

A Not Very Promising Beginning

By Murray Capill

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Bible Text: Genesis 12:1-9
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Nelson Attwood
4 Streeton Court
Pakenham, Victoria, 3810

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/njattwood

Genesis 12:1-9. Let's hear God's word.

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you, I will curse. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So Abram left as the Lord had told him and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran and they set out for the land of Canaan and they arrived there. Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time, the Canaanites were in the land. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar to the Lord there that had appeared to him. From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.

This is the passage I want us to think about this morning. Let's just pray and ask that God would open his word to us. Shall we pray?

Our living and righteous God, we acknowledge that this is your word and that your word is living and active, that it is powerful, that it is designed to change and transform our lives and so we pray that you would help us to listen to your word to understand it, and more than that, we pray that your Holy Spirit would be at work in us as we look at this portion of Scripture. So come amongst us now with the power of your Holy Spirit and work in our hearts and our minds and make us the people and the church you want us to be. We ask this in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.

I don't know if you've picked up the little accent thing already but I was born, not born but raised in Christchurch in New Zealand and Christchurch was just a very very beautiful city to grow up in. Right in the center of the city there is a magnificent cathedral; the city sort of spans out from the cathedral square. There are wonderful parks and gardens there, huge inner-city parks, and in the springtime it's just a picture – there are tens of thousands of daffodils and blossom-lined avenues. There is a beautiful river, the Avon River, that winds

through the middle of the city, and the backdrop about 100 kilometers away of the snowy mountains of the Southern Alps.

So Christchurch was a beautiful place to grow up and known as the Garden City, but in 2011 the city was shaken by two massive earthquakes and much of the city that I grew up in and loved has since then just been a mess. So many buildings shattered, ruins, rubble and rock and concrete. Whole suburbs wiped out. But not long after the earthquake in the middle of all the rubble and mess, right near the city center there was a pop-up enterprise. Some innovative people brought in shipping containers. They painted these shipping containers bright colors and they set up shops in these shipping containers right near the city center. So you had this pop-up mall in the middle of rubble and destruction. A shipping container is pretty ordinary, not very special, but it was a start. It was a restart and it meant a lot.

Now, I think that's kind of a picture of what happened on a much grander scale in our world at the very beginning of human history. We are told that God created this world, he created a beautiful world and he created a garden, the garden of Eden, a place of beauty, a place of rivers and gold and exotic trees, of wonderful animals, but when Adam and Eve rebelled against God, it was like an earthquake shattered the beauty of the world that God had made. Immediately death and destruction replaced the peace and beauty of that place. And if you read in the Bible from Genesis 3 through two Genesis 11, you'll read of a curse, a flood, and a scattering of people of the Tower of Babel, three judgments of God because people had rebelled against him and declared autonomy, but now when we come to Genesis 12, there is a pop-up enterprise in the midst of the rubble and ruin. God starts again. He's actually starting for the third time. First he started with Adam and Eve, then restarted with Noah, and now starts again with Abraham.

That in itself, is a testament in wonderful grace. In a way you think, "Why would God start again? It hadn't worked out with Adam and Eve, it hadn't worked out with Noah and his descendants, why would he begin again?" And yet that is a wonderful testament to the God of the Bible, the God who created our world. He is a God of grace and he starts again and what he starts now is of enormous significance for us. I believe that what we find here in Genesis 12 is where we as Christian people, where we as the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, have our roots. We are only 12 chapters into the Bible, there are another 1,177 chapters to go, and all the other chapters that follow build on what we read here in this passage. This really sets the agenda for the rest of the Bible and for the rest of God's work in human history.

So let's have a look at the story of what is here and what I want you to notice first in these verses is that, really, it is such an unpromising start. It's such an unpromising start. It really is a shipping container kind of start. If you want to begin a venture that is going to shake the world, that is going to be influential, that is going to be powerful and impacting, surely you want to begin with significant resources. You want to begin with the best people in the most strategic location. You want a good brand. You want an excellent strategy. You want funding. You want reputation. But God who created this world out of nothing, now restarts with almost nothing. He starts with an old man, 75 years old to be precise. He has a wife, Sarai, and we are told at the end of chapter 11 that she is barren. She has no children. Abram is not some kind of amazingly committed Christian guy who has been church planting in Iran. You can kind of get the impression Abraham must've been just this really really godly guy and God picked this fantastic Gospel worker. No, we read an amazing thing in Joshua

24. Let me just read this verse to you. This is Joshua 24:2, Joshua said to all the people, this is hundreds of years later, "This is what the Lord the God of Israel says, long ago your forefathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River, and worshiped other gods." That's Abraham's background. He lived in Haran, prior to that in Ur of the Chaldeans. He lived in these countries where they worshiped other gods. Abraham came from a pagan background.

Now, sure, he came from some pretty impressive cities. Ur of the Chaldeans was like the London or the New York of the world at that time. It was a massive, influential, powerful city. He moves from there with his family to Haran. These are cities in modern day Iraq. It was another impressive city but Abraham is a pagan. Abraham is an idol worshiper along with his family and God calls him, calls this old man, calls this person with a pagan background, calls this person from big important cities and relocates him. He says, "Get up, Abram. Go. Go somewhere. I'll show you where. Just head on your way." And he does. He doesn't tell him where he's going but where it turns out to be is the land of the Canaanites. The Canaanites had a reputation for being incredibly ungodly. They are wicked perverse people.

So God takes this old man, relocates him from somewhere big and impressive to somewhere rough and ungodly, takes a person with no particular strong spiritual background and restarts his work in this world in that way. If things hadn't worked out with righteous Adam and if they hadn't worked out with righteous Noah, why would they now work out with Abraham? This really is such an unpromising start, is it not? But friends, what an encouragement that is. God loves to work in contexts that are seemingly impossible. He takes unpromising people and unpromising situations and he works there to show that what comes about is his work. Full stop.

The Bible shows that time and time again. Loads of Bible stories in exactly this theme right at the center. Think of the story of Gideon, you remember Gideon with his army of 300 people who has to go out against the Midianites with an army of 30,000 people. He doesn't have a chance except that God has chosen to work that way. You think of the disciples in the New Testament. There is a description of the disciples in the book of Acts where they are described as "unschooled ordinary men." That's who God chose to be the closest followers of Jesus and the foundation stone for the church, unschooled ordinary men. Think of the church itself. As Paul describes the church in 1 Corinthians 1, he says there, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise." He says, "Look at the church, there aren't too many people in the church who are famous and amazing and philosophers." He says, "No, God has just chosen ordinary people to do his work." Most notably of all, think of Jesus Christ, the carpenter from Nazareth in Galilee. A nowhere job in a nowhere town and he is to be the Savior of the world.

God's choice of whom he will work with and where he will work is not conditioned on how promising we are. We had elections here, didn't we, a few weeks back. For weeks and weeks and weeks, the politicians promote their case and they say what they stand for, they present their personality and all that they stand for. They put down the opposition. They try to promote themselves so that you will choose to vote for them. They know that your choice will be conditioned on how they come across. But God's choice is never conditioned on how well we come across. It seems he likes to choose weak people, small people, struggling

people, ordinary people. The Apostle Paul himself said, didn't he, "We have this treasure," that's the treasurer of the Gospel, "in jars of clay," in clay pots, so that the focus is on the treasure and not on the pot. That's God's strategy.

So friends, that means that when you are being used of God, don't assume that it's because God thinks you're pretty amazing. It might just be the opposite. And it also means that when you are in a situation that looks very unpromising, don't lose heart. If you look at yourself and you see someone who you think is just very very unpromising, if you look at your kids, your family, your work situation, you look at your church and say, "This isn't really much. This is just hard work. This is just struggle. This is just small. This is just ordinary," friends, don't lose heart, that is exactly where God works. Shipping container starts are God's thing.

So the story begins with this very unpromising start. Where does it go from there? Well, the next thing I want you to notice is that now into that unpromising situation, God makes extravagant promises. He now makes extravagant promises. I don't know whether you receive these kind of emails but I frequently receive emails usually from some Nigerian woman who has come into an amazing fortune and her husband has died and she is offering me millions of dollars as seed funding into my ministry and all I have to do is send her my bank account details. Have any of you heard from this lady? She's absolutely magnificent. Sometimes you get these promises that are just too good to be true. So someone sends me an email promising me millions of dollars and do you know what I do? Hit the delete button. Instantly. But here in this passage, we have promises far bigger than that but don't hit the delete button because this is not some kind of desperate grab on God's part. This is, as I said before, the agenda that will set the pace for the rest of human history.

He makes promises, they are in verses 2 and 3, and I think if you break that down, he promises three things in particular. First of all, he promises to Abraham personally that he will become great. "I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you. I will make your name great. I will give you a great name. I will give you a reputation. I will turn you into a nation." Remember, we are talking about an old man of 75 who has got an old wife who is barren. That's God's first extravagant promise. Secondly, he promises that the well-being of other people in this world will be dependent on their response to Abraham and his children. Look at what it says there next, "I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you, I will curse." What happens to the lives of other people will be dependent on their response to Abraham and his descendants. That's a big promise. Thirdly, he promises that what he's starting now will bring blessing to the ends of the earth, that all nations he says at the end of verse 3 there, "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

These are massive promises. God clearly is looking way beyond one old man and seeing all that he intends to unfold through Abraham's yet-to-come descendants. If you like, he sees way past a shipping container to a new mall, to a new city. Everything changed. God is really saying, "This world that I created, these people that I created for myself to live in relationship with me, to be blessed and to be prospered, this world will be restored and renewed through you, Abraham, and through your descendants." And God will bless Abraham and his descendants so that they will be a blessing. They are blessed to be a blessing. They will both embody and mediate God's blessing to the ends of the earth.

I want you to notice: Abraham is not called here to something small and inward and personal. He's called to something outward and missional. God's program here isn't just to look after Abraham and his family, his program is to bless them so that his blessing will go to all peoples throughout the world. In fact, friends, what is promised here is nothing other than the Gospel itself. It says that quite overtly in the New Testament letter of Galatians. Listen to what Paul says, "Understand that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and announced the Gospel in advance to Abraham, all nations will be blessed through you." Paul is saying this promise, all nations being blessed through you, this is the Gospel.

This is the Gospel message being announced to Abraham and we stand with the privilege of being about 4,000 years down the track and we know that Abraham eventually did have a child and then there were more descendants, and then there was a nation, and eventually from Abraham came Jesus Christ, the Messiah. And all the promises that are being made here to Abraham ultimately reached their fulfillment in Jesus Christ and now through him and his people, blessing is going to the ends of the earth. In fact, there is really a direct line from these great promises to Abraham to what we call the Great Commission of Jesus where Jesus at the end of his earthly ministry says, "Go and make disciples of all nations." Because he had come, the blessing would go through him to the ends of the earth.

Now, these are big promises that rest ultimately on Jesus and I think that has a couple of powerful implications. The first implication is clearly this: your well-being and mine ultimately depends on our response to Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham. If we bless him, we will be blessed. That's the promise of the Gospel, isn't it? If we turn to Jesus and we love him and we trust him and we honor him and we live for him and we follow him, if we bless him, we will be blessed.

What's the blessing that you receive when you follow Jesus? Well, let me say it's not the blessing of being rich and famous. I think lots of people would love the blessing of being rich and famous but if you look at the lives of the rich and famous, how many of them are not at all happy? This week, most of you will have watched some Olympic games and seen again the amazing story of Michael Phelps who is now the most medaled Olympian of all time, 22 gold medals, 27 metals in total. No Olympic athlete has had greater success than Michael Phelps and yet also there are the stories of what he calls his dark days, how after multiple Olympic medals, he still experienced depression and hardship and has been in rehab for alcohol and drug problems. You can be the most famous person in the world and not be happy.

God isn't promising us here the blessing of being rich and famous. I'm inclined to think that might actually be a bit of a curse. What God is promising is the blessing of experiencing what he originally intended us to experience. God created us for himself. He created us to have relationship with himself. He created us to know him and to love him. He created us to serve him in his world. He created us to experience peace and joy and a sense of purpose and value in life. And now he comes to us in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, and says if you bless Jesus Christ, if you love him, if you follow him, if you have faith in him, if you trust him, you will begin to discover joy and peace and purpose and value. And the flipside is true of that as well. If you reject Jesus Christ, if you don't honor him, then you won't experience the blessing that God intended for his people. If you curse him, in fact, you will be cursed.

So that's one of the implications of these extravagant promises. Our well-being is now tied up with what we do with Jesus Christ. I think there is another implication as well and that is once we have life in Jesus Christ, our lives and our churches cannot be inward looking and small minded. Remember, God is saying to Abraham, "You will be blessed to be a blessing," and that is always to be the case. If we are drawn into blessing in Jesus Christ, we are being blessed to be a blessing. Israel was always meant to be a blessing to the nations. His church today is meant to be a blessing to the community around. That means we always need to be thinking about how we can bless others with what we have been blessed with. We've always got to be thinking about how we can share what we have with other people. We've always got to be thinking about how we can draw other people in to the good things that we have in Jesus Christ.

Let me put it this way: suppose I have a son called Tom. I don't have a son called Tom but suppose I had a son called Tom. I say to Tom, "Hey, Tom, I want to spoil you. I want to give you an amazing day out." And I give to Tom six tickets to go to a theme park and I give to him, as well, this humongous bag of Wally's and I give to him a heap, a scarily big heap of spending money and I say, "Tom, I want you to have an absolute ball at the theme park and so what I want you to do is I want you to go to your friends, give them the tickets, five friends, six of you go and have the time of your life. I'll drop you off, I'll pick you up." And Tom goes to bed that night as happy as Larry, like his name is not Larry, his name is Tom. But he goes to bed as happy as Larry and he just can't believe that his dad has done this. He can't believe how blessed he is, what a day it's going to be. But overnight as he thinks about it, he thinks, "If I go by myself, I get all the Wally's and all the money." So the next morning he doesn't bother with the friends, he just goes to the theme park and he goes on all the rides by himself, and he does a lot of them, and he eats lollies until his stomach aches and he spends money like it's going out of fashion. And at the end of the day, I go and pick him up and he has kind of had a good day but he's not half as happy as I expected he would be. His tummy is sore and he didn't have anyone with whom to experience all that fun. I think many Christians and maybe many churches are like Tom, trying to enjoy all that God has given us for ourselves and forgetting that we've been blessed to be a blessing and that there is great joy, great joy in sharing God's blessings with other people.

Well, there is one more thing in this passage that I want us to look at. We've seen such an unpromising start. Then we've seen God's extravagant promises and what they actually mean in this world. Now let's finish by looking at a very promising response. Abraham's response is just fantastic. Don't you love it when people respond well? I just love it when I say to my kids, "Look, could you just help do this?" And they are like, "Yeah, sure, like now?" And I almost die. I'm like, "Did they just respond immediately with no resistance? That's crazy." Just love it when your kids respond well. Great church life, you say, "Look, we need a few volunteers to do this," and the next time you make an announcement up front of the church you're saying, "Please, no more volunteers. Like everyone offered and we just don't need everyone." Don't you love it when the response is just fantastic?

Abraham's response is fantastic. He was asked to do something incredibly hard. God is asking him to leave his family, his home, his country. God is asking him to leave his false gods and his false worship. God is asking him to go somewhere and he doesn't really know where. God is asking him to believe the impossible, "You will have descendants, many of

them, and through them the whole earth is going to be blessed." And in verse 4 we read, "Abram went." Abram obeyed. Abram said, "Yes, I'm in!"

So he heads off and he comes to the land of Canaan and the Lord says, "This is the land." And Abram we read of here, moves through that land from north to south and that land will never be his in his lifetime, all he'll own in that land is a burial site. That's all he'll get in his lifetime. He lives there as a sojourner, a pilgrim, and he pitches his tent, his temporary dwelling, and next to his tent he builds an altar and he worships the Lord. In fact, you see there that he builds an altar at Shechem and then he moves south to Bethel and he builds an altar there. He has built an altar slap bang in the middle of the Promised Land. He built an altar right down on the southern end of the Promised Land. But why? Why this altar building? Because he's saying, "I believe that this land will be the Lord's." And there in that foreign land he worships the Lord. There in the face of all sorts of other religions and who knows what opposition, he worships and acknowledges God and makes a statement of faith that he believes that what God has said will come true.

A tent and an altar, two wonderful symbols of the Christian life. Two great symbols of what it means to cling to the promises of God. A tent, a reminder that this is not our final home. We are pilgrims as well. A tent is a reminder that we too must be prepared to leave family and friends and comforts and hobbies and dreams, anything, to follow Jesus Christ. A tent that declares that we are not living for the now but for eternity. Are you living as a pilgrim, a follower of Jesus Christ, with your heart set not on the stuff around you but on the promises of God, that he will bless you and make you a blessing?

Then alongside the tent, an altar, a symbol of worship, a reminder that we who are followers of Jesus are to openly acknowledge the name of God no matter what people around us are saying or thinking. A reminder that we are to set up worship of God right in the midst of secular Australia. A reminder that we are a people who say, "I believe God and I believe this world belongs to God no matter what it looks like." Are you a worshiper of God in that way?

There is perhaps no better commentary on this passage that we've been looking at than that found in the book of Hebrews 11. There it speaks of Abraham. Hebrews 11 is the great chapter of faith and let me just read to you what it says about Abraham, verses 8 to 11. It says, "By faith Abraham when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country. He lived in tents as did Isaac and Jacob who were heirs with him of the same promise for he was looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God. By faith Abraham even though he was past age and Sarah herself was barren, was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise."

When we have faith like Abraham's, we become children of Abraham. We become those blessed by God and we are blessed to be a blessing. Are you a child of Abraham? Are you a pilgrim in this world? Are you a worshiper of God? Are you perhaps, in your own mind at least, an unpromising start? Are you a bit of a shipping container in the midst of the rubble? If you say yes to any of that, then in Jesus Christ you can be richly blessed and blessed to be a blessing.

Shall we pray?

Our Lord God, we thank you for this amazing way in which you started again in our broken world. We thank you for your grace. We thank you for your amazing promises. We thank you for your plans in human history. And we thank you that you brought through Abraham's line, Jesus Christ our Savior. And we pray now that you would take our lives, no matter how unpromising they might be, and we pray that you would bless us for Jesus' sake. We pray that you would teach us to bless him and love him and serve him and follow him. We pray that in this world we might live as pilgrims, that we might worship you, and that we might never forget that we have been blessed to be a blessing. Thank you, Father, for the way in which you have restarted in this world, and thank you that through thousands of years you have been continuing what you promised then and you will bring it to glorious completion when Jesus Christ comes again. We praise and thank you and Jesus' name. Amen.