

Genesis 11:26-13:2 “Land, Seed, Blessing”
Psalm 105
Hebrews 11:1-16

May 17, 2009

Abram heard God’s voice.
Abram believed God’s voice.
Abram obeyed God’s voice.

Therefore, when you hear God’s call,
you need to believe what God says,
and do it.

This is the message of Genesis 12.
Remember who is listening to Genesis 12?

Israel – in the days of Moses,
as they are preparing to go into the land that he promised Abraham.
They need to listen to the voice of the LORD – like Abram.
And Israel then for a thousand years lived in the land that God promised Abram.
They would continue to hear the story of Abraham,
and they would hear of the importance
of listening to the voice of the LORD.
And then Israel – for 70 years – lived in Exile,
waiting for the voice of the LORD
to call them back to the land that he promised Abraham.
And even after they were back, for 500 years they waited,
still in an exile of sorts, for God to make things right!
And then Paul tells us that we Gentiles are grafted into the Abrahamic olive tree.
We are Abraham’s heirs by faith.

In other words, for over 3,000 years preachers have exhorted congregations
to imitate the faith of Abraham,
as he believed God’s word, and did as God said.

Therefore let us sing in response to God’s word, Psalm 105
(we’ll sing the first five stanzas and then the last two).
Read Hebrews 11.

There are three parts to the blessing of Abraham.
The promised Land
The promised Seed
And the promise of the blessing to the nations.

Today we are looking at the blessing of Abraham.
But by looking at all of Genesis 12,
we are seeing that blessing in a different light.

After all, in Abram's own lived experience,
the promises of God do not get very far.

You hear me week after week tell you
of all the glorious things that God has done in Jesus Christ.
You hear of the mighty deeds that God has wrought.

And then you look at your own life and say,
"where are God's mighty deeds?"
"Why don't I see anything in my own life?"

You need the faith of Abram:
a faith that looks the promises of God,
even when it looks like those promises are going down the drain!

Introduction: The Generations of Terah (11:27-32)

27 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.

Part 6 of Genesis is entitled, the generations of Terah.
It consists of the stories of Abraham and Isaac.

We are told at the end of chapter 11 that Terah began to set out for Canaan,
but settled in Haran.

Terah is most likely not a believer.

He lives in Ur – a center of moon worship –
and moves to Haran – another center of moon worship.

The names of the women also hint at this:

Sarai is related to the Akkadian name of the consort of the moon-god,
and Milcah sounds like the Akkadian for the daughter of the moon-god.

None of the names have any connection to the worship of God.

In terms of land and seed,
verses 27-32 describes a family
that does not quite know where it belongs – Ur, Haran, Canaan.
And at the very center of this paragraph we hear that Sarai was barren –
and therefore has some uncertainty as to whether it will even continue.

A dislocated family with fertility problems.

This is not a very promising beginning.
But then again, God does not often choose
the wise and powerful things of this age...

1. The Promise: Land, Seed, and Blessing to the Nations (12:1-3)

12:1 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.*

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.”*

Five times in these three verses God says that he will bless Abram.

This connects us back to the blessing upon Adam and upon Noah.
Abram is identified here as the seed of the woman,
through whom God will save the world.

Also, Abram is called to leave his family – his father’s house –
and accept the inheritance of the LORD.

Whatever inheritance he might have received from Terah is abandoned.

Jesus says, whoever does not hate father, mother, wife, children, siblings, etc.
to follow me, cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26)

When he said that, he could have been thinking of Abram.

Abram understood the cost of discipleship.

If you would be a disciple of Jesus,
then you must leave everything and follow him.

What matters more to you?

Your family identity?

Your work identity?

Or your identity as a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Jesus offers something far better than your country,
your kindred and your father’s house.

God calls Abram to something far better than anything the city of man can offer!

The inheritance that God promises is threefold:

The land (v1)

The seed (v2)

The blessing to the nations (v3)

Notice that each of these require faith:

*“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house
to the land that I will show you.*

Abram does not know where this country is.
Neither does he know what will happen when he gets there!

Will you allow God to show you his purposes in *his time*?
Or do you have to know now?
My father-in-law's favorite question to his children was,
“do you need the answer now?”
If they said “yes” – then he said “no”!

He was teaching them discipleship.

*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.*

That's all very fine,
but my wife is barren!
How can I become a great nation?
If my line dies out, then my name will never be great!

*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.”*

The promise of the Land, the promise of the Seed,
and the promise of the blessing to the nations,
all require Abram to believe something that he cannot see.

But Abram believed God and so he did what God said.

2. The Land? It Belongs to the Canaanites (12:4-9)

4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him.

Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

*5 And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son,
and all their possessions that they had gathered,
and the people that they had acquired in Haran,
and they set out to go to the land of Canaan.*

Already in verse 5 we have an indication that Abram is a wealthy man.
There are many “people” that they have acquired.

In the ancient world wealth was generally judged
by how many people depended upon you.
Abram apparently is able to provide for a large group of people.

When they came to the land of Canaan,

6 Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh.

At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

7 Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said,

“To your offspring I will give this land.”

Note that before the LORD had only spoken.

Now the LORD appears to Abram,

either in a vision or a theophany – some sort of visual appearance.

In verse 1 God had said “go to the land I show you.”

Now God reveals that Abram himself will not receive the land.

“To your offspring I will give this land.”

How does Abram respond to this news?

Is he disappointed?

No.

Watch what he does in verses 7-9:

So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

8 From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel

and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east.

And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord.

9 And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

Abram builds an altar to the LORD at Shechem.

Shechem is in the center of the land.

Shechem will be the place where Joshua renews the covenant in Joshua 24

Then he goes further south, between Bethel and Ai,

another significant site in the history of Joshua,

and there he builds another altar and called upon the name of Yahweh.

Abram owns no land.

So his altars would have been left as silent monuments of Yahweh-worship.

Contrast Abram with the anonymous tower-builders of chapter 11.

They sought to make a name for themselves and are forgotten.

Abram’s concern is to worship the name of Yahweh.

And his name will be remembered for all time!

But he appears to be looking for suitable pasture land

that is not already occupied by Canaanites,

so he continues to move south through the land,

from Shechem to Bethel to the Negev.

Where is he going?

We find out in the next verse:

3. The Seed? Sarai in Pharaoh's Harem (12:10-16)

10 Now there was a famine in the land.

There are a lot of famines in the book of Genesis.

They were common in the ancient world,
and especially in the ancient near east,
the climate is so hot and dry that it doesn't take much for the crops to fail,
and when the crops fail, famine results.

But when famine came,

Abram had no place to go – no family to turn to.

After all, he has left his father's house!

He is a wanderer in the land.

The Canaanites will take care of their own families,

but they will jealously guard every drop of water in the land.

So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.

Many have tried to say that Abram is wrong for doing this,

that Abram should have stayed in the land.

But most likely, if Abram had stayed in the land he would have died!

Certainly bad things happen in Egypt,

but we cannot say that therefore the decision to go to Egypt was wrong.

Rather, we need to hear the story as it would have been heard by Israel:

when they heard that Abram went down to Egypt,

they would have started clucking their tongues –

not because he lacked faith or was disobeying God –

but because bad things *always* happen when you go *down* to Egypt!

When the biblical authors talk about going to Egypt

they invariably talk about going “down” to Egypt

When Abram returns from Egypt in 13:1 “he went up from Egypt.”

This makes sense to us because when you look at a map,

Canaan is up, and Egypt is down.

But for them, this is generally because of elevation.

(that is why northern Egypt is called “lower Egypt”

and southern Egypt is called “upper Egypt”).

It all has to do with elevation.

But this idea of going “down” into Egypt has some convenience to it.

You go down into Egypt, like you go down into the grave.

Egypt is consistently portrayed as the land of death –
the land where bad things happen.

Of course, to Abram, there are no negative connotations.
God has never forbidden him to go there.
Nothing bad has ever happened there yet!

And so Egypt is the *obvious* choice for Abram.
Why?

Because Egypt has a steady water supply (the Nile)
and so tends to be a safer place in a famine.

So while Abram does not necessarily sin in leaving the land,
he will discover that the promises of God are all connected.

Land, Seed, and blessing to the nations
are all woven together.

When the Seed leaves the Land,
Blessing usually departs as well.

And Egypt is as far from the center of the land as you can get in Genesis!

Genesis 12 offers us a preview of the end of the book.

And sure enough,

*11 When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife,
“I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance,
12 and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’
Then they will kill me, but they will let you live.
13 Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you,
and that my life may be spared for your sake.”*

This is technically true –
as we learn in chapter 20, Sarai really is Abram’s half-sister.

But just as the Promised Land appears to be a waste land,
barren and withered,
so also any hope of the Promised Seed is soon imperiled as well.

*14 When Abram entered Egypt,
the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful.
15 And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh.
And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house.*

*16 And for her sake he dealt well with Abram;
and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants,
female donkeys, and camels.*

This may have some benefit for Abram's financial estate,
but it creates a major problem for God's promises.
God has promised that Abram will be father of many nations,
but Abram's wife is in the hands of another man.

The promise of the seed appears to be in jeopardy.

Sarai was taken into Pharaoh's harem.
The text does not specify how far things went,
so I will not speculate.
All we know is that she was taken into Pharaoh's harem
and Pharaoh richly rewarded her "brother."

The Israelites hearing this in the days of Moses could not but help
noticing that their forefather had plundered the Egyptians,
just like they had done when the Egyptians begged them to leave.

They also would notice that Egypt came under "great plagues"
both in the days of Abram and the days of Moses:

4. The Blessing? Egypt Cursed (12:17-20)

*17 But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues
because of Sarai, Abram's wife.*

It is not clear what these plagues were.
Nor is it clear how Pharaoh discovered that Sarai was the cause.

But Pharaoh discovers the hard way that "those who curse" Abram are cursed.
After all, he has "cursed" Abram by taking his wife.

(Of course, Abram is partly to blame because he deceived Pharaoh)

But this reminds us that sin is not subjective.
You don't have to know that you are sinning to be sinning!
Pharaoh *objectively* sins by taking another man's wife.

Notice verse 18:

*18 So Pharaoh called Abram and said,
"What is this you have done to me?
Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?"
19 Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife?*

Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go.”

Pharaoh took Sarai as his wife.
She was lawfully married to Pharaoh under Egyptian law.
Pharaoh had no way of knowing that she was already married,
because neither Sarai nor Abram told him.

But, in marrying a married woman, Pharaoh brought curses upon himself.
He is *objectively* guilty –
even though he didn't think he was doing anything wrong.

This reminds us that very often we don't even realize that we are sinning.
Please understand that *your conscience* is not a sure guide.
God gave you a conscience to prick you from time to time.
But conscience cannot define sin.
What is sin?

Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God.
You sin when you do something that God says you should *not* do,
OR when you fail to do something that God says you *should* do.

So through his blind lust and greed Pharaoh cursed the seed of Abraham.
And when you curse the seed of Abraham,
you invoke the curse of Abraham upon yourself.

“I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse.”

And because Pharaoh takes Abram's wife (unwittingly)
he calls down curses upon himself.

*20 And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him,
and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.
13:1 So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had,
and Lot with him, into the Negeb,
2 Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold.*

And so Abram, who had gone *down* into Egypt,
now goes *up* from Egypt
with the spoil from Egypt.

Again you can see a foreshadowing of the Exodus.

Conclusion:

God promised Abram three things:
the land, the seed, and that he would be a blessing to the nations.

But what did Abram himself see?

He saw the land in the hands of the wicked,
he nearly lost his wife to Pharaoh's harem,
and while he was enriched by the Egyptians,
all that came to the Egyptians were plagues!

And yet Abram believed God.

In other words, Abram believed God –
even when everything looked like it wasn't working.

As you look around you, what do you see?
Do you see God's promises coming to pass?
Or do you see a bleak and barren world?

Paul tells us in Galatians 3 that Jesus is the Seed of Abraham.
Paul tells us that Jesus has received the inheritance.
And so therefore those who are of faith, Paul says,
“are the sons of Abraham.”

Jesus is *the* Son – *the* Seed – the Son of God who has entered into glory
and received all that God promised to Abraham.
And we have been adopted as sons in him, by faith.

*For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.
For as many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus have put on Christ.
There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free,
there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
And if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring,
heirs according to promise. (Gal. 3:26-29)*

By faith you see the promises of God fulfilled in Jesus.
Jesus is the Seed who inherits the Land and in whom all nations are Blessed.
That is your hope!

You may never own a piece of land (all Abram ever owned was a burial plot!)
You may never have children or grandchildren.
Your life may not turn out the way you hoped or planned.

But what you have in Jesus Christ is an inheritance
that is greater and more glorious than all these things put together.

Will you follow Jesus?
When Peter said “See, we have left our homes and followed you.”
Jesus replied, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house
or wife or brothers or parents or children,

for the sake of the kingdom of God,
who will not receive many times more in this time,
and in the age to come eternal life.” (Luke 18:28-30)

How could Jesus say this?

Those who follow Jesus –
those who imitate the faith of Abraham –
find a new family in the church.

And it is this new family into which Hannah Angelee Pitts is baptized today.