

Additional Teaching Materials for March 7

Here are some more ideas about discussion starters:

You might build on the idea that Abraham was chosen not just for his own sake, but for the sake of others. In the same way, we are saved for the sake of others, not just for ourselves. How are others blessed through us? This will usually lead to some talk about serving others. Here are some questions that might help get things going:

- The biblical notions of love for God and neighbor are built on concrete notions of love as sacrifice and action. Love is caring. Love is serving. Thus, the obvious, and oftentimes difficult, question is “How are we serving God and neighbor?” What did we do yesterday? Today? What will we do tomorrow? Where are our priorities? Do we tithe? What are the barriers to our serving God with all our efforts and enthusiasm? How do we overcome these barriers? How do we find the joy in service?
- When founding and guiding numerous congregations, Paul urged them to remember that the body of Christ has many members with many varied and wonderful gifts. Paul teaches that all of us are to serve the community in unity and harmony, but he also knew that we are all pretty different people. Some of us are equipped to teach, some are equipped to build budgets, some are leaders, and still others are equipped to be especially caring and supportive of those in crisis. How do we discover the individual gifts that God has given each of us? How do we go about finding the places in the church where we can best serve?
- We live in a very achievement-oriented community and many of us come from professions filled with hierarchies of power and knowledge. In the church, there are no hierarchies of service – one way of serving the church is not spiritually superior to another. As Paul says, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” (1Cor 12:4-6) Do you find this hard to really accept? Is our seeming need for hierarchy a barrier to service? Or is it a lack of confidence? Or a lack of training? How do we overcome this?

You might lead a discussion about God’s kingdom. Jesus talks about the kingdom of God as if it is a present reality . . . but that sure seems to run smack into the “real world” that we all inhabit.

- Though the Kingdom of God is a present reality, we still await its final consummation. This presents a real problem. It is as if we live with one foot in God’s kingdom and one foot in the “dog-eat-dog” world of the present age. This isn’t easy! Make a list of five areas in your own life where the Kingdom of God and the “dog-eat-dog” world are in greatest conflict. Where is this most difficult and challenging for you? Be as concrete and specific as possible.
- Now . . . for each of the five, discuss how you might go about bringing those two worlds together. (Yes . . . just like “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in

heaven”!) When the Bible talks about the renewal of creation it is about the obliteration of the boundary between the realities of “this world” and the realities of “God’s kingdom.” As you consider each of the five, don’t move too quickly to the concrete. Reflect on the nature of the conflict and why it presents a problem in your struggle to be an ever-truer disciple. Don’t fall into the trap of dismissing Jesus’ teachings as an “impossible ideal.” Instead, allow Jesus’ actions and teachings to train us, to transform us, and lead us toward a better understanding of what is really possible with God!

Grasping what it means to be God’s people means grasping the meaning of ‘covenant.’ Here is some more info on the covenant God makes with Abraham in today’s reading from Genesis, as well as a look at the deepening covenant between God and his people as the OT story moves forward. (This is from *The Teacher’s Commentary* that is part of the Bible Study Library on the computer in the library.)

Genesis 11:10–32 traces the genealogy of the man [Abraham] who was to become such a key to understanding the Old Testament. We read of his birthplace. He began a journey when God first spoke to him and instructed him to leave Mesopotamia to go to a land God would show him (Acts 7:2). Abraham left. While pausing in Haran along the way, God spoke again, repeating His command (Gen. 12:1), and adding words of promise. In a series of great “I wills,” God stated an unshakable purpose which has remained constant through the millennia, and which is the foundation on which our grasp of Old and New Testament revelation must rest today. All the Old Testament and the New can be understood as a progressive unfolding of the purpose God first announced to Abraham some 4,000 years ago!

Yet, glancing at the words in Genesis 12, we’re apt to miss this significance. It is only as we note the restatement of the promises, which come periodically throughout the Old Testament, that we begin to see their implications. As we hear the words of promise developed by the prophets, we see how completely central this revelation of purpose is. As we take these promises as a literal and changeless expression of God’s purpose, the relationship between the Old and New Testaments becomes clear. And the history of our own day, as we await the return of Christ, is filled with fresh meaning.

The Genesis promises stand. They are at the root of the Jewish identity through the millenniums. They are the key to understanding the Old Testament. They are a window on current events.

I will. These words introduce the covenant promise as expressed in Genesis 12:2–3. The details are unclear at this point. But the general shape of God’s purpose is taking form.

I will make you a great nation. From Abraham, Arab and Jew alike trace their origin. More than one nation now calls Abraham “father.”

I will bless you and make your name great. The reverence of millions in the three great monotheistic faiths has more than fulfilled this promise.

I will make you a blessing. From Abraham came the people of Israel. From Israel came both our Scriptures and our Saviour. What blessings indeed!

I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you. In striking ways, the rise and fall of empires bears out the stated intention of God to deal with men and nations as they deal with His chosen people.

In you will all the families of the earth be blessed. God's choice of Abraham and his children was not designed to exclude others. From the very beginning God's choice of Israel was intended for the benefit of mankind. And on the return of Christ, the King, the fullness of blessing will be extended to all.

There is a final promise, one added after Abraham had responded in faith and left Haran, finally entering the land of Canaan. The Lord appeared and said:

To your descendants I will give THIS land. The purposes of God, and the future of Israel, are focused on a particular place: a land, Palestine, where in our own day we've seen the planting once again of a Jewish state.

Tracing the Promise

The statement of promise found in Genesis 12 is only a first, faint outline of that divine purpose which gives shape to the Old Testament and to the history of the world. As we read on in the Bible we realize that these first promises give the Jewish people their sense of identity. Then these first promises are developed. At critical times in the history of Israel, various dimensions of God's basic purpose are amplified and revealed.

God made basic promises to Abraham which are expanded as the Old Testament develops. It's helpful to look ahead briefly, and to see some of the dimensions of the promise, and the development of the purpose first expressed in Genesis 12.

Genesis 15. The promises given to Abraham must have placed a strain on his faith, for Abraham and Sarah were childless. How could he become a great nation? As was common in that culture, Abraham had designated Eliezer of Damascus (who probably had the status of an adopted son) to be his heir, and to care for his wife should he die. In Genesis 15 the question is raised by Abraham: How could the announced purpose of God be fulfilled since he had no child?

In verse 4 is God's response: Your own son shall be your heir. God's promises would be passed on to Abraham's physical seed, and that seed would be as impossible for man to number as the stars of the heaven are to count (v. 5).

Here too God defined the extent of the land to be given Abraham's children: "From the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates" (v. 18). The land was further defined for Abraham by listing the peoples who then lived within it.

Genesis 17. Years have now passed since Abraham had been given the initial promises; years during which he and his wife Sarah had no children. Finally, some 12 years before the scene sketched in this Bible chapter, Abraham, following established custom of this time, had fathered a son by Hagar, his wife's servant. The child, Ishmael (progenitor of the Arabs), was rejected as the heir of the covenant promises. Instead God changed Abram's name (which meant "father" to Abraham (which meant "father of a multitude") This 99-year-old man was told that he and Sarah, who was then 90 and beyond childbearing years, would have a son of their own. This child of miracle was to be named Isaac, and he was to inherit the promises.

The Promised Land

In this statement of the covenant promise, two new dimensions are added. First, God's special relationship with Abraham's descendants is to last forever, "for the generations to come" (v. 7). Second, the title deed to Palestine is given the same "everlasting" status. As history has demonstrated, sin might cause Israel to be expelled from her land. But the title is retained. The promises made to Abraham, and the purposes they express, are to be viewed as changeless.

2 Samuel 7. Centuries passed before another significant amplification of the original covenant promise. In the early days of Israel's organization as a monarchy, David was selected to be king and special promises were given to him. His line was to be established as a royal line, and from his descendants was to come an Offspring whose kingdom would be established forever (vv. 12–13). A Davidic ruler might not always sit on a throne in Jerusalem. But there would always be a rightful heir to the throne, until finally the promised King would ascend the throne to rule over an endless kingdom.

From the perspective given by the New Testament, the promise becomes strikingly clear. Matthew carefully traced the line of David to Jesus. Even today Jesus, the rightful Heir, lives! And one day soon He, Jesus of Nazareth, will take the throne. The eternal purposes of God in Israel will be fulfilled, and the promises kept through Jesus' endless reign.

Jeremiah 30–31. Still more centuries followed. The people of God were torn from the Promised Land and dragged into Captivity. Then Jeremiah was used by God to reveal yet another dimension to the purpose.

In the Book of Jeremiah, the Abrahamic Covenant is reconfirmed. God would bring the captive people back to the Promised Land (30:3). What's more, the promise to David is reconfirmed as well. A Davidic king will be raised up as Israel's ruler and relate God to man (vv. 9, 21). And now comes the new revelation!

Long after Abraham, God had given Abraham's descendants a Law to keep. Obedience to the Law provided evidence of faith, and obedience was the basis on which a particular generation of Jews might expect blessing or judgment. To obey meant that a generation would have a present experience of the blessings promised to Israel at history's end. Disobedience meant a generation would suffer judgment, though the basic promises remained sure.

Through Jeremiah now comes word that the fulfillment of God's covenant promise deals not only with the external life of men, but with the inner man as well! The promise is not simply one of a day of peace and plenty. The promise of God involves conversion: the gift of a new heart and a new personal relationship with God that will mend the ravages of sin upon the human personality (31:31–35). The promise to Abraham is ultimately related to the undoing of the curse! The very sin that mars the image of God in man will be dealt with, iniquity will be forgiven and washed away, and a new heart implanted that is in full harmony with God and godliness.¹

¹Richards, L., & Richards, L. O. (1987). *The teacher's commentary*. Includes index. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.