

The Backdrop to Abraham

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Date: 12 April 2020

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[0 : 00] Tonight we begin a new series that I'm very excited about. It'll be about seven weeks on the life of Abraham. Now I know we read from Genesis 3, but this is the setting that sets the stage for Abraham's story.

So Abraham walks on and through the pages of Scripture like a giant. He is one of the most important figures of the Christian faith. The Bible talks about Abraham, it feels like on every page. The New Testament is concerned especially with who are Abraham's descendants. Now of course many in Jesus' day are talking about who is physically descended from Abraham, but Jesus and his apostles are concerned with who is spiritually descended from Abraham.

Christians are at least spiritually the ones who are the true descendants of Abraham. It's those who have faith, because of course Abraham was the man of faith.

He's a brilliant example of what it means to live by faith, but he's more than just an example. It's not just a good example. Abraham's story is actually our origin story.

[1 : 16] In fact, it's the sort of origin story that if you don't get your mind around it, you'll miss so much of the richness of your own story and of the Gospel itself.

So the story of Abraham bursts out of Genesis chapter 12. It's absolutely a blaze with hope. It's a marvelous story. But before we can understand the beauty of this new hope, we have to understand the darkness of the despair that precedes it.

So we're going to read Genesis chapter 11 verses 27 to 32, and this will be the text that our sermon today is anchored out of.

Starting in verse 27. Now these are the generations of Tara. Tara fathered Abram, Nahor, and Huron, and Huron fathered Lot.

Huron died in the presence of his father Tara in the land of his kindred in Ur of the Chaldeans. And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife Milka, the daughter of Huron, the father of Milka, and Iska.

[2 : 32] Now Sarai was barren. She had no child. Tara took Abram his son and Lot the son of Huron, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan.

But when they came to Heron, they settled there. The days of Tara were 205 years, and Tara died in Heron.

Ten times in the book of Genesis we find the phrase, now these are the generations of so and so. This is not like a family tree from Ancestry.com.

It's something like it, but it's much more than that. When it talks about the generations in the book of Genesis that marks important divisions in the story, these generations direct our attention to what we need to focus on.

What we need to focus on next, it's like the changing of a scene in a movie, with a scene shifts to an entirely new location, and you get a new setting and you get new characters.

[3 : 43] Now in this particular chunk of the story, this generation section is quite short, and it just goes from Tara to his death, mapping out his children and grandchildren.

But the very center of this narrative is the thing that everything is pointing to, and it's the fact that Sarai is barren. Barrenness is the backdrop.

Barrenness is the setting to this whole story, to the whole story of Abraham. We need to understand that. But this story and the emphasis on Sarai's barrenness doesn't come in a vacuum.

It flows out of and develops from everything that came before it. So we're going to reflect back on what Thomas read for us from Genesis 3 and kind of think through Genesis 3 and 4 and down the line up to Genesis 11 and kind of a fly by, if you will.

So in Genesis 3, of course, God has put Adam and Eve in a garden, and he's given them access to the tree of life for eternal life, and he's also placed there the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and he's commanded them to not eat from that one tree.

[4 : 56] Of course, they do eat from it, and they're tempted to this sin by the serpent. Now when God comes and discovers this, in verse 14, you can look at it if you have your Bible, after sinning, God doesn't begin by addressing Adam and Eve.

He addresses the serpent. He says, serpent, because you have done this, and he doesn't curse Adam and Eve.

He does tell them eventually what the consequences of their actions will be, but he curses the serpent. Now we need to notice something before we talk about the next verse in 15, that in many of our translations it's going to say offspring, and of course it is talking about the offspring. Now the literal word behind that is most directly just seed. I'll probably say that a lot, it's hard to get my mind out of thinking of it as seed, because I've read it that way for so long, but it's a very valuable thing to understand.

Now just like the English word seed, the Hebrew word for seed has three different kind of meanings. It can mean one literal seed that you would plant an apple seed and get an apple tree.

[6 : 10] Seed can also mean plural seeds at the same time, like I was sowing seed, but seed can also mean offspring. Now of course the author uses all three of those meanings, and he plays with them and weaves together some incredible kind of narrative intricacies that are exciting but also meaningful.

So in verse 15 he says there's going to be enmity between the offspring or the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. What this is pointing to is that all humanity ultimately is going to fit into categories.

Category one is the offspring of the serpent. It's those who submit their lives and their purposes to the evil one. Category two are the ones who submit their lives and purpose to God.

There is no morally neutral gray middle zone. We are not our own masters. Jesus actually makes this point in the Gospel according to John chapter 8 verse 44.

I'll read it for you. He says you are, and he's talking to the Pharisees, who are proud of their ancestry pointing back to Abraham.

[7 : 28] Jesus says you are of your father, the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him.

When he lies, he speaks out of his own character for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which one of you can fix me of sin?

If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.

So we find that here in Genesis 3, we are setting the stage for us for understanding the rest of the Bible and frankly the rest of history in these categories of two seeds, two spiritual ancestries, so to speak.

But of course after this grave error in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve throw away God's reign and rule and choose their own path, ultimately the path of the serpent, God doesn't just throw up his hands in exasperation.

[8 : 37] He doesn't give up. This book is always a book of hope. And the rest of the Bible, this whole story, it flows out of this moment, out of this promise that a seed will come, a seed of the woman, an offspring.

And he'll save us. He will come and he will destroy the very thing that has driven us away from God. It sets up longing for a savior.

So of course when we read the story like a story and we kind of move on to the next portion of the story, we're naturally set up then to start looking for this offspring.

We're looking for the seed of the woman. We know, okay, God said there's going to be a seed born, an offspring who's going to crush the serpent. That's what we want because the serpent's what caused all this problem in the first place.

The serpent introduced the evil to us. So if we can get rid of the serpent, that's what we need. So as we move through the story of Genesis, it's from this place of longing, a place of expectation, looking for the savior.

[9 : 50] But of course in the very next story in Genesis chapter 4, Adam and Eve, they have two children, two offspring, two seed, Cain and Abel.

And Abel has favor with God and Cain does not. So we have a righteous one and what Cain does is he gets jealous and kills Abel.

And we find in the end of the chapter that Adam and Eve had likely set their hope on Abel as the righteous seed. They were thinking, here's two children, one of these surely will be the savior. God promised. He promised an offspring to save us. But he was crushed, Abel was crushed and didn't crush the serpent.

Now in chapter 4 of Genesis verse 25, Adam and Eve have a third son and they name him Seth. Even the name basically just remains replacement. And it says quite specifically that God has appointed another seed in place of Abel who was crushed.

[10 : 56] But Seth isn't the one either. And Seth fathers children and he dies. And Seth's children, father children and they die. And the story goes on and on and on for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Generation after generation, we're looking for the seed who will save us. And finally we come to Noah and we think, oh, here's a righteous one amidst a world that's absolutely just terrible and wicked and horrible.

There's one bright spot in it. Surely Noah is the seed. And of course God judges the world with the flood and he wipes away all the filth and he preserves Noah and his family.

But when we come out the other side, we find that Noah has the same infection that Adam and Eve had and that Cain had. And he sins and he falls and he fails to be the seed who will crush the serpent.

Another failure. Noah has three sons and one of those sons, Shem, is pointed to and we know that again by the genealogy.

[12 : 06] So now these are the generations. Earlier we find a section of these are the generations of Shem, Noah's son. And it goes down the line and Shem's great, great, great, great, great, maybe great grandson is Tara, the father of Abram.

Sidebar. Abram later, his name will be changed to Abraham. It just means basically father and father of many respectively. So don't get confused if we call him Abram from this text.

Later he will become Abraham. But for generations and generations and generations from Adam to Tara, to Adam and Seth and Noah and Shem and Tara and all the dozens of people in between, we've been waiting for the seed to save us.

And he hasn't come. So much longing. But the story leaves us wanting and waiting.

I can't help but feeling that early readers maybe after every generational failure would have felt a lot like Jesus' disciples after the crucifixion.

[13 : 14] Well, we really thought he was the one. What now? Is there any hope? At this point, it's interesting, if you check out the life spans in Genesis from Noah's great, Noah's grandfather I think is Methuselah.

They lived over 900 years old, nearly a thousand years old. And from that point, if you were to chart out their life spans, they just plummet. They lived for 900 years and 800 and 600 and 500 and 400 all the way down.

Humanity is careening toward extinction. And I have to wonder, if God hadn't stepped in in Genesis 12 with the story of Abraham, if God hadn't interceded in human history, I wonder if we would have snuffed ourselves out.

Wouldn't that be just like us? So we find that not only is there generation after generation of kind of disappointed hope, but it's actually been funneling down, it's been narrowing down where we should be looking for this seed to come from.

Because of course, by the time of Tara, there's many, many, many people on the earth. If we drew out Adam's family tree, it would look like the root system of a forest when we're all done, right?

[14 : 36] But we know that Eve's line, Adam and Eve kind of came down to Seth's line. And Seth had a bunch of sons, but out of Seth's descendants, it narrowed down to Noah's line. And from Noah's line down to Shem's line.

And now, in Genesis 11, we find that it's in Tara's line. But what happens in Genesis 11? Tara's line hits a dead end.

Sarah is barren. And the line stops here. Where is the hope for the seed now?

Who will save humanity? Now we're going to go zoom back in. We've zoomed out and looked at Genesis 3 to 11. And now we're going to zoom back in to Genesis 11, 27 to 32.

And we're going to look at two characters who've been introduced to us in this story. We'll get to Abram next week. Today, we're going to look at Tara first.

[15 : 35] Tara, the pagan. Now this is the godly line of Seth. This is the godly line of Noah and Shem. But Tara, by the time we get down to him, he's steeped in paganism and idolatry.

So Abram is born to Tara in Ur of the Chaldeans. And this is kind of just a hub, a center of pagan worship. It's basically Babylon. And later in this very passage, Tara moves his family from Ur of the Chaldeans to Huron.

And Huron is like the mecca for moon worship, for worshiping this moon god. And ancient readers would have picked up on it more quickly than we do.

We need help getting there because it's not obvious to us. But even the names of Tara's children and all the female names, Sarai, Milka, Iska, they're all named after kind of the mythological royal family of this moon god.

God will call a worshiper for himself out of this family. But the family themselves are as far from God as you can get.

[16 : 48] Very pagan. Seth and Tara form these two dramatic bookends. Remember, Seth is the son, the third son of Adam. And Tara now is this kind of final descendant before Abraham.

And in Seth's time, it says in the end of Genesis 4, in his days when they first began to call upon the name of the Lord, worship of God started then in earnest, in kind of a, with a fullness.

But by Tara's time, it was gone. And they're worshiping the moon. The light has gone out.

What hope is there? It's dwindled to nothing. From Genesis 3 up until now, it's very important for us to see that when left to ourselves, we would never choose God.

What hope is there for us? When left to ourselves, we never choose God. That's why Jesus says in John 15, 16, you didn't choose me, I chose you.

[17 : 56] We didn't love God first. God loved us first. God had to come and seek us out because we weren't seeking Him at all. We would never choose God if left to ourselves.

We're just like Tara's line and like Tara himself. You might say, isn't that just kind of depressing and guilt inducing? No, here's why this is so important. It's easy to love the lovable.

But who could love the unlovable? Read Romans 5, 6 through 8.

For while we were still weak at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die.

But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While we were still sinners, He came and died for us.

[19 : 03] He pursued us. The love of God becomes more beautiful to us when we see that He desired us, when we were undesirable. He loved us when we were unlovable.

He died for us when we were dead spiritually. The setting and backdrop to Abraham's story, this is the backdrop to our story, because we were far from God and had nothing to offer Him.

And that's when He came and saved us. So that's Tara, the pagan, character number one.

Character number two is Sarai, the baron wife.

Now the Bible doesn't take baroness and miscarriage flippantly. Baroness is awful. It's horrid because it's a kind of a deadness in the very womb and cradle of life.

In the biblical story, God uses baroness many times with many of the matriarchs of our faith in the Old Testament, and in the New. And He uses baroness not to cultivate a longing for a son, but He uses baroness to cultivate a longing for the son.

[20 : 23] In other words, Sarai wasn't baron to create a longing for Isaac. Sarai was baron to create a longing for God.

Sarai, the baron wife, and Tara, the pagan father, this brokenness, sadness, despair, this rebellion, the sin, this is the backdrop for the explosive story of what God is about to do.

Now, we're not going to really cover chapter 12 this week, but the first verse of chapter 12 starts with, Now the Lord said to Abram, God speaks.

The beginning of chapter 11, humans are speaking a common language. They're using their language to unite themselves against God. That's building the tower of Babel.

But the beginning of the next chapter, God speaks and uses language to unite humanity back to Himself through one family and one seed.

[21 : 35] Scholar Dane Ortland said, If the actions of Jesus are reflective of who He most deeply is, and they are, then we cannot avoid the conclusion that it is the very fallenness which He came to undo that is most irresistibly attractive to Him.

That has always been true about God. So if the first eleven chapters of the Bible teach us anything about God, it's that God has moved to create life where there is nothing but deadness.

God moves toward us in the very spot of our failure and our weakness. God loves His enemies even when they hate Him, and God pursues most vigorously those who are farthest from Him.

And it's when things are at their bleakest that God's power and love are most beautiful. It's like a star whose beauty is best seen against the backdrop of the darkest night sky.

So from the setting of Abraham's story, we find that one note resounds like a clear bell, and it's that goodness and getting your life together are not prerequisites for God coming to you with His love, just the opposite.

[23 : 13] Jesus came not for the healthy, but for the sick. That's who He is. We have to be open to saying, I didn't get this right, Lord, that I need a Savior.

If we don't think we need a Savior, He can't save us. We have to let Him in. Praise God that He changes hearts and draws people to Himself even when they're farthest off.

Jesus will not be the sort of sugar sprinkled on top of your life. Jesus will not be your sidekick.

Jesus will not be your guru dispensing kind of bite-sized bits of wisdom. Jesus must be your Lord, and if you let Him, He'll save you.

He'll draw near to you. And if death itself could not keep Jesus in the ground, then no spiritual deadness, no brokenness in or around you, can keep Him from drawing close to you right now.

[24 : 30] Let's pray. Our gracious God and Father, we thank you for moving toward us in the midst of our sin, in the midst of our darkness, in the midst of our pain.

We thank you that even now, as we call on your name for salvation and we consider ourselves in Christ, we know our future is bright, but we look around at these dark circumstances, and we're tempted to despair.

Father, we take hope, we take courage, we put steel in our spines from the truth that you've given us in your word.

We praise you, and we just collapse onto you and trust you in the name of Christ. Amen.