

Lesson 2: Noah to Abraham (Genesis 4-22)

The Continuation of Sin

As a result of their sin, Adam and Eve are exiled East of Eden without hope of return. Suffering and enslaved to their passions, they no longer entrust themselves to their heavenly Father. Humanity is wounded and in need of instruction so that trust in God might be reestablished. That is really what the Old Testament is all about: God teaching His people to regain their trust in Him.

Tragically, however, sin begins to multiply very quickly.³⁹ Cain kills Abel out of envy, and from that first murder things keep going downhill. Because of the sin of Adam, subsequent generations suffer the consequence of sin and they themselves enter into sin.⁴⁰ It gets so bad that God acts to intervene. “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”⁴¹ Thus the Great Flood occurs as a consequence of human sin. This is a difficult but important lesson. We have to take responsibility for the devastating results that come from our evil decisions. God allows the natural consequences to follow from our bad free choices. It is not so much a punishment externally inflicted by God as the direct product of our sin. The Flood, like suffering, sickness, death, and other natural disasters is a result of the Fall. God does not inflict suffering on the world, we inflict it on ourselves through our own sinfulness.

Why does God allow all this to happen? Why does He not just intervene and stop the chain of events that we have started? If He wanted to, He could just let us start over every time we make a mistake. He could have made it so our wickedness was instantly and painlessly forgiven, with no tragic consequences. But this is not how He created us. By being made in the image and likeness of God we are free creatures, and God respects our freedom too much for Him to simply intervene and deny us our capacity to choose. God, in His desire for us to be free, will let us have what we choose, even if it hurts us. He allows us to be responsible for our own actions and their outcome. As John Paul II states, to strip man of his responsibility “would be to deny the person’s dignity and freedom, which are manifested, even though in a negative and disastrous way, also in this responsibility for sin committed.”⁴² Therefore God permits the devastation that follows from moral evil as a testimony to the significance of our free choices. Freedom possesses a great dignity, but it can be abused. The work of salvation is to harness the power of freedom to love God and each other.⁴³

There is a pattern that is repeated throughout the Bible. First, God seeks to establish a covenant with his people. Second, the people break the covenant through sin, disobedience, and a lack of trust in God. Third, God’s judgment allows the natural consequences of the abuse of freedom, and there is great suffering for the people.

³⁹ CCC, #401

⁴⁰ Romans 5:12, 19

⁴¹ Genesis 6:5-22

⁴² Apostolic Exhortation, John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, #16

⁴³ CCC, #387

Finally, when the people return to God repentant, He shows mercy to them and renews the covenant.

The Family of Noah

So even though humanity had been judged guilty for their crimes with the consequence of the whole world being flooded, God shows mercy to Noah and renews the covenant with him. Noah is saved from the devastation of the flood, and representatives of the earth's living creatures find a refuge in his ark. The Lord then expands this new covenant to include Noah's household, and as a sign he set a rainbow in the sky.⁴⁴ Just as God drew creation and order out of the waters in the Genesis 1 and 2, the same happens here. From the waters of the flood God recreates the world, renews order and establishes a new covenant.

This is a new opportunity for humanity to entrust itself to God. And yet sin begins again, for although Shem (Noah's eldest son) and his descendents were to be the leaders of God's covenantal family,⁴⁵ Ham (Noah's second son) and *his* descendants seek to grasp superiority for themselves. Chapter ten gives us the generational lineage of Shem and Ham, and in these two lines we see very different characteristics. Shem's family line symbolizes the "Kingdom of God," those who live their lives in trust and obedience to the will of God, whereas Ham's family line symbolizes the "Kingdom of Man," those who live in sin, doing as they like without regard for the dictates of the Creator. Their sin was so bad that we could call Ham's line Israel's most wanted list.

As an aside, it is worthwhile to note that although we may find the tenth chapter of Genesis tedious with all its names and genealogies, the fact is that this list of descendents is helpful for understanding the familial origins of conflicts, which will continue down through the centuries. For example, as we will see, the Canaanites, who are descended from Canaan, the son of Ham, will often be the primary threat to the Israelites, who are descended from Shem. Egypt is also a son of Ham, and the Egyptians will also be a great threat to the Israelite people. Again, this manifests the long-term effects of the division which sin produces. Conflict within a family often lasts for generations, which is in part why it is so important to maintain strong, charitable relationships within our own families. We will see that much of the story of the Old Testament is about the consequences of sin within families.

The Tower of Babel

As the generations continue, we see that Nimrod, a descendent of Ham, is King of Babel in the land of Shinar. But this is a problem, because the blessing, anointing and authority went to Shem and his descendants. So why is a Hamite ruling? Then we see the men of Shinar (a land ruled by Hamites) say to themselves: "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Genesis 9:1-17

⁴⁵ Genesis 9:26

⁴⁶ Genesis 11:4

Now in Hebrew the word for “name” is the word for “dynasty” which is the word “Shem.” In other words, what the descendants of Ham in Shinar are really saying is, “Why should we have to follow the rule of the Shemites? We’ll set up our own Shem, our own dynasty.” The Hamites are trying to usurp God’s covenant blessing, trying to set up a counter kingdom to God’s covenant family, to God’s kingdom (this is the first of many examples of the conflict between the City of God vs. the City of Man). They are rebelling against the blessing and the authority that Noah had given to Shem, refusing to follow the anointed leader of God’s covenant family. They want independence from God because, like Adam, they fail to trust Him.

What are the consequences of this rebellion? God judges them and scatters them by confusing their language. Hence the place is called Babel, and the world would continue to bear the burden of multiple languages and the resulting difficulty of mutual communication between peoples. However, we believe that this separation will eventually come to an end, and we see a preview of this at Pentecost, when people of different languages understood one another, there “was foreshadowed the union of all peoples in the catholicity of the faith by means of the Church of the New Alliance, a Church which speaks every language, understands every, and embraces all tongues in charity, and thus overcomes the dispersion of Babel.”⁴⁷ The sin of the Old Testament, our faith tells us, will be reversed, and harmony in creation and among peoples will be restored.

Abraham, the Father of Faith

Ten generations later God establishes the next covenant with Abram. With Abram (who later becomes Abraham) God enlarges the covenant family to the level of a tribe, and the sign of this new covenant is circumcision. In Genesis 12, God commands Abram, “Go from your country [Babel/Babylon/Ur of the Chaldeans] and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” Basically, God is saying, “Leave everything behind you; abandon yourself to Me. Trust Me and obey Me.” God goes on to make three promises to Abram, which are crucial for understanding the rest of the Bible.

First, He promises land. “Go... to the land that I will show you.” Next, He promises a dynasty. “And I will make your name (=shem=dynasty) great.” And finally, God promises that Abram’s descendants will be the source of blessing for all the peoples of the world. “And by you all the families of the world shall bless themselves.”⁴⁸ These three promises are absolutely vital in order to grasp the meaning of salvation history.

Remember, this call of Abram comes right after we hear about the scattering of all the families of the world at Babel. God is calling Abram to be the instrument for bringing the broken family back into the blessing, back into the unity of the covenant.⁴⁹ This call of Abram is the remote preparation for the Catholic Church. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

⁴⁷ Vatican Council II, *Ad gentes divinitus*, Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, #4

⁴⁸ Genesis 12:1-3

⁴⁹ CCC, #60

The eternal Father, in accordance with the utterly gratuitous and mysterious design of his wisdom and goodness, created the whole universe and chose to raise up men to share in his own divine life, to which he calls all men in his Son. The Father determined to call together in a holy Church those who should believe in Christ. This family of God is gradually formed and takes shape during the stages of human history, in keeping with the Father's plan...The gathering together of the People of God began at the moment when sin destroyed the communion of men with God, and that of men among themselves. The gathering together of the Church is, as it were, God's reaction to the chaos provoked by sin...The remote preparation for this gathering together of the People of God begins when he calls Abraham and promises that he become the father of a great people.⁵⁰

Abram is not selected simply for his own benefit; he is to be the instrument by which God blesses all people. This is true of everyone who is called by God for a special mission. A call ("vocation") is not just an honorary thing for the individual's benefit, but rather so that all may receive the grace of God through the individual. Thus the chosen people, later named Israel, are not specially picked in spite of the rest of the world, but rather for the sake of the rest of the world. To be the Chosen People in this biblical sense, then, is not about a greater dignity or any kind of superiority, but it is about service to the rest of the world. It is about serving as God's ambassador to fulfill His mission among all the nations.

So, when are these three promises of Genesis 12 fulfilled? The promise of many descendants is shown to be true during the time of Moses, when Israel becomes a nation and is taken out of Egypt into the Promised Land. The promise of a great dynasty comes true through David, who establishes the Kingdom of Israel and the royal lineage. As to the last promise, that through Abram's descendants all the peoples of the earth shall be blessed, that is certainly fulfilled through Christ, the greatest of those who can call Abraham ancestor. Only in Jesus, Son of David, Son of Abraham, is the whole world blessed.

The problem with all this is that, as of yet, Abram is childless. Abram says to God, "O Lord God, what wilt thou give me, for I continue childless?"⁵¹ And yet God assures him, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them... So shall your descendants be. And he believed the Lord, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness."⁵² It is interesting to note that this dialogue took place "as the sun was going down."⁵³ In other words, Abram cannot see the stars, just as he cannot see his future offspring. It was as if God is saying, "You can't see the stars, but I can. Likewise, you can't see your descendants, but I can. Trust me." However, due to Sarai's continuing barrenness Abram and his wife Sarai fail in trust.⁵⁴ Instead of relying on God's promise, they decide to take matters into their own hands. Abram sleeps with

⁵⁰ CCC 759, 761-762

⁵¹ Genesis 15:2

⁵² Genesis 15:5,6

⁵³ Genesis 15:12

⁵⁴ Genesis 16

Sarai's servant, Hagar, and has a son by her named Ishmael. So Abram turns to immoral means – adultery – to get what he wants. The result is family chaos, for Hagar feuds with Sarai, and Hagar's descendents (who are normally identified with the Muslims) will be constantly feuding with Sarai's descendents (the Jews). The lesson is that all sin has terrible consequences, both immediate and remote.

God therefore has to make a new covenant with Abram, since it had just been broken through a lack of trust. So in Genesis 17 God changes Abram's name to Abraham and changes Sarai's name to Sarah, and continues to promise a child from their union. He also institutes a new regulation as punishment for their misbehavior: God demands that all the males be circumcised. This is now the official sign of God's covenant with Abraham. It seems like a strange sign for a covenant but it is both a covenantal sign of God's promise and a sign of Abraham's sin. Hagar was an Egyptian, and Egyptians practiced circumcision. According to some scholars, God, in a sense, is saying, "Abraham, if you want to act like an Egyptian by sleeping with them, then you are going to look like one." This is an example of how the covenantal promise often comes after an act of penance.

Now, because of their mistrust, both Abraham and Sarah laugh at the promise of ever having a son together – after all, Abraham is over a hundred years old, and Sarah is over ninety.⁵⁵ When they actually do have a child, his name is Isaac, which means "laughter." At last, Abraham has the child upon which all his hopes have been riding for so long. God's promise has been fulfilled at long last.

The Sacrifice of Isaac

But Abraham still has to prove his trust, abandonment and obedience to God, and so he is given one ultimate test. God tells Abraham, "Take your son, your only son Isaac [clarifying that Ishmael is not his legitimate son, and not part of the covenant], whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."⁵⁶ God is calling Abraham to empty himself of his deepest attachment: his love for his son Isaac, the heir God had promised. And Abraham obeys. He takes Isaac to the top of the mountain, places him on the altar, and raises his hand to strike him dead. He had such great faith in God that he knew Isaac could be brought back from the dead if God so chose.⁵⁷ But God sends an angel to stop Abraham from killing Isaac, and provides a ram for him to offer up instead. This is how Abraham proves his faith and trust in God: through obedience.

This is the story of Abraham, the "Father of Faith." God took Abraham and educated him in trust and obedience through the circumstances of his life. He was called out of his homeland, he was promised a physiologically impossible heir, and when the heir finally did arrive, Abraham was ordered to sacrifice him up to God. Through these tests, he

⁵⁵ Genesis 17:17; 18:12

⁵⁶ Genesis 22:2

⁵⁷ Hebrews 11:19

grew in holiness and perfection in trust of the divine Father. It was through faith and trust that Abraham obeyed the Lord.⁵⁸

The same is true with us. The Father will give us a constant flow of opportunities to grow in filial trust, and he will give us the grace to make good use of these opportunities. The point is that if we believe in God, if we truly trust in Him, we will follow His directions. Even if we don't understand them or desire them, we know that He is a loving Father and that His instructions are the only way to ever become truly blessed and happy. But in order to place our trust in God through the difficulties of life we must be people of prayer and meditation. It is through prayer that we acquire the capacity to trust.⁵⁹ Prayer is the fuel that drives the engine of faith, and unless we make time for prayer our faith will wither and eventually die. To be a person of faith, like Abraham, requires prayer.

The Lamb of God

In the liturgy we often hear of Christ referenced as “The Lamb of God.” We also see this title at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry.⁶⁰ This is a direct reference to Abraham and Isaac. The Mass also references the sacrifice of Isaac as a prefigurement of Christ’s own sacrifice. Just as Abraham was to offer up his only son, God the Father offers up his only Son, Christ. The meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross is in part understood as the fulfillment of the sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah that never took place. “Moriah” is the name given to the place by Abraham, meaning the Lord “will provide,” and in Hebrew provide is *yireh*, and the place is Mt. Moriah where Salem is, which is now called *yeru-salem*, that is *Jeru-salem* – the very place of Calvary. It is in Christ that the promises and covenants made with Abraham are fulfilled. There are other features of Isaac’s sacrifice that make it a prefigurement of Christ’s sacrifice: the father giving up his son; the son surrendering himself to his father’s will; the son carrying the wood for the sacrifice; and the tools of sacrifice such as the wood and the thorns.

The New Testament clearly sees the sacrifice of Isaac as a type of Christ’s death on the cross.⁶¹ The Fathers of the Church also read the Scriptures in this way. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, for example said:

The whole mystery of faith can be seen in the story of Isaac. The lamb is fixed to the tree, suspended by its horns; the first born carries upon him the wood for sacrifice. He, then, who upholds the universe by the word of his power, is the same who bears the burden of our wood, and is hung up on the wood, upholding as God, and carried as the lamb, the Holy Spirit having in figure divided the mystery between the two, the only son and the lamb who appears at his side. In the lamb is revealed the mystery of death and in the only son the life which will never be cut short by death.⁶²

Saint Ambrose wrote:

⁵⁸ Hebrews 11:8-11; CCC, ##145-156

⁵⁹ CCC, ##2570-2573

⁶⁰ John 1:29

⁶¹ e.g. Romans 8:31-32; 1 Peter 1:19-20

⁶² *Hom. Res. I*; P.G. XLVI, 601 C-D

Whom does the ram represent, if not him of whom it is written, 'He has raised up a horn for his people' (Psalm 148:14)? [...] Christ: It is He whom Abraham saw in that sacrifice; it was his passion he saw. Thus, our Lord himself says of Abraham: 'Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad' (John 8:56). Therefore Scripture says: 'Abraham called the name of that place 'The Lord will provide,' so that today one can say: the Lord appeared on the mount, that is, he appeared to Abraham revealing his future passion in his body, whereby he redeemed the world; and sharing, at the same time, the nature of his passion when he caused him to see the ram suspended by his horns. The thicket stands for the scaffold of the cross.⁶³

⁶³ *De Abraham*, 1, 8, 77-78