

Second Sunday in Lent, Old Testament, Year C

GOD'S PROMISE TO ABRAM/ABRAHAM

Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

15:1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." 2But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." 4But the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." 5He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness." 7Then he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." 8But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" 9He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goad three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. 11And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. 12As the sun was going down, a deep sleep came upon Abram,

and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him . . .
17When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot
and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18On that day,
the LORD made a covenant with Abram saying, "To your descendants
I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river,
the river Euphrates . . . [verses 19-21 continue the
demarcations]."

[Note: The heart of this passage, verses 5-6, was first
"crossed" by Paul in Galatians 3 and again in Romans 4. For
Paul, as for us, God's promissory blessing is equally beneficial
to Gentile "nations" as it is to Abram's "descendants." Hence
Abram's name-change to Abraham, which means "father-of-a-throng-
of-nations" (Gen 17:5); similarly for Sarah's name (17:15-16).
For this reason, the interpretation of our text must reckon with
other expressions of the Abrahamic Promise, namely, in Genesis
12:1-3, 7a; 13:14-17; 15:17-21; 17:1-8; 18:18; and 22:15-18. The
inclusion of "all the nations (or clans or families) of the
earth" in God's promise to Abram (12:3, 18:18, and 22:18) is
profoundly significant. As Paul saw it, without an equal
blessing to Jews and Gentiles alike, by faith in God, the
central Promise to Israel fails to become Christological. By
this measure, the Abrahamic Promise for Jew and Gentile alike
(what Paul called "the truth of the gospel") is the single most
important promise given by God to humanity.]

DIAGNOSIS: The Curse of the Law

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): The Problem of Election

As expressed in Genesis 12:1-3, God's election of Abram came simultaneously with a promise "to all the families of the earth." Subsequent expressions tended to prioritize the Jewish nation ("your descendants," 12:5) over all other nations, so that any blessing to the Gentiles would come only by basking in Israel's shadow. Even the blessing itself came to be focused on the land (as in 15:18). Israelite religion thus separated the world into Jews and Gentiles (all non-Jews), as in the axiomatic "Jews and Gentile sinners" or "Jews and Greeks." And so Israel's election came to mean that the Gentile nations would either participate, second-hand, in the blessing to Israel, or that they would bring tribute to the nation of Israel as a part of Israel's blessing. Israel, for her part, either presumed on her election as an election for Israel only, or, following God's later covenant to Moses, relied on the outward "works of the law" (social commandments, circumcision, purity and dietary laws, Sabbath observance) in order to maintain her status as God's chosen people. In fact, both options failed to produce the promised blessing. Instead, Israel got insufferably bad kings, exile, and a land flowing with countless Gentile armies. Israel did get a very big temple to house her God, but that was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, and the booty was used to build the Coliseum. Abram's election, construed to be for Jews only, proved to be a dead end.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): The Curse of the Law

What went wrong? Beginning with the nuclear family, civilization arises by making a distinction between and within groups: "us" versus "them" in ever-widening circles of conflict. The rule is so basic that it spawns religion as an unimpeachable way to hide the rule from being discovered as unjust! Cooperation (limited

rules akin to the Ten Commandments), while a necessary construction in its own right, is always subservient to the basic social rule of "us versus them." So the basic rule in the formation and maintenance of any social group is a self-inflicted "curse" that inevitably leads to conflict within and without, and continually threatens to tear groups apart even as it makes larger unities possible. But at the heart of this civilization-founding rule is the priority of self-reliance over trusting one another. Israel was no exception to this rule, and her divine election played itself out accordingly.

In Israel's case, what began with trusting in God (v. 6) immediately devolved into doubt (v. 8) that God would deliver on his interim promise of the land (v. 7); for if the land is in doubt so too is the blessing. Looking for signs and portents of God's continuing favor, such as the land and the security that it promises, is a favorite way for religion to mask the curse that resides in a group's existence. Over against this social curse, God's promise to Abram is unconditional, as shown by God himself sealing his promise in the fiery sacrifice (vv. 17-18); and especially by God making good on his promise to Abram and Sarai for a son and heir who could ensure that promise. Abram's faith in God is the unconditional human counterpart to God's promise and was thus deemed "righteous" (v. 6) as God himself is righteous. Yet, already in v. 8, Abram's doubt is symptomatic of Israel's cursed reliance on herself, rather than on God, for the land.

The cultural curse worsened for Israel, while becoming more obvious, when her divine election and promise to Abram was codified in the Law/Instruction, that is, the first five books

of Moses. The Law moderated the excesses of civilization's curse (Israel continues to this day), but the conjunction of the social curse and the Law resulted in an even graver curse, one that is both social and theological. Israel misused the Law in order to ensure her own election, and thereby codified the separation between "holy" Israel and the "sinner" Gentiles. The Law that contained the Abrahamic Promise also became a mirror to Israel's shame—the history of Israel (by Israel) is replete with her failures, a feature unknown in human history. The same Law that held "faith-in-God" as the highest priority for humanity and the sole condition for a praiseworthy life before God (v. 6; see Hab. 2:4) also said, "Cursed/Damned [by God] is anyone who does not fulfill the words of this Law/Instruction, to do them!" (Deut. 27:26). The Law curses anyone who fails to follow its instructions—not only the law that commands faith (again v. 6; see Ex 20:3) as the foundation of all other laws, but "the works of the Law" (circumcision, purity and dietary laws, and observance of the Sabbath) that regulate Jewish existence as well as all the other laws that define and maintain Israel as an elect people—an insurmountable task. Even the attempt to do the minimal "works of the Law" enjoins a person to do the whole Law, making minimal works such as circumcision a curse unto themselves! This is curse upon curse upon curse! In the final analysis, the "curse of the Law" as a movement from 'faith-in-God' to 'works-that-make-holy' reverses the presupposition of the Abrahamic Promise and increases the cultural-anthropological curse exponentially into a Divine Curse that is, simply put, intractable and inescapable.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): The Wrath of God

Not to belabor the point, but the ineluctable failure of Israel to live by and trust in her election, most especially its

presupposition of faith-in-God, resulted in an unending national crisis. That crisis produced wrath of its own via the Curse of the Law, unfaithful kings, countless wars, the Babylonian Exile, and ultimately a Roman domination that destroyed the nation altogether. Yet even these wrathful events pale in comparison to the apparent loss of her founding Promise to be blessed in the Land, and through Abraham's "seed" to be a blessing to the all the families of the earth. This is so much more than the destruction of Israel's national identity; it is the death of Israel's promissory relationship with YHWH her God. Even worse, it signals the end of the Promise to the Gentiles as well; even to the whole of creation.

PROGNOSIS: The Abrahamic Promise and Blessing

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Freed from the Curse of the Law and the Wrath of God

In this maelstrom of curses and wrath resides another curse (small in comparison) that might have crushed all hope for God's Promise. Nonetheless, YHWH—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—did what the Law, wracked by so many curses, could not do: God himself made good on his Promise to Abram. There was talk in Judea about the coming reign of God when Israel would be "forgiven" (that is, given a fresh start) and God's messiah would make Israel great again, mostly by destroying her enemies—but this expectation was in its particulars a product of the curses. God chose another way by sending a man who personified the blessing of the Abrahamic Promise, the blessing that was promised to Abraham's "descendants" (v. 5). Regarding the life of Israel greater than his own, in faithful obedience to God, Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed that the fulfillment of

God's promise to Israel was at hand. Acting like a faithful king (or "son of God") in welcoming all Jews into the family of God, Jesus of Nazareth became in the eyes of some the hopefully-awaited messiah, or king of the Jews; thereby also a representative of the nation before God. By welcoming those who were by the standards of the Law unclean, by forgiving the sins of many ("sins" here understood as not keeping the Law), and by subverting the temple sacrifices that according to the Law maintained Israel's favor with God, Jesus struck at the deadly Curse of the Law that had exacerbated Israelite religion. Jesus exemplified "faith-in-God" and by contrast disclosed "the curse of the Law." The predictable response of the Jewish leaders was to use the Law against him: accusing him of blasphemy and having him crucified, for in so doing they could assure themselves and the whole nation that Jesus was not, in fact, the messiah, because the Law declared, "Cursed/Damned is anyone who hangs on a tree" (Deut. 21:23).

And yet, by Jesus' resurrection from the dead—a wholly unexpected event but one that in most circles signaled the beginning of a New Age—God proved not only that Jesus was the promised Messiah, but demonstrated by his crucifixion that the Curse of the Law was itself crucified in him. For if the Law could lawfully be used to crucify God's Messiah then the Law proves itself unable to deliver on its promises. And if the Messiah is raised from the dead into life eternal, then the Law proves to have exhausted itself against faith in God, and the Abrahamic Promise and the New Age must have arrived. By faith in God, personified in Jesus the king of the Jews, the cultural curse, the Curse of the Law, sin, death, and wrath are all extinguished—and a new creation is born. In Jesus the Christ, the Abrahamic Promise is fulfilled.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Forgiven and Freed to Trust in God

To be clear: Being freed from the Curse of the Law is nothing other than the forgiveness of sins. Being forgiven, and thus being continuously forgiven, is an altogether different situation from bondage to the curse of the Law. Being forgiven now means that the wrath of God, whether now or in the future, is no longer a threat. By trusting that God acted decisively in Jesus of Nazareth to forgive us (we who had put our trust in doing the requirements of the Law), we—whether Jew or Gentile—find that we are all together “blessed” according to the Promise given to Abram. The Promise and its Blessing are bound together in the person of Jesus. By faith in him, he continues to be our faithful representative before God, given by God on our behalf for just this purpose. The blessing of Christ is simply this: the freedom to trust in God by what God has done for us in Jesus. By faith in Christ, which is to say, faith in God, one is blessed socially in that the curse that had separated Jew from Gentile is removed. By faith in Christ, one is blessed theologically by not having to prove oneself before God. By faith in Christ, one participates in the Spirit of God that makes all things new. Again to be clear: Jesus, crucified on our behalf and raised from the dead, is the Promise fulfilled and the Blessing offered. But he is this for us only as we find in him an entirely new possibility for human existence. The old creation, loaded as it is with curses, has no future. The only future available is in Christ. And the future is now! The Promise and the Blessing are now. We, both Jews and Gentiles together, have been freed in order to trust in God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Living to God, Living for Others

Being blessed according to the Abrahamic Promise is an opportunity to be a blessing for others—all others. Despite the focus on oneself that “faith in God” may suggest (here is a whisper of the curse yet to be crucified when we die), the real payoff, the real blessing, is not in our own life but in the lives of others. Christ did not die for himself but for us! This is what it means to say that God is love. If we know anything about God, it is that God is life itself; and life is godly life only as it seeks out others to love. Loving others, especially our erstwhile enemies, is to be immersed in the “abundant life” that God has created for us as “descendants of Abraham” (v. 5). In the life of the children of God there are no more distinctions to divide us (from ourselves or from God), only distinctions to celebrate. But since the Curse and the Wrath still operate in the old creation, still making distinctions with which to dominate one another, the life of Christ continues to be crucified, through us who trust in God, wherever the love of Christ finds itself immersed in the death-grip of those distinctions. But as new creatures in the Spirit of Christ, we can do no other thing than to love. The love that freely gives away our old life for the betterment of others is a love that cannot die—because it’s the stuff that promises are made of.