



## **GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING**

### **ABRAHAM'S BLESSING**

**Galatians 3:6-9**

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...<sup>6</sup>just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

<sup>7</sup>Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.

<sup>8</sup>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.” <sup>9</sup>So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

### **Introduction**

Today’s passage contains some very good news. In this passage God tells us that anyone of us can share in the blessing he has given to Abraham. Regardless of your race or class or gender; irrespective of your ethnicity or age or nationality; no matter your personal history or credit score or dumb decisions of the past—you can become the beneficiary of Abraham’s blessing. This is the main burden of this message and the main point of this passage: “So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (Gal. 3:9). And it’s better news than a tax refund or a pay raise or any other windfall you can imagine.

Now, I recognize that for some of you this may sound quaint but not too exciting. If you were raised in the church, perhaps there’s a certain fascination with Abraham; he’s that mysterious Bedouin character of Sunday school stories and songs: “Father Abraham had many sons . . .” But if you weren’t raised in the church, then you’ll likely have trouble seeing any relevance in receiving Abraham’s blessing. You’d much rather find a way to get in on the good graces of Facebook founder Jeff Zuckerberg, who recently pledged \$100 million in Facebook stock to the Newark, NJ, school district. Now that’s something to get excited about, right?

The Christ-followers in Galatia were certainly interested in Abraham’s blessing. In fact, that’s what all the fuss was about. Paul wrote this most intense and heated of his letters in order to sort out the issue of who can receive Abraham’s blessing. There was no more relevant question for Paul or the Galatians or those stirring up confusion and trouble in Galatia.

But interest in Abraham’s blessing is not simply an antique interest, fascinating like collecting rare stamps is fascinating. No, it couldn’t be more relevant today—perhaps especially today, in our post-9/11 world. For the three great monotheistic religions of the world—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—all trace their origin back to God’s promise of blessing to Abraham. Thus, well over 3 billion people—that’s over half the world’s population—have a vested interest in this issue; or at least they ought to, if they rightly understand their own faith tradition.

As is the case with most things about which the Bible speaks, you will find them more relevant as you understand what they are. This is certainly the case with Abraham's blessing. When you understand what it is, you'll realize how highly relevant it is to you—to every one of us. And when you understand how you can share in it, you'll no doubt hear it as very good news indeed.

## **The Reverse of the Curse**

So, then, what is the blessing of Abraham to which Paul refers in this passage? Perhaps the simplest way to define it is this: *Abraham's blessing is God's solution to the world's problems.* What are the world's problems? Well, the world's problems begin in here: with the evil in every human heart. But our problems don't end there; the world's problems include all the strife and violence that exists between people and communities and even countries; think of those constants of human history—domestic abuse, racism, genocide. Yet what vexes the world can't be confined to human beings; it includes the chaos and disintegration of the creation itself. We see and feel creation's 'groaning' (cf. Rom. 8:23) in things like earthquakes that bury the unsuspecting under tall piles of rubble, or tsunamis that wash away entire villages without even asking, or molecules that mutate for the worst by becoming another case of pancreatic cancer, or miscarriages that break a hopeful mother's heart and leave her without any good reason why.

You see, *Abraham's blessing is God's way of reversing the effects of the curse.* If you look at the storyline of Scripture, you find that God called Abraham, and promised to extend his blessing through Abraham, in Genesis 12. But this chapter comes not only on the heels of Genesis 3-11, which describes the Fall and its after-effects; but it comes as *a direct response* to what we see in those chapters. And what is it that we see in that portion of Scripture that describes the Fall and its after-effects?

Genesis 3-11 show how every dimension of life is tragically adrift from the original goodness of God's purpose. The earth lies under the sentence of God's curse because of human sin. Human beings are adding to their catalogue of evil as the generations roll past—jealousy, anger, murder, vengeance, violence, corruption, drunkenness, sexual disorder, arrogance. Animals are being killed for food, with God's permission but hardly with their creator's best pleasure. Women enjoy the gift of childbirth along with suffering and pain. Men find fulfillment in subduing the earth, but with sweat and frustration. Both enjoy sexual complementarity and intimacy, but along with lust and domination. Every inclination of human hearts is shot through with evil. Technology and culture are advancing, but the skill that can craft instruments for music and agriculture can also forge weapons of violent death.

Nations experience the richness of their ethnic, linguistic and geographical diversity along with confusion, scattering and strife.<sup>1</sup>

Abraham's blessing is, then, God's solution to each and every one of these problems. Thus nothing could be more relevant to you than Abraham's blessing, whether you live in Chicago, Illinois, Tripoli, Libya, or Tokyo, Japan. Abraham's blessing is God's way of reversing the horrific effects of the curse upon the whole of creation.

Think about Abraham's blessing this way. No doubt, most of you have seen some of the horrific video footage of the devastation wrought by the tsunami that recently struck Japan. I want you to picture in your mind's eye, if you will, the twenty second clip of the ocean literally coming ashore and rolling over the tops of villages, consuming everything in its path: houses, schools, hospitals, cars, children, the elderly, and the unaware. Now, imagine Abraham's blessing as that tape *played in reverse*; imagine it as God's reversing all that devastation and senseless destruction, turning it all back, restoring it to its original state, bringing his shalom-peace out of utter chaos and desolation. And then imagine that great reversal not just for Japan, but for the entire creation—and indeed the entire cosmos.

That, friends, is Abraham's blessing. This is why God blessed Abraham, and called him to be a blessing to the nations, the whole world: the promise of a new creation, free from sickness and sin and death. This is the ultimate solution to all of our problems; this is the answer to every one of our dilemmas; this is the antidote to every disease, the resolution to every conflict. This is what every one of us needs; this is what every one of us deep down really wants. This is the blessing God promised to Abraham, and to those who are blessed along with Abraham.

### **In Abraham by Faith**

So, then, how do you share in Abraham's blessing? To put it simply: *you share in Abraham's blessing by becoming a part of Abraham's family*. This is the whole thrust of this passage. In particular, in verse 8 Paul quotes the key passage from Genesis 12, where God says to Abraham: "In you shall all the nations be blessed." God's blessing of Abraham is extended to others only through Abraham. "*In you* shall all the nations be blessed." Not in the Prophet Mohammed or Buddha or Oprah Winfrey or Barack Obama or your 401K or your church or your pastor; only in Abraham can one share in God's blessing.

In order to share, then, in Abraham's blessing you must be a child of Abraham; you must become a son or a daughter of Abraham. And this makes sense. I think we all understand that a person's benefits (i.e., 'blessings') get passed down to that person's descendants, not randomly distributed to complete strangers. Periodically, we see in the news a brouhaha over some fabulously wealthy person's estate and who are the rightly heirs of all that person's wealth. Of course, I don't join in those fights, even though I wouldn't mind a bit of that blessing. But I recognize that I've got no claim to it; I'm not a part of that family, not even close. And so it is with Abraham and sharing in his blessing. Only if you are Abraham's offspring are you an heir to Abraham's inheritance (cf. 3:29).

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, p. 65.

So, the next logical question becomes: How do you become a son or daughter of Abraham? Well, here's where things became controversial for Paul and indeed for early Christianity. For it was quite natural for the Jews in Paul's day to assume that the only way to become a part of Abraham's family is to become circumcised and thus become a Jew. After all, the Lord God did say explicitly to Abraham: "This is my covenant with you, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised" (Gen. 17:10).

Yet what Paul understands from Scripture itself is that God had *already* declared his intention to bless the nations apart from them becoming Jews. Thus, Paul can say a most remarkable thing: "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'" (3:8).<sup>2</sup> Because God always intended to justify sinners by faith, God could tell Abraham many hundreds of years before Christ that through him God's blessing would extend to all nations and indeed the whole creation.

Inclusion in Abraham's family was thus never going to be tied to circumcision; it was always going to be about faith—"just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'" (3:6; cf. Gen. 15:6). God had always intended to enfold Gentiles as Gentiles into the family of Abraham; God had always intended to reckon people a part of Abraham's family by faith, and not by works of law.

Therefore, Paul can draw the conclusion: "Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham" (3:7). Those who are of the same faith as Abraham share in the same blessing promised to Abraham. You must, then, be *an Abraham look-alike*; you must live your life just like Abraham did his; that is, by faith, for Abraham was "the man of faith" (3:9).

## **An Abraham Look-Alike**

But what does an Abraham look-alike look like? What does it mean to be a man or woman of faith, like Abraham? It means, first of all, that you have *a Christ-focused faith*. Genesis 15:6 says Abraham "believed God." But it would be a mistake to take this to mean that Abraham simply had some vague notion of a divine being or higher power. No, what it meant for Abraham was to believe in the God who had spoken a very specific word to him, a word of promise. But now, in these last days, God has spoken to us through his Son (cf. Heb. 1:2). Jesus Christ is the one who has died and been raised and now sits at the right hand of God and will one day return to judge the living and the dead; and it is this Jesus in whom all the promises of God are both Yes and Amen. And so to be a man or woman of faith, and thus a child of Abraham, is to live a life of faith that is focused upon all that God has promised to do for you and for the world in his Son, Jesus Christ.

But to be of the same faith as Abraham also means that this faith of yours is *an obedient faith*. While Abraham is indeed the *model* of faith, his faith was no mere intellectual assent. No, his was a living and active kind of faith, not a dead one. His faith was what led him to follow

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<sup>2</sup> Abraham's blessing shouldn't be equated with justification. It certainly includes God's counting us righteous because of Christ. But it goes beyond that. In fact, God's justifying us in Christ Jesus opens the door for every other blessing God intends for humanity and indeed the whole creation.

God even when he had no idea where God was going to take him (Heb. 11:8). His was a faith what enabled him to offer up his own son Isaac (Gen. 22; Heb. 11:17-18; James 2:21). “You see that faith was active along with his works,” the Book of James reminds us, “and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’” (2:22-23).

Yet Abraham’s obedient faith wasn’t a perfect faith; a quick perusal of his own life’s story makes that perfectly clear. But Abraham’s faith was *a persevering faith*. And so too is yours, if you are “of faith,” like Abraham, the man of faith. This means not waffling in unbelief and thus wavering concerning the promises of God. This also means not staying down when you fall down, but getting back up, dusting yourself off with repentance, refocusing your life with faith, and setting out again in the strength of the Holy Spirit. A perseverant faith means growing increasingly strong in faith over your lifetime, just like Abraham did, and thus growing in your capacity to give God glory by being ever-increasingly convinced that God is able to do for you what he has promised (cf. Rom. 4:20-21). This was the trajectory of Abraham’s life. “That is why, as Paul says, “his faith was ‘counted to him as righteousness’” (Rom. 4:22). “But the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also” (Rom. 4:23-24).

## Conclusion

Practically speaking, to live your life as an Abraham look-alike will mean that you’ll need to go; you’ll need to leave; and you’ll need to seek. God’s first word to Abraham was “Go.” So, too, if you follow in his footsteps, you’ll need to go; you’ll need to go out from the world in order to be set apart for God; no longer conformed to the pattern of this world (Rom. 12:2). Just like Abraham, then, you’ll also need to leave; you’ll need to say goodbye to the life you perhaps imagined for yourself: the comforts, the perks, the benefits; instead, it will mean going with Jesus outside the camp to bear the reproach he himself bore (Heb. 13:13).

But you’ll only truly go and leave if you, like Abraham, are seeking a better future from God. It is said of Abraham that he lived his life as a nomad because he was “looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10). So, too, you and me, like Abraham, need to have our hearts set on pilgrimage, not settling down as though this place were lasting. “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:14).

A city that is to come—that is the Christian hope! Not simply going to heaven when you die but inhabiting a real city, which will be the fulfillment of God’s blessing to Abraham; it will also be the consummation of everything God has been doing from the beginning—all because of Christ and through Christ.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor

pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. . . .

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. . . .

The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. . . .

He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev. 21:1-7, 22:1-5, 17, 20).

Amen.

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