

Week 6: A tale of two kingdoms (Genesis 11–12)

God cleansed and replanted the world that was corrupted by violence when the godly lost their way (Genesis 4–8). To limit violence, God gave humans more authority, covenanting to never give up his reign over us. Noah abused that power with slavery. His descendants formed nations and used war to build kingdoms (Genesis 9–10).

Tonight we see Babel (Babylon) trying to take over God's world (Genesis 11). God responds by calling Abraham to leave the Babel-builders region, to establish a nation that would restore to the nations the blessing they're missing—namely God's leadership (Genesis 12). Abraham's partnership with God lays the foundation for the whole Old Testament and ultimately for the salvation of the world.

Before we move on to tonight's chapters, any questions on the previous ones?

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Genesis 11: A kingdom trying to take God's world

You've heard of the *Tower of Babel*? The word *bā·bēl* is translated "Babylon" in every instance of the Old Testament, except Genesis 10:10 and 11:9. The region later known as Babylonia had various names in earlier times: Sumer, Shinar, and Chaldea.

Babylon (Babel) was not a tower. It was a city. And the city had a tower:

Genesis 11:1-4 (NIV)

¹ Now the whole world had one language and a common speech.

² As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. ³ They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar.

⁴ Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

The Sumerians built these towering structures called *ziggurats*, probably for worship. Abraham's family came from Ur (11:28, 31). The ziggurat at Ur still exists today, though it would have been taller in Abraham's time.

To the Hebrews, these towering structures represented Babylon's attempt to take over God's world. They were trying to reach up into the heavens and grasp the power of the gods in human hands, so they could rule the whole world.



Ziggurat at Ur. Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ziggurat-at-Ur>

The city of Babylon and its tower (11:1-9)

Babylon wanted to build a city—an administrative capital, a central government that would hold all people under its power, instead of having separate nations spread out all over the world (verse 4).

The narrator notes that Sumerians built their ziggurats from baked bricks (verse 3). Why tell us that? It's an architectural statement: they created man-made building materials, rather than use the stones the gods provided.

The tower makes the same statement: they've reached up into the heavens, to bring the power of the gods into human hands. They want people to bow to their greatness, *to make a name for themselves* as the city that rules the world.

Babylon's attempt to take over the world poses a serious threat to God's plan to save the world through Israel. The kingdom God established through Abraham later falls to the government that was trying to take over the world (2 Kings 25).

So why didn't God crush the evil empire of Babylon at this early stage, before it became a plague on the earth? That's the question Genesis 11 is addressing.

God's covenant declared he'd never give up ruling the world (Genesis 9). But he didn't stop the nations from going their own way, forming their own governments instead of recognizing God's authority (Genesis 10). Will the LORD let the evil empire take his whole world?

Genesis 11:5-9 (NIV)

⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. ⁶ The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

⁸ So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ That is why it was called Babel [Babylon]—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world.

From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

God does not cede the world to Babylon. God intervenes, but not as we might expect. Babylon fights wars to build its kingdom (10:9-10), but God doesn't bomb Babylon to bits. God simply frustrates them, *confusing* them so they don't understand each other.

By giving different languages to different peoples, God limits what they can plan to do together. The inability to get on with each other still implodes political powers today. History consists of national fights and international wars, but God does not permit one enduring evil empire to take over the galaxy.

In the Old Testament narrative, the Babylonian Empire was a major hurdle on the way to restoring the earth as a kingdom of heaven.



Hanging gardens of Babylon. Image: National Geographic

In the sixth century BC, Babylon did take over God's world as they knew it. But God frustrated Babylon, so it fell under its own weight (Jeremiah 51).

Babylon became a symbol for every superpower that seduces the nations into its web so it can take over the resources and the people of God's world (Revelation 17). But Babylon falls, like all the superpowers it represents (Revelation 18). God appoints the King of Kings (Revelation 19).

Your thoughts?

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Transition from Shem to Abram (11:10-26)

These seven verses are the briefest *tôlēdôt* (family story). It's just a bridge carrying us from Noah's son (Shem) to Abraham's father (Terah):

Genesis 11:10-26 (NIV)

¹⁰ This is the account of Shem's family line [*tôlēdôt*].

Shem ... became the father of Arphaxad. ...

¹² **Arphaxad** ... became the father of Shelah. ...

¹⁴ **Shelah** ... became the father of Eber. ...

¹⁶ **Eber** ... became the father of Peleg. ...

¹⁸ **Peleg** ... became the father of Reu. ...

²⁰ **Reu** ... became the father of Serug. ...

²² **Serug** ... became the father of Nahor. ...

²⁴ **Nahor** ... became the father of Terah. ...

²⁶ **Terah** ... became the father of **Abram**, Nahor and Haran.

But bridges are significant. These verses link Abram (later called Abraham) with the story of humanity. The rest of the Old Testament zooms in on Israel, the nation that comes from Abraham. Israel is different to the nations of Genesis 10 because it's a kingdom of God. In Israel, heaven's reign was present on earth.

Yet Israel's story is not disconnected from the nations. The other nations (Genesis 10) were also descendants of Noah, brothers in the same family. The LORD who reigns over the whole earth is the Father of the whole human family.

That's the meaning of this brief *tôlēdôt*.

Introducing Abram (11:27-32)

Verse 27 then introduces the longest *tôlēdôt*. The family story of Abraham and Sarah runs for 14 chapters (Genesis 25:11).

Genesis 11:27–12:1 (NIV)

²⁷ This is the account of Terah's family line [*tôlēdôt*].

Terah became the father of **Abram**, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. ²⁸ While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in **Ur of the Chaldeans**, in the land of his birth.

²⁹ **Abram** and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was **Sarai**, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milkah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milkah and Iskah. ³⁰ Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive.

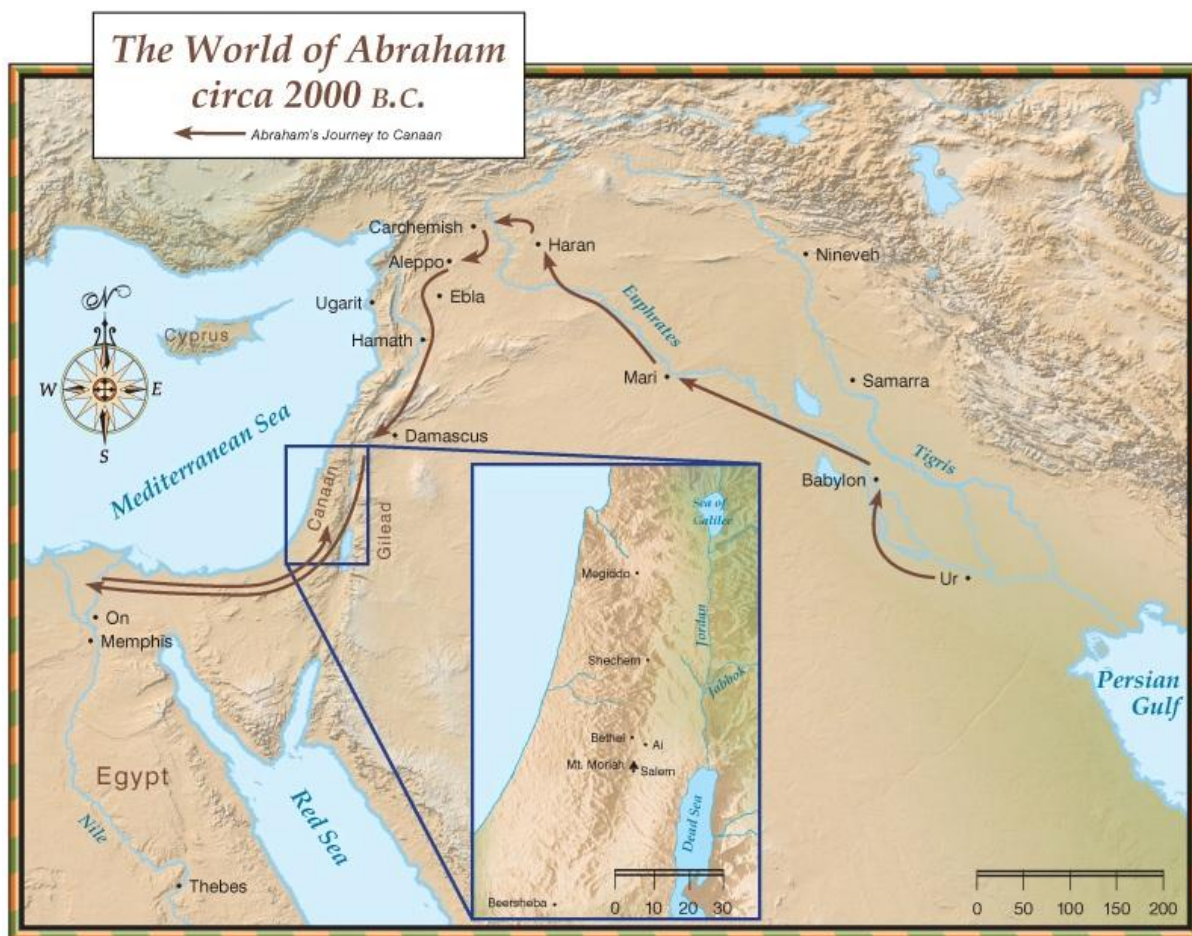
³¹ Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to **Harran**, they settled there.

³² Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Harran.

12 ¹ The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you."

Abram's family is from **Ur**, a region of Babel (Babylon). The Chaldeans ruled it back then. Abram's father (Terah) decided to take his family elsewhere. The natural path to take was not westward, for that goes into the Arabian Desert. They travelled along the Euphrates River, the well-worn route along the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia (the region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers).

For a time, the family settled in Haran in the region of Aram (northern Syria today). After the death of his father, Abram hears the LORD calling him to continue southward towards **Canaan**, where God will establish a nation under his leadership through Abram's descendants. The problem is that Sarai can't have descendants (verse 30).



"Map 2" in *Standard Bible Atlas* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2006), 4.

Genesis 12: A kingdom representing God to the world

Genesis 12 doesn't really belong with the first eleven chapters. The call of Abraham is the start of Israel's story, whereas Genesis 1–11 covered God's sovereignty over the nations. We're including Genesis 12 in this series so we can see how Genesis 1–11 sets up Israel's story within the broader claim that the LORD reigns over all nations.

Genesis 12–50 describes Israel's founding fathers: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob:

- The family story (*tôlēḡôṭ*) of Terah's son **Abram** runs from 11:27 to 25:11.
- After Ishmael's brief *tôlēḡôṭ*, Genesis 25:19–35:29 is **Isaac's** *tôlēḡôṭ*.
- After Esau's *tôlēḡôṭ*, Genesis 37–50 is the *tôlēḡôṭ* of **Jacob** and his sons.

Abram partners with God (12:1-5)

God calls Abram to leave the land where the nations rule, to launch a different kind of nation, one established by the LORD'S decree, living under his leadership:

Genesis 12:1-3 (NIV)

¹ The LORD had said to Abram,

“Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

² “I will make you into a **great nation**, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

What an amazing promise for a couple who expected their names to die with them since they could not have children (11:30). God's *blessing* the world with *fruitfulness* (1:22, 28; 5:2; 9:1), but the earth was no longer as responsive as barrenness and death took over when they separated from God (3:16-19). God chooses a **barren** couple so they themselves are a sign of what God will do: restoring creation through them.

Their descendants will be *a great nation* (verse 2). Greatness isn't measured by the human standards as physical size or military dominance. Its national greatness is the *blessing* of God's presence and leadership. With God at the helm, this nation will be guided by the wisdom of God's instruction and the voice of his Spirit (the Law and the Prophets).

This nation is the antithesis of Babel, the undoing of human sin, the restoration of what God decreed in the beginning (1:26-28). The God/Abram partnership restores what humanity is missing, what the other nations don't have: life under God's reign.

How other nations treat his people is something God takes personally (verse 3):

- Those who *bless* God's nation participate in their blessing (Isaiah 19:23–25; Zechariah 8:20–22), for all nations belong to him (Exodus 19:5).
- Those who *curse* God's kingdom are cursing its King (Psalm 48:1-7), making themselves God's enemies (Psalms, 18; 60:17; 92:9-11; 108:10; 110:1-2; 144:6).

This is precisely the criteria God's anointed uses to sort sheep from goats:

Matthew 25:40 (ESV) The King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

What's crucial, therefore, is Abram's response to God's call. Does he partner with God as Noah had done? Does he believe God and participate in what God said?

Genesis 12:4-5 (NIV)

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.

⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

This is the foundation for the rest of the Bible. Abram and Sarai believed God and put their allegiance to God (faith) into action. They became the founders of God's project to restore the whole of creation to heaven's government. They left the region of the Babel-builders and Haran because they were looking for a city under God:

Hebrews 11:8-10 (NIV)

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to **the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.**

From the moment Abram and Sarai entered this partnership with God, the Biblical narrative becomes the story of how God establishes this city, the kingdom that invites God's reign. The Sinai covenant established Israel as that kingdom, so **Jerusalem** was *the city of the Great King*, the place where God lives among his people (Psalm 48:2).

Misapplication: we're not them

What do you say if a childless couple comes to you and asks for prayer? Do you say, "God did it for Abram and Sarai, and he'll do it for you"?

We love putting ourselves into the story of Scripture, as if we are the characters we're reading about: Abraham or Sarah, Joshua or Deborah, David or Esther. We are living in God's story, but we're not them, and we're not living in the same chapter of the story they were.

Substituting "me" into every Bible story and claiming, "God will do it again!" is misguided and misleading. God will do what God needs to do for us in our situation, but our situation is not theirs. We have no grounds to promise God will do it again.

God released Paul from prison in Philippi (Acts 16), but God did not do it again when Paul was in prison in Rome. Even for the same person, God doesn't always do the same thing.

I know a childless couple who were promised the "Sarah" miracle repeatedly as they requested prayer over the years, but never had children. Sheridan Voysey candidly shares their disappointment with God and how they coped: *Resurrection Year: Turning Broken Dreams Into New Beginnings* and *Praying Through Infertility: A 90-Day Devotional for Men and Women* (Thomas Nelson, 2013, 2024).

Is that okay? Is this something you want to discuss?

Abram in the land (12:6-9)**Genesis 12:6-9 (NIV)**

⁶ Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an **altar** there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

⁸ From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an **altar** to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.

⁹ Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev [south].

Abram reached the land (verse 5). Wherever he went, he built *altars to the LORD*. (verses 7-8) The altars stood as markers of God's authority in this land, like planting a flag or staking a claim for God. Great start, Abram!

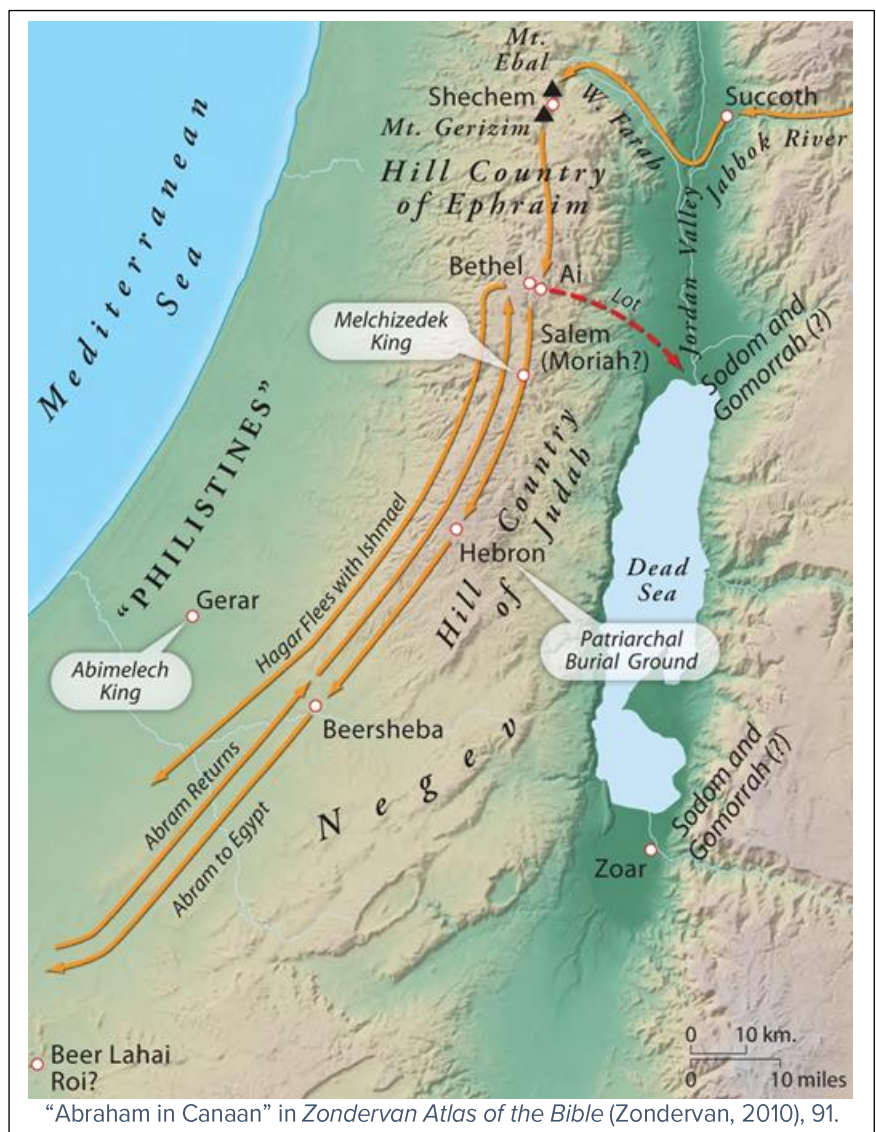
But this “Promised Land” falls short of what Abram and Sarai expect:

Genesis 12:10 (NIV)

Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.

Not only are there people already living there (verse 6), but this land could not support them. It's easy for us to idealize the Promised Land, but most of it is not the great farmland. Particularly in the Negev (the south near the Dead Sea), it's a dry and barren place.

So why did God choose this location for his people? The reason is geography rather than agriculture. Canaan is the bridge between three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. It's at the heart of the nations as they spread out from Shem, Ham and Japheth. The Babel builders wanted to *make a name for themselves* so that people would not be *spread over the face of the whole earth* (11:4). God's people exist to proclaim, “*LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth*” (Psalm 8:1, 9).



Abram and this world's rulers (12:10-20)

This is not yet restored creation. Though God decreed fruitfulness for the earth (1:11-12), it fights back with thorns and thistles, dearth and death (3:17-19). And death doesn't only come from natural causes:

Genesis 12:11-12 (NIV)

¹¹ As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. ¹² When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live."

It's a violent world where brother kills brother (4:8), and people constantly plan evil against each other (6:5; 8:21). When God gave us the right to take a killer's life (9:6), warriors saw death as a means to build kingdoms (10:8-12). Abram left Babel, but the rest of the world also has rulers who use the power of death to take whatever they want. From a Jewish perspective, lust and violence characterize the nations.

Abram decides to sell off Sarai to save himself:

Genesis 12:13 (NIV)

"Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."

Abram gets a fat dowry for providing Pharaoh with a desirable woman.

The plan works: Abram gains wealth and honour:

Genesis 12:10-16 (NIV)

¹⁴ When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman. ¹⁵ And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. ¹⁶ He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels.

Are you horrified? Abram just committed to partnership with God, and already he's selling out to Pharaoh. It's as if his commitment to God—and to Sarai—means nothing to him. Unfaithfulness to God dogs Israel throughout the OT, and it's often compared to marital unfaithfulness. (e.g. Jeremiah 3; Ezekiel 16; Hosea).

So, is this the end of God's restoration project to save the nations?

Has unfaithfulness already destroyed the partnership with God?

Wasn't this the problem in the garden (Genesis 3)?

Wasn't this why violence corrupted God's world (Genesis 6)?

If Abram has sold out to Pharaoh, isn't the partnership with God over?

God knows how to unravel Abram's unholy and deceptive alliance with Pharaoh:

Genesis 12:17-20 (NIV)

¹⁷ But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. ¹⁸ So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife?" ¹⁹ Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!" ²⁰ Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.

The LORD reveals himself to Pharaoh. Pharaoh listens to the God Abram misrepresented. Pharaoh breaks this unholy alliance with Abram, commanding him to return to Canaan—exactly as God wants! Abram has been unfaithful to God, but God has remained faithful to Abram, rescuing him from his own deceit and disobedience.

But Abram has not dealt with his unfaithfulness. Later, he repeats the same deception, selling Sarah to a Philistine king, gaining both the dowry and a reparation payment (Genesis 21). Abram's son Isaac pulls a similar stunt (Genesis 26). And Isaac's son Jacob was a power-grabbing deceiver from birth (Genesis 25:26; 25:31; 27:19; **27:36**).

The problem of unfaithfulness to their covenant with God dogged Israel through the Old Testament. Ultimately, the relationship between heaven and earth can only be restored through a descendant of Israel who is faithful: *a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit* (John 1:47), someone whose *faithfulness* reveals *God-doing right* for all people (Romans 3:21ff). In the end, God's faithfulness undoes our unfaithfulness.

So what?

Genesis 12 is just the beginning of God's global rescue project, restoring the world to his reign through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who became Israel.

There are so many ups and downs along the way, as the city Abram was looking for (Jerusalem) misrepresented God's reign and fell to Babylon (2 Kings 25). God then declared that Babylon would fall (Jeremiah 51), and Jerusalem would rise again, so *the LORD rises upon you* and the *nations will come to your light* (Isaiah 60:2-3).

When God finally sent his anointed leader to Jerusalem, they handed him over to the "Babylon" of their day (Rome) to be put to death. That's when God overturned the power of death, raising him up with all authority to reign in heaven and on earth. That's how God's reign (the kingdom of God) was restored to the earth in Christ.

In the end, Babylon falls (Revelation 18). Heaven's government finally comes to the earth as a New Jerusalem, where all the peoples of the earth live in the reign of heaven's anointed ruler, the King of Kings (Revelation 21).

The partnership between God and humanity that launched in Abraham is finally fulfilled in the descendant of Abraham who restores the whole human family to God:

Galatians 3:7-9, 14 (NIV)

⁷ Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham.

⁸ Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." ⁹ So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. ... ¹⁴ He [Christ] redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

Your thoughts?

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Going further

Because God *chose* Abraham, Israel became God's *chosen* people, the *elect* people of God. The call of Abram in Genesis 12 is therefore the foundation for the doctrine of **election**—a word we'll strike when we do Romans (e.g. 8:33; 9:11; 11:7, 28).

Why did God *choose* Abraham? Why was Israel God's *elect* people? It was not so that God could save them and damn the other nations. God's election of Israel was not about individual salvation; it was about their national vocation.

God chose (elected) to partner with Abraham in his mission to save the nations. Understanding God's *call* as a missionary calling (rather than personal salvation) deeply affects how we read Scripture, relate to God, and represent God in his world.

- Lesslie Newbigin (missionary writer):

The covenant of Noah is not revoked. The promised blessing is, in the end, for all the nations. Abraham, Israel, the tribe of Judah, and the faithful remnant are the chosen bearers of it. Bearers—not exclusive beneficiaries. There lay the constant temptation.³⁸

- Michael Bird (theologian):

The Abrahamic covenant enacts the mission of God to reach into the world through his chosen people. Thus, the reign of the Lord is exercised in and through Abraham's family, and the response that is required is principally faith in the promises and obedience to the subsequent commands.³⁹

- Chris Wright (Old Testament scholar):

God's blessing was not for Abraham and his family only. He would be the father of a particular nation through whom blessing would come universally to all nations. "We", then, if we are in Christ, are part of that family of Abraham, no matter what nation we come from.

But if, in Christ, we inherit Abraham's blessing, we also inherit Abraham's mission—that is, to go and be a blessing, to be the means by which God's blessing comes to others ... to participate in God's promised mission of bringing people from all nations on earth into the sphere of God's redemptive blessing through Christ.⁴⁰

- Tom Wright (New Testament scholar):

The narrative quietly insists that Abraham and his progeny inherit the role of Adam and Eve. There are, interestingly, two differences which emerge in the shape of this role. The command ('be fruitful ...') has turned into a promise ('I will make you fruitful ...'), and possession of the land of Canaan, together with supremacy over enemies, has taken the place of Adam's dominion over nature.⁴¹

³⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology*. (Eerdmans, 1978), 33–34.

³⁹ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Zondervan, 2013), 502.

⁴⁰ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People* (Zondervan, 2010), 81.

⁴¹ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (London: SPCK, 1992), 263.

Blog posts:

- [Can the nations take over God's reign?](#) (Genesis 11)
- [YHWH launches a nation of his own](#) (Genesis 12:1-3)
- [God shows up](#) (Genesis 12:4-9)
- [What if we're unfaithful?](#) (Genesis 12:10-20)
- [Piecing it together](#) (Genesis 1–25).
- [Looking for a city](#) (Hebrews 11:10)

On election, see this 8-part blog series by Tim Gombis:

- <https://timgombis.com/2012/05/29/election-according-to-scripture-pt-1/>

On how Genesis fits with Old Testament history:

- [Formed in God's story: Genesis – Esther](#) (6 weeks of notes and podcasts).



This gate to the northern city of Dan would have been standing at the time Abram and Sarai came to Canaan.
Photo by Allen Browne, 2017.