

# The Church

## The story so far

The story of the promises to Abraham is now nearly complete. The promises of **land, offspring, enjoying God's presence, and blessing to all nations** was given to Abraham, it was honoured in the deliverance of the Exodus, it was almost fulfilled in David and Solomon, and almost lost in the exile. The promises were re-imagined by the prophets, particularly Isaiah. Finally Jesus arrived, and by his ministry demonstrated that the promises were beginning to be fulfilled, but in the new way that the prophets had anticipated. Jesus' death involved his personal loss of all the promises. But his death was a punishment for the sins of his people, and he opened the way for his disciples to inherit the promises despite their sin. His resurrection is a first taste of God's new creation in which all the promises to Abraham will finally be fully and completely realised.

## Acts and the promises to Abraham

The book of Acts begins with a crucial misunderstanding on the part of the disciples. The disciples ask "Lord are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"<sup>1</sup> Jesus answers by explaining what the fulfilment of this promise will look like.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

This establishes a major theme in the book of Acts. Namely that the Holy Spirit is vital to the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promises. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit descends and enables the disciples to speak in foreign tongues so that people exclaimed "what does this mean?"<sup>2</sup> Peter explains that this is a first sign that God's blessing will spread to **the nations** as the Spirit is poured out on "all people" and "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."<sup>3</sup>

The healing of a crippled beggar in Acts 3 is explained with the Abrahamic promises in mind. Jesus is declared to have been raised from the dead by "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"<sup>4</sup> and the beggar was healed through faith in him. These are the days of the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham

"Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days. And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.' When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways." (Acts 3:24-26)

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:6

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:1-13

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:16-21, quoting from Joel 2:28-32.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 3:13

When Stephen is accused of blasphemy it is specifically that he is “speaking against this holy place [the Temple] and the law.”<sup>5</sup> In Acts 7 Stephen explains how God had never felt confined by geography or architecture in his meetings with his people. He met Abraham in Mesopotamia (v.2), he was with Joseph in Egypt (v.9), he used Moses who was educated as an Egyptian (v. 22), had sons in a foreign land (v. 29). He even met God there (v. 30) and God explicitly declared himself to be “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (v. 32). At the Exodus and up to the time of David God travelled with his people in the tabernacle (vv. 44-45). The Temple was something of an afterthought and did not do justice to God who is sovereign over the whole earth (vv.48-50). Stephen’s point is that people have always **enjoyed God’s presence** outside of the confines of Temple, or even sometimes observance of the law. This is how God worked to “fulfil his promise to Abraham” (v. 17). Just as scripture anticipated, the Holy Spirit is working to bring God’s promised presence in new ways to the nations.

The rest of the story of Acts is mainly about the slow and painful process by which God’s people came to realise that the promises to Abraham are now being fulfilled in a new way. The promise of **land** is now a promise of a global community. The promise of **offsprings** is now fulfilled as God takes a people for himself from among the gentiles, and by the Holy Spirit giving them faith in Christ.<sup>6</sup> God manifests his **presence** dramatically in place after place, and all **the nations** are blessed.

Acts closes with Paul in Rome, the centre of the world, speaking to Jews who refuse to believe. Paul quotes Isaiah 6<sup>7</sup> to explain that this was always expected. Some will refuse, but the gentiles will listen and inherit the blessing promised to Abraham.

## The Letters of Paul

Underlying large parts of the Apostle Paul’s theology are his convictions about how the promises to Abraham are fulfilled in the church.

### Galatians

In Paul’s early letter to the Galatians, for instance, he sets out to demonstrate that we are not put right with God – justified – through obedience to the law, but through faith in Christ. Neither are we transformed simply through following the law, but through the gift of the Holy Spirit. However his whole argument is shaped by the promises to Abraham.

A crucial early statement of his understanding is found in Galatians 3:6-14

<sup>6</sup> Consider Abraham: “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” <sup>7</sup> Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> The 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.” <sup>9</sup> So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

<sup>10</sup> All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” <sup>11</sup> Clearly no-one is justified

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<sup>5</sup> Acts 6:13

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Acts 15:1-21.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 28:26-27.

before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.”<sup>12</sup> The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, “The man who does these things will live by them.”<sup>13</sup> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”<sup>14</sup> He 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.

Paul makes a number of important statements:

1. Verses 6-9. “Children of Abraham” are those who are justified by faith, not the physical descendants of Abraham. The promise that **all nations would be blessed** (v8) is fulfilled now in this multicultural community of faith.
2. Verses 10-13. “Observing the law” does not make us children of Abraham. Rather it clarifies the universal curse on mankind, since everyone is cursed who “does not continue to do everything which is written in the Book of the Law”(v10).<sup>8</sup> Rather the law points to the need for faith in Christ, who became a curse for us, and so redeemed us from the curse.
3. Verse 14. The redemption Christ won is “in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles” in other words to fulfil the promise that **all nations will be blessed**. The seal of this fulfilment is the gift of the Spirit.

Thus Christ’s death on the cross and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit are both associated with the fulfilment of God’s promises to Abraham. Although the emphasis in this passage is on the blessing of the nations, this implicitly includes the other three elements, **land, offspring** and **the presence of God** since the promise has always been that the nations will enjoy all these blessings.

In Galatians 3:15-16 Paul deals with one aspect of the **offspring** theme by drawing attention to the ambiguity associated with the word “seed.”<sup>9</sup> In the account of the promises to Abraham the Hebrew word could mean either a single descendant or numerous descendants.<sup>10</sup> Paul suggests that the singular use of the word points to Christ. Though we might find this exegesis strained, it is nevertheless faithful to the twofold interest, which we have carefully traced already, in both innumerable offspring and a single inheritor of the promise. Perhaps Paul is right that it was no grammatical accident that meant the initial promise was “to your seed.”

In Galatians 3:26-4:7 Paul indicates that those who have faith in Christ inherit the promises (the analogy of **land** is used) particularly a **relationship with God**. He does this by describing us as sons of God. Just like a human son there is a period of minority in which the **land** is promised but not fully inherited (4:1-3), but with the death of Christ we now have the “full rights of sons” (vv4-5). This fully realised status is confirmed by the gift of the Spirit who gives us the experience of enjoying a relationship with God, in which we cry out from our hearts “*Abba, Father*” (vv6-7).

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<sup>8</sup> Cf Deu 27:26. This is a crucial verse in Deuteronomy as explained in Bible Overview 3 “What about the Law?”.

<sup>9</sup> Greek: sperma, Hebrew: zera. Both of these words have the ambiguity between singular and plural which is also found in the English word “seed.”

<sup>10</sup> See Genesis 12:7, 13:15, 24:7.

## Romans

This pattern is repeated and developed in Paul's explanation of the gospel in the letter to the Romans. In his prologue Paul describes Jesus a "seed of David"<sup>11</sup> and his ministry to "all the nations"<sup>12</sup> is emphasised. The outline of Romans 1-8 then has the promises to Abraham very much in mind. In chapters 1-4 Paul asserts that we are justified simply through faith in Christ. In chapter 4 this is supported by reference to Abraham. Paul wants to prove that Abraham and all his true offspring are justified by faith. In doing so he affirms that "Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world"<sup>13</sup> "The world"<sup>14</sup> could mean the earth, and thus be a globalisation of the promise of **land**, or it could mean the people of the earth, and thus be a reference of the promise of **blessing to all nation**, and **innumerable offspring**. Quite probably Paul uses the word to encapsulate both of these options.<sup>15</sup> The promise of **offspring** (vv16,18) and **blessing to all nations** (vv17,18 ) are also reiterated.

The promises to Abraham are also an underlying theme of Romans 5-8. In Romans 4:17 the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham is based on God being "the God who gives life to the dead." Thus God's gift of life - first to Abraham and Sarah in the form of Isaac (4:19), then to Jesus at his resurrection (4:25) – becomes the major theme of Romans 5-8. Paul will begin by going right back to Adam to discuss how death came into the world, and how life now comes to us, and finish by looking forward to restoration of all things.

According to Paul life does not come to us by "works of the law" but through Jesus as a gift of grace.<sup>16</sup> This gift of life enables us to begin living a new life in which sin is not our master.<sup>17</sup> That gift is realised in our lives by the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of life.<sup>18</sup> The Spirit centrally enables us to **enjoy a relationship with God** in which we cry out to him "*Abba* Father."<sup>19</sup> Thus life now is a fulfilment of one aspect of the promises to Abraham. However Romans 8 goes on to explain that the promise of life also includes future resurrection life, not only for us but for the whole of creation.<sup>20</sup> At this point Paul is, of course, drawing on the Isaianic extension of the promise of **land** to include a new

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<sup>11</sup> Romans 1:3

<sup>12</sup> Romans 1:5

<sup>13</sup> Romans 4:13

<sup>14</sup> Greek: *cosmos*

<sup>15</sup> See Moo, D. J. (1996). *The Epistle to the Romans*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. p. 274. [Paul] succinctly summarizes the three key provisions of the promise as it unfolds in Genesis: that Abraham would have an immense number of descendants, embracing "many nations" (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:4–6, 16–20; 22:17), that he would possess "the land" (Gen. 13:15–17; 15:12–21; 17:8), and that he would be the medium of blessing to "all the peoples of the earth" (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18).

<sup>16</sup> Romans 5:17, 21, 6:4

<sup>17</sup> Romans 6:14.

<sup>18</sup> Romans 8:1-4.

<sup>19</sup> Romans 8:15, cf the previous comments on Galatians 4:6-7.

<sup>20</sup> Romans 8:18-21.

heaven and a new earth.<sup>21</sup> Thus for Paul the words “death” and “life” encapsulate the whole story of the Bible from creation to new creation and in which the promises to Abraham play a central role.

## Other letters of Paul

This underlying substructure to Paul’s thought appears again and again as he discusses numerous issues. For Paul Jesus is the **one offspring** who is “the firstborn over all creation,” but as such he embodies **the presence of God** because “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.”<sup>22</sup> We become beneficiaries of the promises to Abraham as we come to be “in Christ.”<sup>23</sup>

We could summarise Paul’s thought by saying that the promises to Abraham has been “spiritualised”, “globalised” and “eschatologised.”<sup>24</sup> For instance the promise of **land** has become largely extended to the eschatological promise of a new resurrected creation.<sup>25</sup> However there are hints of a spiritual fulfilment now because we have “the full rights of sons.”<sup>26</sup> Just as Jesus called disciples to himself and promised them the previously land-based blessing of rest,<sup>27</sup> so Paul associates the gift of the Spirit with gaining our inheritance. The promise of land is also occasionally explicitly globalised. We have already mentioned that for Paul Abraham was promised “the world”<sup>28</sup> but also, when quoting the fifth commandment in Ephesians 6 he changes the promise in Deuteronomy that obedient children will “live long in the land” to a promise that they will “live long on the earth.”<sup>29</sup>

This pattern is repeated for the other promises. The **offspring** of Abraham are a global company of adopted sons,<sup>30</sup> who have the spiritual gift of faith<sup>31</sup> and who are awaiting their eternal inheritance.<sup>32</sup>

**Enjoying God’s presence** is a spiritual reality now<sup>33</sup> and is not confined to the temple, but is realised in every local church<sup>34</sup> as the Spirit takes the message of the gospel and

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<sup>21</sup> Isaiah 65-66. See the chapter on the prophets.

<sup>22</sup> Colossians 1:15-23.

<sup>23</sup> A phrase used 86 times in the Pauline Epistles, usually with a technical sense. It is his shorthand for the union with Christ which all believers enjoy, and which in turn entitles them to all the blessings of the gospel. See e.g. Ephesians 1:13.

<sup>24</sup> An ugly word I know but perhaps useful to help us remember that the final fulfilment of all the hopes of scripture are in eternity.

<sup>25</sup> See Romans 8:18-21

<sup>26</sup> Galatians 4:5, noting that this is developing the analogy of the inheritance of a promised estate.

<sup>27</sup> See Matt 11:28, and the comments on that verse in the chapter on the life of Jesus.

<sup>28</sup> Romans 4:13.

<sup>29</sup> Ephesians 6:3, cf Deuteronomy 5:16. See O'Brien, P. T. (1999). *The letter to the Ephesians*. The Pillar New Testament commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. p. 444.

<sup>30</sup> Romans 8:15, Ephesians 1:5

<sup>31</sup> Romans 4:16, 9:8, Galatians 3:26-29.

<sup>32</sup> E.g. Colossians 1:26.

opens our eyes to “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”<sup>35</sup> However it awaits its final consummation in eternity when we shall see “face to face.”<sup>36</sup>

## Non-Pauline Letters

The non-Pauline letters use somewhat different terminology but they share the same perspective. Peter describes the church as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God”<sup>37</sup> thus transferring the status of Israel to the church so that she inherits the promises to Abraham. For instance the church is the new temple where we **enjoy God’s presence**.<sup>38</sup>

Peter captures the eschatologised fulfilment of the promise of **land** by describing Christians as “strangers and aliens, scattered...”<sup>39</sup> Abraham and his immediate descendants lived in the land but did not yet own it. They thus lived there as “strangers and aliens.”<sup>40</sup> This was later made even more acute when they were scattered, first by the exile in Egypt<sup>41</sup> and then by the Babylonian exile<sup>42</sup> but always with the hope of return<sup>43</sup>. Peter, therefore uses this phraseology to capture the fact that Christians too are promised that they will inherit the earth, but they have not yet received it. We are still scattered as exiles. James also uses the word “scattered” to emphasise that we have not yet inherited, even if we are “the twelve tribes.”<sup>44</sup>

The writer to the Hebrews reveals the same structure to his thought, especially when discussing the issue of **land**. As we have seen previously, the idea of rest is almost synonymous with dwelling in the land in many Old Testament passages, especially the book of Joshua. The writer to the Hebrews draws on this, in a long passage reflecting on Psalm 95<sup>45</sup> and the promise of God for us to “enter my rest.” He argues that the entry into the promised land did not produce God’s promised rest since Psalm 95 still considers it a future blessing. The true rest that was promised, was not to live in the land, but to “rest from our own work”<sup>46</sup> i.e. to put our faith in Christ’s finished work on the cross. This is therefore another clear example of the spiritualisation of the promise of **land**.

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<sup>33</sup> Galatians 4:9, Philippians 3:10

<sup>34</sup> Ephesians 2:19-22

<sup>35</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:6

<sup>36</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12

<sup>37</sup> 1 Peter 2:9

<sup>38</sup> 1 Peter 2:5

<sup>39</sup> 1 Peter 1:1, see also 2:11, and Hebrews 11:13.

<sup>40</sup> Genesis 17:8, 23:4, 28:4, 1 Chronicles 16:14-19, 29:15

<sup>41</sup> See Genesis 15:13

<sup>42</sup> Zechariah 7:14

<sup>43</sup> Isaiah 11:12, Zechariah 10:9-12, Zephaniah 3:19-20

<sup>44</sup> James 1:1

<sup>45</sup> Hebrews 3:7-4:13.

<sup>46</sup> Hebrews 4:10.

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We have seen that throughout the New Testament letters the church is seen as the inheritor of the fourfold promises to Abraham, through faith in Jesus Christ. However these promises are

- Globalised – they are no longer confined to one people, one land, or one temple
- Spiritualised – they are not yet inherited in their physical fullness, but are presently enjoyed in our spirit, as we enjoy such blessings as rest and a relationship with God. All this is mediated by the Holy Spirit.
- Eschatologised – we live in the hope of the full enjoyment of all that God promised in the new heaven and new earth.

## Exercise

Examine the quotations from Isaiah in Romans 9-15 and show how Paul uses the New Exodus theme in Isaiah (See Section 4 to remind yourself if necessary) to explain God's faithfulness in including gentiles into the people of God.

## Questions

1. In many ways the book of Acts sets out to correct poor biblical theology. What are the key errors in biblical theology that get addressed in this book? Why might they be significant for us?
2. The New Testament maintains a careful balance between encouraging Christians to enjoy the present fulfilment of the promises to Abraham and also warning us that they are not yet fully consummated. Give examples of this, and explain why an inaccurate understanding may lead to pastoral problems.
3. If we are "strangers and aliens" in the world what does this mean for our attitude to politics, social action, and daily work?