

3 The Seed of Promise

This is the third talk outline in The God Story Sermon Series. The related chapter in The God Story book is Chapter 3, *The Seed of Promise*. The book in the Bible this chapter corresponds with is Genesis, chapters 12–50

Teaching Outline

Key aims

To explore the story of Abraham, God's call upon his life to steward the blessing of God to all nations, the covenantal way God bound Himself to his partner and what Abraham came to realise through the process of contending for the promise.

The God Story storytelling method

The God Story Storyteller understands that to teach The God Story effectively a dual teaching method is required. This is the art of teaching in a way that both **unfolds the eternal purposes of God through history and also releases them into personal encounter**. Practically this will mean prayerfully considering in each talk outline what parts you want to 'go deeper' in and what parts you want to mention at a headline level. We trust the Spirit will inspire and guide you to find the right cadence as you aim to give a passionate sweep of the unfolding narrative while also narrowing the focus in certain places to emphasise personal application and encounter.

Key Bible passages

You may want to read a short passage of scripture before you begin your talk. The passages below are the ones we believe are most relevant to this particular talk.

We recommend you choose one of these:

Genesis 12:1-3

Genesis 15

Genesis 17

Genesis 21

Genesis 22

Teaching notes

The notes provided will equip you to understand more of the context and more of the story as you prepare your talk. Generally speaking the talk outline follows the structure of the corresponding chapter in The God Story book. We feel the key sections in the Talk Outline below relate to the main flow of the unfolding scriptural narrative and so we have included key Biblical passages and quotes from The God Story to assist you in this. We recommend using these sections to shape your talk but please choose the parts which you feel are most helpful for your context.

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Introduction

Recap of previous session(s)

God's good creation has been attacked by a 'crafty' enemy, Satan, whose primary tactic was to deceive those created in the image of God to believe they could be God. The disease of self-gratification and self-exaltation (sin) has destroyed creation. Despite God's pursuit of his wayward sons and daughters, generation after generation have moved further away from God - east of Eden.

Talk overview

Abram's introduction to The God Story shatters the hollow and nebulous tone of Genesis 11. Genesis 12:1-3 is one of the most important passages in scripture and a hinge point in history. God calls Abram to leave his home to start walking into an unknown frontier and speaks a promise over him which encapsulates the Eternal Family's universal plan of redemption. But as stunning as God's plan is, however, it is absurd. Abram is a seventy-five year old nomad and his wife Sarah is barren. Abram will have to contend for this promise for many years, learning the true essence of God's promise is his presence. God will be patient with Abram, binding Himself to Abram in an unbreakable agreement of covenant and renaming him as Abraham, the father of nations. In the perfect time, Abraham and his wife Sarah will eventually give birth to a son, Isaac, but even after all of this an ultimate form of testing awaits Abraham. Through all of this Abraham captures the heart of God and God's seed of promise will pass through Abraham's subsequent generations - Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, eventually ending up in the heart of the Egyptian Empire.

Talk Outline

Key Teaching Sections

1 The promise and the voice (Gen 12:1-4)

- + Read Genesis 12:1-3 emphasising the significance of this verse. John Stott claimed this is "the text that the rest of the Bible expounds."¹

- + Teach how God calls Abram to detach himself, layer after layer, in progressive vulnerability, from all that is familiar to his heart: his country, his people, his family (v.1). At this stage Abram is 75 years old. Why did Abram leave? We have to conclude that there was something compelling and captivating about God's voice that moved him.
- + **The promise:** Explain how God's promise to Abram is a reformulation of the original blessing given in Eden to Adam. Point out how God is still set on restoring the whole creation but he is narrowing the focus upon one family. i.e. The 'scandal of particularity' (choosing one specific people group) was always for ultimate inclusivity (in the end to have all nations).

≡ Key quote

"Notice the details at the end of chapter 11 which reveal Abram's original homeland: Mesopotamia or 'the Ur of the Chaldeans' to put it precisely. This is much more significant than people usually realise. The Ur of the Chaldeans was essentially the heartbeat of Babylon - and Babylon, as we referred to in the last chapter, is portrayed as the ultimate rival to God's design for human flourishing. God's decision therefore to choose a man from this city is not accidental or coincidental. It is overwhelmingly redemptive! God is choosing a man from the epicentre of an idolatrous and rebellious civilisation, to begin the process of redeeming broken humanity and transforming all nations. Wow!"²

- + Emphasise this simple summary statement - Abram has been **blessed to be a blessing**.
- + Take note of Abram's **radical obedience** (Gen 12:4) *"So Abram went, as the Lord had told him."*
 - "A simple sentence. A radical obedience. Abram has heard the echo of Eden, 'Where are you?'"³ Notice how Abram has started walking west! God has found a partner to walk with him not away from him.
- + **A stunning but absurd promise** - Emphasise the fact Abram was 75 years old and his wife Sarah was barren when God gave them this promise.

2 The proposal (Gen 15:1-6)

Explain how 10 years have passed before God appears to Abram again who is still without a son,

- + **Key verse:** *"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."* (15:1)

- + Emphasise how God is teaching Abram the central God Story theme: **God's presence is his promise.**

≡ Key quote

"These anchoring words to a weary and waiting heart are God's way of saying to Abram, In your waiting I am more than enough for you, I exceed anything I ever promised you." ⁴

- + Encourage people to think of this moment as **God's engagement** to Abram i.e. God is pledging his commitment to Abram **but cannot give Abram the promise before he has given Abram himself.**
- + Despite God's word highlight how Abram's faith muscles have grown weak and suggests a different option (his servant Eliezer).
- + **Read God's response** (Gen 15:4-5): *"This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."*

≡ Key quote

"Imagine Abram's heart suddenly starting to beat again, as he sees his destiny written in the myriad of stars lighting up the night sky. Essentially God is saying, 'Abram – look up, my boy! Even though you can't see it – even though it seems absurd and impossible – I have not forgotten you! If I can create all the stars of the sky, I can bring forth my promise to you, my son.'" ⁵

- + **Read Abram's final response** (Gen 15:6): *"Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness"*
 - **Teaching point:** Abraham shows us true faith is vulnerable, active, confident trust in God's goodness and his promise. This is the basis of right relationship with God (c/f Gal 3:16-17).

3 Covenant (Gen 15:9-19)

Describe this remarkable intimate and mysterious scene as God comes to make a covenant with Abram.

≡ Key quote

*"Covenant is established on sacrificial love for the other and is marked by sacrifice, forgiveness, faithfulness and loyalty... God is the great initiator in this proposal. God lays a table for Abram. The animals God asked Abram to place on the table are cut in two - side by side - symbolising the giving of oneself on behalf of the other. God is opening up his heart to Abram in this most intimate of encounters....Joined with God, through a symbolic ritual of death, Abram ironically has never been more alive. The depth of loving union God invited Abram into had melted his heart, allowing it to become a warm and receptive seedbed, where the seed of promise could thrive. In doing so God had irrevocably bound himself to Abram. This is what covenant is all about."*⁶

- + Highlight the difference between the biblical idea of covenant and the modern day secular equivalent of contract. See *The God Story* p.44 for a fuller explanation of this.

4 Abram's mistake (Gen 16)

Even after this profound encounter Abram makes a huge mistake, sleeping with Sarah's servant Hagar in an attempt to accomplish God's promise his way. Ishmael is born

» Opportunity for application or reflection

Reflect on how we have all been tempted to short cut God's promise by making our own way in our strength.

- + Emphasise how God is still committed to Abram but it is Abram who is still not ready to steward the magnitude of God's blessing.
- + **Hagar** (Gen 16): Take time to highlight God's pursuit of Hagar even though she has been used and abused. Emphasise how God's encounter with Hagar results in the revealing of one of God's most personal names. 'El Roi' meaning '*the God who sees me*' (v.13)

5 The marriage (Gen 17)

If Genesis 15 is a little like God proposing to Abram, you could think of Genesis 17 like a marriage. Explain that this scene comes another 13 long years after Abram's mistake and 25 years since the original promise (Genesis 12:1-3). Abram is 99 when God shows up again.

- + Highlight how it appears Abram is now ready. "We can only conclude God had used these years to tenderly carve Abram's heart into a holy receptacle now ready to carry God's dream for the world." ⁷
- + **The marriage:** The long season of waiting is about to come to an end. God appears again to Abram and we see three key elements of a marriage in this encounter:
 - First, God appears in glorious splendour and initiates covenant. (17:1-4). Abram responds in loving surrender. "Abram fell face down." (v.3)
 - Second, the covenant is symbolised by circumcision, not unlike the giving of rings in marriage (v.24). Circumcision was a painful, daily reminder that the fruitfulness of their family is a gift from God.
 - Third, a reformulation of identity took place as a new name was conferred upon Abram. Abram will become Abraham (father of nations). Sarai will become Sarah.

≡ Key quote

"The word 'become' here is important. It speaks to the process of spiritual formation. Abram became what he was destined to inherit. Or as Eugene Peterson translates it, 'Abraham was first named "father" and then became a father because he dared to trust God to do what only God could do.' This is a central theme of The God Story. We become people of promise before we inherit the promise. Identity precedes destiny. And continual trust is needed every step of the way in the 'becoming.'" ⁸

» Application opportunity

Who are you becoming? How much are you trusting God in the process?

+ Isaac

- Emphasise how Isaac is born at the perfect time, and his name means 'laughter' (Gen 21:1-7). Ishmael came through control and human manufacturing but the son of promise could only come through wonder, joy and loving surrender. Abraham only happened to be 100 and Sarah 90!

6 The ultimate test of trust (Gen 22)

Explain how a number of years have passed but in Abraham's old age his depth of love with God would face its ultimate test.

- + **Key verse:** *"After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." he said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."* (Gen 22:1-2)
- + Emphasise how every word in this passage rings with profound vulnerability and prophetic foreshadowing.
- + Encourage people to enter into the emotional intensity of this scene. Imagine Abraham's dilemma - after almost 40 years of waiting for his promise, now he is being asked to place it on the altar.
- + Focus on how Abraham was experiencing the unrelenting tension of 'God as Tester' and 'God as Provider' simultaneously.⁹
- + See The God Story p.49/50 for an imaginative retelling of the scene
- + **Key focus:** In the end Abraham's willingness to raise his knife revealed his trust in God's provision no matter the cost
- + **God's response:** Focus on how God is captured by Abraham's response
- + **Key verse:** *"Now I know you fear God Abraham, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son"* (Gen 22:12)

≡ Key quote

"Abraham has completely won the heart of God. His obedience in this most sacred of moments, reveals our choices to completely surrender, can elicit a 'now I know' response from God, moving his heart in breathtaking wonder. God can be completely satisfied that the seed of promise is blossoming in the heart of his closest companion on the earth. Isaac may have been the sacrifice laid on the altar, but God really wanted Abraham. It's no wonder this is where we find

the first mention of worship in the Bible. Worship and sacrifice are inseparable. Abraham who had received this promise many years ago and not always fully believed is now presented to us as a son who totally embodies the essence of The God Story — only those who die to themselves know how to truly live, only those who give up the gift can truly receive the Giver, only those who lay down the promise can receive the fullness of his presence.”¹⁰

- + Describe how God provides a ram to sacrifice and the significant foreshadowing taking place here as God reveals another of his names - Jehovah Jireh (Gen 22:13-14)
- + **Important note:** Emphasise the shocking nature of this test to the modern mind and how it should cause a visceral reaction in us - yet explain how the story draws us into holy mystery, foreshadowing a God who will not hold back his Son in an act of sacrificial love. (See this section in The God Story for a fuller account of this.)

» Application opportunity

What is more important to you - the promise or the Promise-Giver? What kind of emotions / reactions does this scene raise within you?

7 East of Eden (Gen 25–36)

There is obviously a lot of content left between Genesis 25-50. Therefore we suggest only briefly highlighting the key headlines of the next chapters of Genesis to simply knit the story together and set the context for the next chapter ('Birth of a nation') - we have included the main elements of the Genesis narrative as the story unfolds for you to edit and adapt as you wish

- + Abraham dies aged 175 but not before he finds a bride for Isaac, Rebekah (Gen 24)
- + Isaac, carrying his own miraculous story of conception, prays for 20 years and God eventually answers with twins - Jacob and Esau.
- + Jacob manipulates Esau and seizes his birthright in exchange for a bowl of soup (Gen 25:19-35) and then later deceives Isaac for the blessing usually reserved for firstborn - Esau (Gen 27).

- + Jacob flees his home and encounters God in a dream - 'the stairway to heaven' - and calls the place Bethel (Gen 28). In the dream God declares that Jacob will steward the promise of blessing flowing from his father (Isaac) and grandfather (Abraham).
- + Jacob, living among his uncle Laban, will marry Rachel and Leah and eventually end up with twelve sons who will eventually become the heads of The Twelve Tribes of Israel (Gen 29-31).
- + After twenty years away from home, Jacob returns to meet Esau. On the way he wrestles with God by the river Jabook, in an intense encounter. Here, God changes Jacob's name to Israel (Gen 32:22-32).
- + After Jacob and Esau's relationship is restored Jacob returns to Bethel where God reaffirms the covenant promise (Gen 35).

8 Joseph (Gen 37-50)

- + Overview of the story of Joseph
 - One of Jacob's twelve sons; an immature 'dreamer' who was sold by his brothers into slavery, eventually making his way into the royal court in Egypt where he became second in command to Pharaoh.
 - Because of the divine favour and 'excellent spirit' resting on Joseph he was able to interpret dreams and provide wisdom for the nations in a time of crisis (regional famine)
 - His brothers travel to Egypt for food and without realising it meet with Joseph. Through this encounter Joseph realises God has sent him to Egypt to preserve the people of Israel, "a remnant on the earth" (Gen 45:7) - those who carried the seed of promise.
 - Joseph is eventually reconciled to his brothers and to his father Jacob. Jacob's whole family (seventy in total) resettle in Egypt where the people of Israel greatly multiply.

- **Key verse:** After Jacob dies and his brothers fear that they could still face revenge from Joseph, his reply speaks not just to this story but The God Story narrative to date: *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children."* (Gen 50:20-21)

9 Helpful Summary

- + Emphasise how these verses above (Gen 50:20-21) not only conclude Joseph's story of redemption but, as they come in the closing verses of the book of Genesis, serve as a perfect summary of The God Story plot to date - what the enemy has meant for harm God has turned for good!

≡ Key quote

*"In fact if we draw a line from Eden in Genesis 1 to the end of Joseph's story in the final chapter of Genesis we can conclude: despite the fragility of the plot, due to man's own attempts to literally write their own self-centred script and the ongoing influence of the devil, the story has been persevered and redemption is underway. Divine blessing has multiplied through the sons of Abraham's line. Despite their weaknesses he, Isaac and Jacob have said YES to God, and now through their sons and daughters a hopeful seed of promise has found its way into the dark womb of Egypt. A small and insignificant nomadic tribe with a host of dysfunctional issues have been caught up in the eternal purposes of God for the world."*¹¹

Questions for Reflection or Further Application

Where are you being invited to trust God and follow his voice no matter the cost? Is there any area in your life where you are trying to engineer God's promise in your own wisdom instead of wholeheartedly trusting God's plan?

Three Sacred Themes

The closing page of each chapter in The God Story book includes a summary shaped around three sacred themes which we believe helps knit the overarching storyline together. Feel free to use this as an extra resource to The God Story Sermon Series if you feel this would be helpful to summarise each talk. You will find this for *The Seed* on p.54.

End of sermon

- 1 John R. W. Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (revised edition; London: Scripture Union, 1984), p.51
- 2 Alain Emerson and Adam Cox, *The God Story; Encountering unfailing love in the unfolding narrative of scripture*; (London, Form SPCK Group 2024), p.40
- 3 Ibid, p.41
- 4 Ibid, p.42
- 5 Ibid, p.43
- 6 Ibid, p.44-45
- 7 Ibid, p.46
- 8 Ibid, p.47
- 9 This language is taken from, Walter Bruggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A commentary for teaching and preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p.134-45.
- 10 Alain Emerson and Adam Cox, *The God Story; Encountering unfailing love in the unfolding narrative of scripture*; (London, Form SPCK Group 2024), p.49
- 11 Ibid, p.53

*All Bible passages quoted are taken from NIV unless stated.