The Patriarchs from the book of Genesis Part 2 - July 2, 2023

With input from <https://www.ligonier.org/podcasts/simply-put/the-abrahamic-covenant>; <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/christian-you-are-able-not-to-sin>; <https://www.gotquestions.org/heaven-sin.html>

In part 1 we discussed the multiple definitions and descriptions of “Patriarchs.” For our study in Genesis, we are stating that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be the patriarchs we will examine

**Genesis 15:6-11**

*6* ***Then he believed in the Lord; and He credited it to him as righteousness.*** *7 And He said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it.” 8 But he said, “Lord God, how may I know that I will possess it?” 9 So He said to him, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” 10 Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. 11 And birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.*

*17 Now it came about, when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, a smoking oven and a flaming torch appeared which passed between these pieces.*

**R.C. Sproul**: “And we’re told that through belief in the promise of God, Abraham was counted “righteous.” That is what Genesis chapter 15 verse 6 means when it says Abraham “believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”

This is a stunning moment: God’s revelation that faith in Him is the mechanism by which people are accepted by Him and become heirs of His promises. As Paul says in:

**Romans 4:1-5** *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” 4 Now to the one who works, the wages are not credited as a favor, but as what is due. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness*

**Galatians 3:6-9:** *Just as Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. 7 Therefore, recognize that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. 8 The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached* ***the gospel*** *beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the nations will be blessed in you.” 9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.*

Abraham was justified by faith alone—faith in the promises of God. Promises which found their fulfilment in Christ.

That God operates like this is overwhelmingly good news—not just for Abraham but also for us. So let me say it again: salvation is given to us not because of anything we have done or could do or ever will do, but purely on the basis of what God has done. And we receive the benefits of what God has done simply by trusting Him, as Abraham did.

So here in Genesis, in the very first book of Scripture, in this Abrahamic covenant, is the good news that was fully revealed some two thousand years later in Christ.

We do not, and cannot, produce our own righteousness. We can’t do it any more than Abraham could. But Christ did live a perfectly righteous life. So, when we believe Christ, as Abraham believed God, we are declared righteous, just as Abraham was. Second Corinthians chapter 5 verse 21 puts it this way: “For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God.”

There’s something else about the Abrahamic covenant that is extremely significant. When covenants were made in the ancient Near East, the two parties would kill an animal, cut it in half, and then both of them would walk between the two halves. It was a solemn and symbolic way for each person to say to the other: “If I break this covenant, may the same thing happen to me. May I be destroyed if I don’t keep this covenant.”

“But that is not what happens in the covenant between Abram and God. In this covenant, only God passes between the two halves of the animal, not Abram. God is saying to Abram, and by implication to all of God’s people: “This covenant does not depend on your obedience but on Mine. I swear by My own life (existence) that this promise will come to pass.”

And as if to further confirm that our righteousness does not depend on our obedience of God’s law, God credits Abraham with righteousness well before He gives Moses the Ten Commandments.

So that’s what the Abrahamic covenant has to do with us.

Abraham’s faith was counted to him as righteousness. If we have faith in Christ, our faith too will be counted to us as righteousness.”

**Genesis 17:1-8**:

*Now when Abram was* ***ninety-nine years old****, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him,*

*“I am God Almighty;*

*Walk before Me, and be blameless.*

*2 I will make My covenant between Me and you,*

*And I will multiply you exceedingly.”*

*3 Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying,*

*4 “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you,*

*And you will be the father of a multitude of nations.*

*5 No longer shall you be named Abram,*

*But your name shall be Abraham;*

*For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.*

*6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. 7 I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations as an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. 8 And I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land where you live as a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”*

**Now let’s look at one way God will bless and protect Abram - Abraham**

**Genesis 12:10-20:** *Now there was a famine in the land; so Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a time, because the famine was severe in the land. 11 It came about, when he was approaching Egypt, that he said to his wife Sarai, “See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman; 12 and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife’; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. 13 Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well for me because of you, and that I may live on account of you.”*

*14 Now it came about, when Abram entered Egypt, that the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. 15 Pharaoh’s officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house. 16 Therefore he treated Abram well for her sake; and he gave him sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants and female servants, female donkeys, and camels.*

*17 But the Lord struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife. 18 Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, “What is this that you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?* (how did Pharaoh find this out?) *19 Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her for myself as a wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go!” 20 And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they escorted him away, with his wife and all that belonged to him.*

**Genesis 20:1-18:** *Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he lived for a time in Gerar. 2 And Abraham said of his wife Sarah, “She is my sister.” So Abimelech king of Gerar sent men and took Sarah. 3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, “Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married.” 4 Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, “Lord, will You kill a nation, even though blameless? 5 Did he himself not say to me, ‘She is my sister’? And she herself said, ‘He is my brother.’ In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this.”*

*6 Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this,* ***and I also kept you from sinning against Me****; therefore, I did not let you touch her. 7 Now then, return the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, know that you will certainly die, you and all who are yours.”*

*8 So Abimelech got up early in the morning and called all his servants, and told all these things in their presence; and the people were greatly frightened. 9 Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, “What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.” 10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What have you encountered, that you have done this thing?”*

*11 Abraham said, “Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. 12 Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife; 13 and it came about, when God caused me to wander from my father’s house, that I said to her, ‘This is the kindness which you will show to me: everywhere we go, say of me, “He is my brother.”’”*

*14 Abimelech then took sheep and oxen and male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned his wife Sarah to him. 15 Abimelech said, “Behold, my land is before you; settle wherever you please.” 16 To Sarah he said, “Look, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. It is your vindication before all who are with you, and before everyone you are cleared.” 17 Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his female slaves, so that they gave birth to children. 18 For the Lord had completely closed all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife.*

What is one thing we learn through this? God will keep His promises.

What is another thing we learn from verse 6? *Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this,* ***and I also kept you from sinning against Me****; therefore, I did not let you touch her.*

**Desiring God/Jon Piper/Zach Howard:** The Christian life has this baffling paradox at its heart: we are simultaneously sinners and saints. We are both able to sin and able not to sin.

As saints, we’ve experienced the power of new birth (2 Corinthians 5:17) and tasted “the firstfruits of the Spirit” (Romans 8:23). Yet despite these miraculous realities, we keep on sinning, to our great dismay and shame. And if we think we don’t sin, John tells us we’re deceiving ourselves (1 John 1:8). As much as we wish it were not so, saints still sin.

Sinning as a saint can cause two opposite (and equally) wrong reactions. On the one hand, we can respond with prideful presumption in our power to overcome sin. On the other hand, we can react with helpless despair in the face of our persistent sin. What should we do? One early church pastor, Augustine of Hippo (354–430), has given us categories for understanding our relationship to sin, as well as hope for saints in the fight with sin.

**Sin and (In)Ability**

The arc of salvation history — creation, fall, redemption, consummation — frames Augustine’s categories for man’s relationship to sin (see, for example, On Correction & Grace XXXIII; The Enchiridion CXVIII). In the garden before the fall, Adam was able to sin (Latin posse peccare). And sadly, he did (Genesis 3:6).

After the fall, Adam’s original sin corrupted all mankind such that all men were not able to not sin (non posse non peccare – Augustine’s wording: In Adam's original sin, man lost the posse non peccare (the power not to sin) and retained the posse peccare (the power to sin)—which he continues to exercise.). Fallen man’s inability to live righteously is so complete that Scripture calls us dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1–2). Only by Christ’s death and resurrection are we made alive and by the Spirit newly able not to sin (posse non pecarre). The power of sin over us has been broken (Romans 6:6–7).

“Pride is a deceiver. Despair is a liar. And only grace brings hope.”

Yet the presence of sin has not disappeared (Romans 6:12). This is the present experience of saints who still sin. We are still able to sin and now able not to sin. Because of the frustrating reality of ongoing sin, we groan with anticipation (Romans 8:23) for the day when we will be gloriously not able to sin (non posse pecarre). We hope in the day when we will see Christ face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12) and when all things will be made new (Revelation 21:1–8).

The Bible describes heaven or the eternal state in great detail in Revelation chapters 21–22. Nowhere in those chapters is the possibility of sin mentioned. In fact, we have the promise that, in the eternal state, we will never experience death, sorrow, crying, or pain (Revelation 21:4)—the absence of those things is proof positive that sin is also absent, since those things are the product of sin (see Romans 6:23).

But in the meantime, we can believe more deeply the indispensable truth that Augustine helpfully reminds us of: in Christ, we really are able not to sin. As a pastor, Augustine gave these categories both to situate the Christian’s present fight against sin and to offer hope for future complete freedom from sin.

**Neither Pride nor Despair**

Our experience is one of sinning saints whose fallen nature is still being renewed. In this state of simultaneous ability to sin and not to sin, we are constantly in danger of two wrong responses, depending on our individual circumstances and personal proclivities.

First, we can slip into a pattern of presuming we can overcome our sin alone. Pride deceives us into indifference and apathy concerning the means of God’s grace. We assume that everything is under control, overlooking the subtleties of sin’s temptation and overestimating our ability to fight in our own strength.

Second, we sometimes fall into a deep despair where we feel helpless in fighting sin. Our old patterns of sin seem insurmountable. Our despair lies, saying there is nothing we can do, so we might as well indulge that desire again.

Pride is a deceiver. Despair is a liar. And only grace brings hope. So when it comes to a Christian’s ability not to sin, Augustine navigates between both prideful presumption and helpless despair by emphasizing several truths from Scripture about our ability not to sin.

**Your Ability Is a Gift**

A performance mentality can lead us to take a “just do it” approach to fighting sin. If I just try harder, just work smarter, just remember better, then I’ll overcome my addiction to pornography, my ever-present anxiety, or my gluttonous eating and drinking habits. Such an approach puts all the confidence in our will. Augustine warns though that man’s “free choice is sufficient for evil, but hardly for good” (sermon 156.12). If we depend on our unassisted will to be good, we will end up addicted to our evil desires.

But maybe you are not like that. Maybe you recognize that fighting sin is hard and that you need a little help. To you, grace sounds like a great performance additive to get you over the hump. This mistake is subtler but just as deadly.

This thinking, Augustine explains, claims that “the grace of God is help for doing things more easily.” It suggests man’s ability is like his power to row a boat, and God’s grace is like the wind in the sails. That sounds like great cooperation, but in reality, it makes God’s grace unnecessary. We could always row on our own without the wind (sermon 156.13). God’s grace is not optional like that; it’s absolutely necessary. Jesus did not say, “Without me you can indeed do something, but it will be easier through me.” He said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Without the power of the Holy Spirit, we are powerless to conquer sin in a way that honors God.

“Grace gives control of us back to ourselves.”

Our ability to fight sin and do good works is a gift, for, as Augustine loved to quote, “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Corinthians 4:7). Every temptation resisted, every thought captured, every sin killed is accomplished by the grace of the Holy Spirit’s power at work in us.

**Your Ability Is Real**

Should we then sit back and wait for grace to quell the anger in us or calm our inordinate fears? Are we led like a droid into battle, completely acted on but never really acting ourselves? No, says Augustine, “you both act and are acted on.”

Grace does not work like radio waves remotely controlling a droid. Grace renews our minds and restores our fallen natures. Grace gives control of us back to ourselves. God does the miraculous work of making us alive and the equally miraculous work of restoring our fallen nature. Therefore, when we resist sin, it is really us resisting it. The ability that God restores in us is a real ability. Augustine explains,

When you hear, As many as are led by the Spirit of God these are God’s sons, don’t slacken off and give up. After all, God is not building his temple out of you as out of stones which can’t move themselves. . . . That’s not what living stones are like (1 Peter 2:5). You are being led, but you too must run; you’re being led, but you must follow; because when you do follow, it will still be true, that without him you can do nothing. Because it does not depend on the one who wills or the one who runs but on God who has mercy (Romans 9:16).

All the commands in Scripture have no meaning if our ability is fake. To take just one example: Paul says, **Colossians 3:5** “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” Paul’s assumption is that we really do act. Our ability not to sin is real. Yet that restoration process is not immediate; we are being transformed.

**Your Ability Is Incomplete**

Although we are able not to sin, sin still plagues us. Scripture gives no promise of sinlessness in this life; indeed, it says the opposite (1 John 1:8). We’re never promised total victory over sin.

“Every sin killed is accomplished by the grace of the Holy Spirit’s power at work in us.”

Instead, the renewal we experience in our life is a foretaste of future glorification. We will win battles against sin in this life, but we should not expect to win the war. We have the ability not to sin, but not the ability to eradicate sin. Our ability in the fight against sin, then, is incomplete until Christ comes again.

We cannot yet rest in victory. Augustine reminds us that “the life of the just in this body is still a warfare, not a triumphal celebration. One day, though, this warfare will have its triumphal celebration. . . . Here is the language of triumph. . . . Death has been swallowed up in victory. Let those celebrating their triumph say, Where, death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:54–55).

The war against sin can be exhausting. And Scripture gives us language for that: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24–25). The war is incomplete as long as we fight with “this body of death.” Our ability to achieve total victory over sin will never come in this life. But it will come. It will come because Christ will return.