

Promise Keeper

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jeremiah 31:31 ESV)

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:33 ESV)

In You All The Families Of The Earth Shall Be Blessed

December 4th, 2022

Genesis 12:1-3

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Genesis 12.

This Advent season, we are working our way through some of the great promises in the Old Testament and observing how they point forward to and find their fulfillment in Jesus.

Last Sunday, we started at the very beginning. We turned our attention to the garden of Eden where God made a promise that a champion would come who would strike down our enemy, the devil. That promise is meant to shape the way that we read the Old Testament. As we move forward in the text, we are now on the lookout for the birth of this promised child who will set his people free from the tyranny of sin.

Unfortunately, as we continue reading after that initial promise, the prospects don't look particularly promising. By the time we reach Genesis 6 – a mere THREE chapters after the fall – the world has already descended so far into corruption that God is forced to send a flood to wipe the slate clean!

One of the things that I appreciate so much about the Bible is that it deals honestly with the world, and with the human condition. The Bible tells us that the world that we are living in is wonderfully made, but terribly broken. And the Bible says the same thing about you and me. We're made in the image of God – eternal beings made to thrive, and to love, and to worship – but

sin has distorted us and rendered us fundamentally broken. We catch a glimpse of that brokenness in every story in the Bible – a reminder of the curse that we are still living under – yet we also find glimmers of hope!

Who can fix this broken world? Who can fix this broken heart? The Bible tells us that there is only one solution – we need DIVINE INTERVENTION! And, praise God, we have received a promise that help is on the way! We saw that promise in Genesis 3, and we find it again in our passage this morning.

We're going to pick up the story in Genesis 11:27, and we will read to Genesis 12:3. Look there with me. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. ²⁸ Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. ²⁹ And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. ³⁰ Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

³¹ Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. ³² The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran.

12 Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 11:27-12:3 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

We just read an incredible promise! Did you catch it? Humanity is living under a curse – a curse that we brought upon ourselves through our rebellion – and yet, here, we find a promise that somehow, through Abram, ALL the families of the earth will be BLESSED. The curse will be LIFTED!

Abraham was living in the same dark world that we're living in today. God's promise to him – glorious as it was – must have seemed all but impossible! And yet, Abraham laid hold of it with all his might.

The story of Abraham is a lesson in faith, and that is an important lesson for people like us, living in a world like this. We're about to zoom in on another of God's incredible promises of blessing, but each and every one of us are living in this broken world where all of the evidence seems to suggest that God's promises have failed! I spent my weekend preparing for a funeral!

In a world like this, the people of God must be the people of faith. So, before we turn our attention to this glorious promise, let's learn a lesson in the faith that will be required to lay hold of it.

A Lesson In Faith

In our passage this morning, the God of the universe graciously calls and blesses a seemingly ordinary man named Abram, and that man responds to God's call with faith. That's this story in a nutshell, and I think it's fair to say, that's OUR story in a nutshell. Isn't it? Isn't this a room full of ordinary men and women who have been called by God and challenged to respond in faith?

Listen: When we read the Bible, it is not inappropriate for us to see something of ourselves in the story – something of the way that God meets us and transforms us. The Bible is not a collection of interesting but irrelevant anecdotes – it is the story of God and man – the story of what we had, what went wrong, and what God has done to set it right once and for all.

And this passage that is before us teaches us some valuable lessons about faith. I want to pull two of those out for us this morning. First, we're reminded in this passage that:

1. Faith begins with God's call

Look again at verse 1. There, we read:

Now the Lord said to Abram, (Genesis 12:1a ESV)

Don't miss this detail: Abram did not call out to God – God called out to ABRAM! Isn't that incredible? There is nothing in the text to give us any indication that Abram was looking for God. He was just going about his life. But then, Abram's world was flipped upside down.

The Lord spoke.

This is the turning point in Abram's story, and it is the turning point in every one of our stories.

I've had the pleasure of hearing so many of your testimonies, and I never get tired of hearing them. Stories of how you were struggling through life without even giving a thought to God. Yet, at the prompting of a co-worker, or in attendance at a funeral, or through a friend at work, or through a memory of something grandma once taught you – you were suddenly confronted with the call of God. In an instant, everything that had been so important to you suddenly became like background noise and God's voice broke through. You weren't looking for Him! You weren't! But as the Apostle Paul so beautifully says:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ **even when we were dead** in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— (Ephesians 2:4-5 ESV)

Do you see that? According to the Bible, not only were you not looking – you were DEAD!

God goes first. This is the consistent, biblical pattern, and it undermines any temptation we might feel to boast. We weren't the smart ones, the shrewd ones, the ones with initiative. We were dead in our sin, just like everyone else. We couldn't make the first move. And we didn't have to. God calls to us before we call to Him. We see that in this passage.

And we also see that calls out to unlikely people. The story of Abram comes after a long list of the descendants of Shem – a list that includes names such as Eber, Reu, and Serug. Have you ever heard of these men? Me neither! And Abram ought to be one more obscure name that you don't recognize on this obscure list of Shem's descendants! Why doesn't Genesis 12:1 begin with the words, "Now the Lord said to Eber..."? There's nothing in the text to suggest that Abram was any more remarkable than the generations listed before him.

In fact, at the time that God calls to Abram, pretty well all that we know about this man and his wife Sarai is that they are barren. We see that in verse 30.

In a moment we are going to consider God's promise to Abram, and we will see that a significant aspect of the promise is contingent upon Abram and Sarai GIVING BIRTH! So, putting it together, not only is Abram seemingly insignificant, but he is also impossibly underqualified!

And yet, God chooses him.

Do you remember when we were in public school, and we used to pick teams at recess? We always looked for the most impressive – most capable – most powerful people to add to our team. But, according to the Bible, God's method is almost EXACTLY the opposite. We read in 1 Corinthians 1:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29 ESV)

Do you ever feel small, insignificant, and embarrassing? Do you ever feel unworthy, unlovable, and unimpressive? Do you ever feel like perhaps you duped God – perhaps He chose you because He saw you in a moment of rare triumph – but now He's feeling buyer's remorse?

Me too.

And yet, He called me. Out of the darkness, I heard His voice. I'm not here this morning because I have a hunch that this is true – I'm here because the God of the universe called my name! And that bolsters my faith. It doesn't matter how dark it gets out there. What matters is the God who called me. And He does not change. He will keep His promise.

Faith begins with God's call. That's the first thing we learn in this story. Second, we learn that:

2. Faith is always costly

When God's call broke into Abram's world, it turned everything upside down. Look at verse 1:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. (Genesis 12:1 ESV)

We discover in verse 4 that Abram was 75 years old when God called him to leave Haran! And it wasn't just his land that he was to leave. He had moved before, but in his previous move, he had travelled with his father and his brothers. This time, however, God was calling him to leave his kindred and his father's house. God's call to Abram was a call to leave behind everything he had ever known.

And where was he going? He was going, God said, "to the land that I will show you." In other words, God was calling Abram into the UNKNOWN. As one commentator summarizes:

Abram is to give up all he holds dearest for an unknown land promised by God.¹

And THAT is a portrait of faith, isn't it? The author to the Hebrews certainly thinks so. In Hebrews 11 – what Bible scholars refer to as the "Hall of Faith" – over a quarter of the chapter is devoted to the faith that Abraham demonstrated. In verse 8, for example, we read:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. (Hebrews 11:8 ESV)

Abram believed God, and he left everything behind in faith that God would be true to every last word of His promise. THAT is faith! Faith lets go of the trivial and temporary to lay hold of that which is priceless and permanent! As the martyred missionary Jim Elliot once said:

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.²

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 274.

² As quoted by Tim Chester, *Jim Elliot Was No Fool* (Crossway, January 18, 2018), accessed November 29, 2022. <https://www.crossway.org/articles/jim-elliott-was-no-fool/>

The call of faith is not a call to safety and ease. On the contrary, I have never met a Christian who's coming to Christ did not include a frightening and costly step of faith. Like the disciples who were called to leave behind their nets and their ships; like Zacchaeus who was called to repay everything he had stolen; like the rich young ruler who was called to sell his possessions; when God calls us, it is always and only a call to complete and total surrender.

You can tell when a person is hearing a legitimate call from the Lord, because they will be wrestling with the cost. Some, like the rich young ruler, consider the cost to be too great, and they go away sad because they are unwilling to let go of their former life. But some, like Abram, respond to the call of God with faith and leave behind everything that they had once known.

Faith is ALWAYS costly. And yet, it is ALWAYS worth it because, as we see in this story, faith is ALWAYS rewarded. God never invites us into a bad deal.

That brings us to the heart of our passage this morning. We've talked thus far about Abraham's faith, and the example that he set for us, but now we turn to the most important detail, and that is the OBJECT of Abraham's faith. Let's turn our attention now to the promise that prompted Abraham to leave behind everything he had ever known – the promise of blessing for the nations in a world that is groaning under the curse.

The Promise

We find the promise in verses 2 to 3. Look there with me now:

And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:2-3 ESV)

God goes on to promise even MORE to Abram in the following verses! Look ahead to Genesis 13:14-15 where God says:

Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, ¹⁵for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. ¹⁶I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can

count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. ¹⁷ Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you. (Genesis 13:14-17 ESV)

In summary, God promises to Abraham that he will give him the land of Canaan – the promised land – ALL OF IT! And He promises that he will make Abram's name great with offspring that cannot be counted! And God promises that He will bless those who bless Abram and curse those who curse him, and that, ultimately, through Abram, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

At this point in the story, the promise from Genesis 3:15 should be ringing in your ears. As one commentator observes:

Abraham is represented here as a new Adam and the "seed of Abraham" as a second Adam, a new humanity.³

It sounds for all the world like the seed of Abraham is going to be the one who is going to crush the serpent's head! This seed of Abraham is going to be the one who will restore to us all that we have lost! The promise from Genesis 3:15 – the promise that a child would be born who would crush our enemy – is being picked up and expanded upon in our passage this morning. Not only will this champion conquer our enemy, but through him all the nations will be blessed! That sounds an awful lot like a REVERSAL of the CURSE! Praise God!

And yet, if we keep reading, the *fulfilment* of this promise in Abraham's lifetime leaves something to be desired. In fact, by the time of Abraham's death in Genesis 25, the lofty promises that he left home and family for seem like an overstatement at best, and dishonesty at worst.

Abraham died with seven sons and the only land in Canaan that he ever possessed was the tomb in Hebron that he and Sarah were buried in. If this promise – the promise that through Abraham all the nations of the world would be blessed – if this promise was limited to Abraham's lifetime, then by all accounts, the promise failed.

But, the promise was NOT limited to Abraham's lifetime. It was a LONG GAME promise – a promise of blessing that would flow TO the world THROUGH a descendant of Abraham. It was a

³ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 139-140.

promise that further shaped our anticipation and left us looking eagerly for the son who would finally unlock the blessing of God for his people.

And it is this anticipation – this longing for the blessed son of Abraham – that prepares us to understand the opening verse of the New Testament. In Matthew 1:1 we read:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, **the son of Abraham.**
(Matthew 1:1 ESV)

If you'd never read the Old Testament – if you'd never considered God's promise to Abraham – then this opening verse might be dismissed as nothing more than a biographical footnote. But now we understand why Matthew was so intentional in drawing the line from Abraham to Jesus. It's because Matthew wants us to see that **THIS** is the child of promise! The Apostle Paul makes the same argument in Galatians 3 when he writes:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "**And to your offspring,**" **who is Christ.** (Galatians 3:16 ESV)

So much of the New Testament is spent picking up these threads of promise and showing us how they point forward to and find their fulfillment in JESUS. **THIS** is the promise that we are alluding to when we sing:

No more let sins and sorrows grow
Nor thorns infest the ground!
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found!⁴

Through Jesus, a BLESSING FOR THE NATIONS has been unlocked! This blessing is the fulfillment of what Genesis 3:15 pointed forward to – it is a reversal of the curse – it is the way HOME – the way back to the life that we were made for and that we lost through the fall.

But, how do we receive the blessing?

⁴ Lyrics by Isaac Watts, *Joy To The World* (1839).

That's an important question, isn't it? Maybe you're here today, and you are well aware that the world is broken, and you're excited to receive the blessing that Jesus has unlocked for you. But how? How do you lay hold of that blessing? The Apostle Paul answers that question for us. In Galatians 3:7-9, he writes:

Know then that it is **those of faith** who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."⁹ So then, **those who are of faith are blessed** along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Galatians 3:7-9 ESV)

That brings us back full circle to what we were discussing earlier. Why did we spend so much time considering Abraham's example of faith? Because the promises and the blessings of God can only be received by faith.

Jesus reversed the curse for you. Do you believe that? He lived the perfect sinless life that our father Adam failed to live – that WE fail to live – and then he assumed in his body all of the sin that should separate us from God forever. The Apostle Paul writes:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"— (Galatians 3:13 ESV)

Faith, then, looks at Jesus on the cross and says, "HIS DEATH WAS MY LIFE!" Faith let's go of sin and looks to Jesus and declares, "I BELIEVE!" Have you done that? I pray that you have, and if you haven't, I pray that you would before you walk out the doors today.

But I want to be clear – the call to faith is just as costly today as it was for Abraham. He had to leave the only life that he had known behind in order to respond to the call. So too will you. His life was filled with miraculous foretastes of heaven, but it was also filled with faith-defying obstacles and setbacks. There were many days when almost every bit of evidence in Abraham's life would have suggested that God's promise had failed. And this is the reason why Abraham was lifted up as an example for us to follow. In Hebrews 11, we're told:

By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.¹⁰ **For he was looking forward** to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:9-10 ESV)

HE WAS LOOKING FORWARD! Somewhere along the line, Abraham came to understand that God's promise was about MORE than physical land and biological children in the here and now! Somewhere along the line, Abraham developed an *appetite* and an *expectation* for another world – for a blessing that was ETERNAL rather than temporary. In Hebrews 11:13, we read:

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were **strangers and exiles on the earth**. (Hebrews 11:13 ESV)

Listen: There are going to be seasons in life when it will feel to you like the promises of God have failed – seasons when all of your circumstances seem to testify that God has given you a bad deal. Can anyone here say amen to that?

But, when those days inevitably come, I would encourage you to revisit the manger.

Remember the thousands of years of longing.

Remember the promise to the serpent, and the promise to Abraham, and the generations that waited and hoped and prayed and searched until finally, in the little town of Bethlehem, a cry broke through the night and a saviour was born!

Your God is a Promise Keeper!

Faith is not just the beginning of the Christian life. It is the lifeblood.

And when it feels like God is painfully slow in keeping His promise, remember that the delay is not a sign of His lack of concern – but that it is actually a display of His mercy and love. The Apostle Peter taught us that. He wrote:

But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. ⁹ **The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise** as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, **not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.** (2 Peter 3:8-9 ESV)

The delay is mercy.

I'm here today because God delayed. He was patient through my sin and my rebellion. He could have ended the story before I ever had a heart that was soft to the promises of God. But He didn't, and praise God that He didn't! And some of you are here today, and if the Lord were to return at this moment – if the trumpet were to sound and the promises of God were finally to reach their fulfillment – you would not be ready. You would be on the outside looking in.

His patience is mercy. He brought you here today to hear the gospel promise. The call to faith has gone out. It has gone out to unsuspecting and unworthy people as it always does. It is a call to follow Him into uncharted waters. It is a costly invitation. But the promise of God – the promise of life, and blessing, a reversal of the curse, and a way home – is worth more than anything that you could ever leave behind.

Let's pray together.