read 22:5]. Notice that Abraham said that "we" will go into the mountain and worship and "we" will return. Abraham had such great faith in God that even if he killed Isaac God would raise him from the dead and bring him back down that mountain. No one had ever been raised from the dead up to this point. But Abraham believed God could and would do it. The writer of Hebrews comments, [read Heb. 11:17-19].

As Abraham and his son were climbing Mt. Moriah, Isaac asked, "Daddy, here is the wood and the fire but where is the lamb for the

sacrifice?” Isaac did not know what Abraham was planning on doing to him. Abraham simply replied, “Son, God will provide. God will provide.”

As they prepared the altar Abraham must have told his son what he was going to do. Abraham was about 115 and Isaac was 15 and he could have easily overpowered his aged father if Isaac did not want to be cooperative. Isaac was willing to let his dad kill him if need be. Here’s what happened: [read Gen. 22:9-12]. Actually God did not want Isaac, he wanted Abraham. God knew that Isaac was Abraham’s most precious possession. All his hopes for his name to continue depended on Isaac. Yet Abraham loved God more than he loved Isaac. God knew then by this powerful demonstration of Abraham’s faith how much Abraham was willing to do and to give up for God and that was everything, even his cherished and only son. The half brother of Jesus, James, wrote the letter of James in the NT. James refers to this story to show us the meaning of real faith. Hear what he wrote in chapter 2: [read 21-24].

At that time Abraham saw a ram caught by its horns in the thicket and he now had a perfect sacrifice. He offered that ram to God. The Lord did provide, didn’t he? Abraham named that mountain, Jehovah-jireh, which means, “The Lord will provide.”

Then the angel of the Lord spoke for God and said, [read vs. 16-18].

Abraham’s Faith Was Not Perfect

So you can see that Abraham was a great man of faith. But, I must add, that Abraham’s faith, while great and a model for us, was not a perfect faith that always obeyed God. His faith was like mine: it goes up and down. On several occasions Abraham showed a lack of faith in God. God had told him that he would take care of him and yet when a famine came he fled to Egypt, a foreign, idolatrous country, in order, he thought, to survive. Here he lied about his wife so that he would not be killed. Here he took an Egyptian maid, Hagar, that later gave birth to Ishmael.

After they returned to Canaan, when Abraham was 86 years old, 11 years after the promise to him that he would have a son, Abraham consented to Sarah’s idea that he have sex with Hagar, somewhat like a surrogate mother, and that any child born would be his heir. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael but that birth brought great jealousy and conflict between Sarah and Hagar and between Ishmael and Isaac. Finally, Sarah told Abraham he must cast out Hagar and his son, Ishmael. Abraham loved his son, Ishmael, but was forced to expel Hagar and Ishmael from the family.

On another occasion, Abraham told some people that Sarah was his sister and not his wife. That's twice he lied about that relationship.

There were also some times when God told him something and he asked for proof that God was going to do it, like in Gen. 15:8.

So what's the point? The point is that a faith that pleases God is not necessarily a faith that does not ask questions, or that occasionally asks for proof, or that even does things that are wrong. Abraham had great faith and he is known for that but his faith was not perfect. He had his flaws, too. This shows us that we do not have to have perfect faith in order to please God and to be in a relationship with God. Our faith marked on a line would somewhat be like the graph of the stock market: it will have its ups and downs.

Believers in Christ are Heirs of Abraham

Because Abram believed God he is the father of all of us today who believe on God, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, slave or free, male or female, for we are all Abraham's seed according to the promise. He is the father of us all who believe.

What God wants from you today is to believe him. To listen to his word. He speaks in his word. He speaks through Jesus, his spiritual son in the incarnation. When we believe in Jesus, when we trust Jesus, and when we turn our lives to obey Jesus then we truly are children of God by faith in Jesus Christ.

God's big story continues from the Garden of Eden to Abraham and then it takes big steps in his life as God uses him to father a great multitude eventually. God is working out his purposes through Abraham and his family. Eighteen hundred years later, Jesus, in the flesh the son of Abraham by genealogy, is born into our world to be our savior and lord. God used Abraham's faith and obedience to develop the Jewish people out of whom Jesus the Christ was eventually born. We who belong to Jesus now are heirs of that great promise to Abraham. This is God's big story.

Every page of the Bible testifies to God's goodness and his active working to develop his big story. You can be a part of God's story today by listening to Jesus, God's son, and by trusting in him with all your heart and committing your life to follow him. Whosoever will may come while we stand and sing.

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