

# reading the Bible with Luther



## Session 5: Saving Faith (Genesis 12 - 22)

by Virgil Thompson

Luther sums up the story of the first 11 chapters of Genesis with one of the best theological one-liners ever: “*The human being is bound to not want God to be God,*” because of course, we want to be our own god. That’s what Adam and Eve found so attractive about the fruit from the tree: “*When you eat of it,*” the serpent swore, “*your eyes will be opened and you will be like God*” (Genesis 3:5). As it turned out, the serpent’s prophecy was only about half right. Their eyes were opened, but instead of “*seeing as God*” they only saw themselves as frightened humans. They were quick to hide their naked vulnerability by taking cover in the tall weeds. I suspect you have an idea of their fear: “*What will others, let alone God, think if ever they saw me for what I really am?*” Still, it hasn’t necessarily dampened our enthusiasm to be as gods. In fact, it probably fuels the fires of the desire.

There are many variations on the theme. Frequently the desire to be as gods disguises itself. The real work of theology is to see things for what they are. In this case, to see divine aspirations for what they are that they may be extinguished. And if extinguished, only so that the new humanity may be raised up by faith in Christ.

Consider two variations on the theme. According to the first, impious and worldly people charge that humanity would be better off without God, as though God is the source of all our problems. They seek to make the charge respectable, citing religious strife, conflict between science and religion, and so forth as evidence that humans would be better off without God. Viewed from the perspective of Genesis 3, such arguments may be seen for what they are—a variation on a very old theme. In reality, God is not the problem; *we* are the problem.

The most dangerous variation on the theme, however, is the one lived out by pious people of the church. They may be tempted to believe that because they are so good and religious, God must be obligated to show them some consideration.

After all, they have tried to do the best they could; that should be worth something. Once again, it is but a variation on an old theme. One way or another, we are determined to be in charge of deciding our destiny. Human imagination, whether pious or impious, ought to work the other way around. We are the ones who owe God a deep un-repayable debt. We owe God every thanks, praise, service and obedience for all His fatherly goodness to us.

It is strange—out of his fatherly goodness, God freely and reliably sustains the lives of the pious and the impious alike. He does it so well that we are in danger of deluding ourselves into believing that we are doing quite well without God. Who needs God? For all practical purposes many of us—all of us from time to time—tend to live as though God were merely a figurehead to adorn the churches. I sometimes have the impression that so much of theology itself runs its course without ever taking the Biblical God seriously.

### **The End — or a New Beginning for Creation?**

All things considered, Genesis 11 might well have marked the end of the Biblical story. God would destroy His ungrateful creation and that would be the end of it. Who could blame God were He to turn His back on creation? But, the Lord God is not inclined to give up His creation so easily. God promises,

*I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease. —*  
Genesis 8:21-22

Not only does God promise to sustain the life of creation, but He promises to bless it by restoring its faith in Him as Lord and God.

## The Promise of Blessing

The drama of the Bible continues as the story of God's promise, which gives life to faith. God speaks to Abram and Sarai: *"I will make you a great nation ... I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"* (Genesis 12:2-3). On the face of it, you might imagine that Abram and Sarai were not the most promising candidates to become a great nation through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed (12:2-3). After all, Abram and Sarai were not exactly spring chickens when God made this promise to them. Abram *"was seventy-five years old"* (12:4) and Sarai *"was barren; she had no child"* (11:30).

People sometimes think the Bible can be obscure and hard to understand. But this much at least appears crystal clear: the promise of salvation does not depend on human effort, as though God had only to show the way and humanity by true grit and a little well-deserved grace would make their way into heaven. What sets Christians on the way of "living as a blessing to others" is the same thing that set Abram and Sarai on that way. As Luther used to say, *"The word of the Lord has done it all."* Christians, like Abram and Sarai, are creatures of God's promise. The story of Abram and Sarai tells the story of Christian faith. Christian faith trusts that in Christ Jesus, God blesses us that we may live as a "blessing to others."

## But Such Faith Sails a Bumpy Sea

I wish I could report that for Abram and Sarai the way of faith was smooth sailing, full-steam ahead, never looking back, never a misstep and no doubts on the horizon. Not so. The first couple in faith bumped along a lumpy sea as they made their way from the promise to its fulfillment.

For example, they were driven by famine into Egypt. Along the way Abram did not exactly appear a rock-solid stalwart of faith. Fearful of what might be his fate among the Egyptians, he tries to buy favor by passing his wife off as his sister and thus an available bride. Abram's deception works. Sarai attracts the attention of the king of Egypt, who marries her—then discovers things are not what they seem. God plagues the king along with his entire household with the truth. Sarai has already been spoken for. Pharaoh gets the message straightaway and quickly restores Sarai to Abram, sending the couple on the way of God's promise (Genesis 12:4-20). When the Lord makes a promise, you may trust that He will keep it—even if he must enlist the enemies of faith as the preachers who restore us to the way. The story of Abraham and Sarah is filled with ups and downs, and continues on through Isaac, the child of promise.

## The Child of God's Promise is Born

The promise of a son to Abraham and Sarah enters the story in chapter 15. The Lord has been reassuring Abraham despite his nagging fears. God promises that He, personally, will shield Abraham from harm. But Abraham's fears and doubts are running away with him: *"O Lord God,"* he prayerfully complains, *"Sarah and I continue childless and I'm afraid that'll be the end of it. The promise will have no children to believe it."* By way of reply, God invites Abraham to step out into the night air with him. *"Look up, count the stars, if you can,"* God challenges Abraham. *"As many stars as there are in the heavens will number the heirs of the promise,"* God proclaims.

No doubt Abraham and Sarah were reassured by the preaching of God's promise. But faith may never take the promise for granted, as though you could write it on a piece of paper, stick it in your hip pocket and take it out whenever you needed reassurance. Faith must hear the promise often. And should the sun ever go down on the preaching of the promise, faith would quickly find itself, as did Abraham and Sarah, in the descending darkness, deep and terrifying (15:12ff).

In times of doubt, believers may be tempted—as were Abraham and Sarah—to take matters into their own hands. If God seems slow to fulfill the promise, then we'll see to it ourselves. There may be many things humans can do for themselves, and ought to do for themselves. But, as Abraham and Sarah discovered, it is never a good idea to step into the shoes of God as though you could force fulfillment of God's promise (see Genesis 16:1-21:21).

## The Last Laugh

Chapter 18 tells of the time when God sent preachers to renew the promise of a son and heir to faith. Abraham and Sarah could only laugh at the disparity between their reality and God's promise. But as the preacher said to them, *"Go ahead and laugh. We'll see who gets the last laugh"* (Genesis 18:9-15).

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And, of course, the Lord God did get the last laugh. When they had least reason to suspect that it would or could be fulfilled, the child of promise was born to them. They named the baby “laughter”—that’s the meaning of the name Isaac, as in, go ahead and laugh and we’ll see who gets the last laugh.

But the Lord God is a strange God. He fulfills the promise to Abraham and Sarah, and then commands Abraham to do the unthinkable: “*Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and ... offer him ... as a burnt offering*” (Genesis 22:1-2). By this time Abraham had no choice in the matter. He belonged to God by faith in the promise. It’s something that is impossible to explain or understand unless you have come to believe as Abraham had come to believe, right down to the tips of his toes. Everything to the contrary, God may be trusted to keep His promise. As Luther points out, with the heart of a father who has himself come to believe, Abraham believed that outside the promise of God everything is terrifying

darkness. Abraham goes up the mountain believing that even should Isaac be completely incinerated and the ashes scattered to the winds, God will keep His promise, gathering the ashes and giving life to the child of promise.

The Lord now knows that He has Abraham right where He wants him: a child of promise. Isaac’s life is spared, but not because of Abraham’s faith. Isaac’s life is spared for the same reason that you and I have life on this side of the promise—because the Lord God is prepared in the person of Jesus to give His own life that we may live, serving God with thanks, praise and obedience.

### Looking Ahead: The Child of Promise Comes of Age

In the next session we will study the portion of the story that features the next generation in faith: Isaac and Rebekah. We shall discover that this story, too, is filled with as much promise for faith as is the story of Abraham and Sarah.

# reading the Bible with Luther — Bible study



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### Bible Study and Prayer

Each installment of our series offers suggestions for reflection and discussion.

1. In a very good book, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Baker Books, 2012) Robert Kolb, quoting Luther, comments on Abraham’s prayer in Genesis 15: “*God makes his saints sad again after they have been made glad, lest they become proud and smug.*” In the midst of distressing times, believers are directed to follow Abraham’s example of “*submitting to God’s will, trusting him, and laying their requests and desires before him in prayer.*” Reflect on and discuss the Biblical counsel of Kolb and Luther in the light of your own experience as a believer.
2. In his book, Kolb also points out that in reading the Bible Luther encountered the Word of God. He believed that “*God’s power to establish a saving relationship ... lies in*

*the externally proclaimed gospel*” (Romans 1:17). With this in mind, consider the way in which God speaks to the believer through the story of Abraham and Sarah. What do **you** hear God saying?

3. Finally, our study of Genesis 12 – 22 has focused on God’s saving promise. Consider:
  - a. *What do I find most comforting, most disturbing about the passage?*
  - b. *What background knowledge would help me better hear the message of these chapters?*
  - c. *What does the passage promise to faith?*
  - d. *What does the passage demand of faith?*

To download a free copy of this Bible study guide and the article on pages 6 and 7, go to:  
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