

Genesis 15:1-6

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.’ But Abram said, ‘O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.’ But 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.’ He brought him outside and said, ‘Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Romans 11:13-24

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead! If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not vaunt yourselves over the branches. If you do vaunt yourselves, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.’ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity towards those who have fallen, but God’s kindness towards you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

The story that Carol read about Abram is one of the most important stories in the whole Hebrew Scriptures. But it needs a bit of context here.

This is three chapters of Genesis and about a year after God told Abram and Sarai to leave their home in the city of Ur and go forth to the land that God would show them. It’s three chapters and about a year since God promised to bless them so much that they would be a

blessing to every nation of the world. It's three chapters and about a year since God promised to make a great nation of Abram.¹

In that time, Abram and Sarai have had some thrilling adventures. They have travelled from present-day Israel into Egypt and back. Abram has won some mighty battles, and his name is known in the whole region. But they are still old, far beyond normal childbearing age. And they still have no children.

This is not a lifestyle choice. This is certainly not a blessing. This is great misfortune, at a level that we twenty-first-century people have to stop and think about to understand. This is more than Abram not getting to teach his son the family business. This is more than Sarai not having any grandchildren to cuddle and spoil.

In a world with no such thing as Social Security, no such thing as old-age pensions or even health insurance, your only security is your children. No children means that there will be no one to take care of Abram and Sarai when they are too old to do hard physical labor.

All that Abram and Sarai have worked all their lives to build and put together is going to last only as long as they do. As soon as they are not able to maintain what they have, it, and they, will disappear without a ripple. And they know this.

This is the opposite of Abram and Sarai being a great nation. This is the opposite of what God has promised them.

This is the situation into which God speaks.

We Christians are part of the millions of descendants that God promises Abram. What Paul is explaining is that we have been grafted through adoption onto Abram's family tree. Not

¹ Genesis 12:1-3.

in place of the Jews, but beside the Jews. We, too, are heirs of the promise that God makes to Abram.

When we read the Bible, we see that we are heirs to a lot of promises.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”²

“For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.”³

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”⁴

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”⁵

Right now, we’ve been in better-looking situations, haven’t we?

Over six point seven million people have been diagnosed with a deadly contagious disease, just in the United States. Nearly two hundred thousand Americans have died. So far.⁶ There is no vaccine. Reasonable people are wearing masks in public, to help limit the spread of the disease. Half or more of you listening to this are not in the sanctuary, but are listening over the Internet. And nobody can say that’s an unreasonable response to the situation.

And, still, God has made these promises to us.

² Jeremiah 29:11, NIV.

³ Isaiah 54:10

⁴ Luke 11:9

⁵ Psalm 23:4, KJV.

⁶ Source: CDC.gov.

Your mileage may vary, but this doesn't look like prospering to me.

But a while after God made the promise to Abram about the stars of the sky, Abram had a son, named Ishmael.⁷ And then, a while later, after enough adventures to fill a whole series of Hollywood movies, he and Sarai had a son named Isaac, or laughter.⁸ Isaac had twelve grandsons, whose descendants became the twelve tribes of Israel.⁹ Even the exiled Ishmael became the ancestor to whom the Muslim Arabs trace their ancestry.¹⁰

There are about sixteen million Jews living in the world today,¹¹ and about two point two billion-with-a-B Christians grafted onto that family tree.¹²

God kept God's promises to Abram. God more than kept God's promises to Abram.

We serve the same God whom Abraham and Sarah served. Through adoption, we are part of that starry sky of descendants that they have. The same God who made promises to them has made promises to us.

God never promised that we would not see the valley of the shadow of death – God promised to walk with us through it.

God more than kept God's promises to Abraham and Sarah. God will more than keep God's promises to us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

⁷ Genesis 16.

⁸ Genesis 21.

⁹ Genesis 35.

¹⁰ *The Koran*.

¹¹ <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4673018,00.html>

¹² <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/04/02/397042004/muslim-population-will-surpass-christians-this-century-pew-says>