

## **FGBC: Our Stories Begin: The Beginning of God's People 1**

Genesis 11:27-21:34

October 21, 2018

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If you've been with us over the last several weeks you know that we are in the middle of a series through the first book in the Bible – Genesis. And Genesis is about establishing a worldview biased towards abundant life. Don't you want to live biased towards abundant life?

In Genesis God says if you look out at the world My way things are going to go better for you than if you come at it a different perspective. Perspective is everything. And that's because I made this place. I know how it works. And regardless what you are spending your life pursuing I know what you actually need, and I want that for you.

And there are 7 aspects to the worldview that Genesis lays out:

The first is that a loving, communal God is behind everything that exists. And He created us to live in community with Himself. But instead of accepting His invitation, each member of humanity has chosen to try being gods in our own little universes – sin broke everything. But despite us, God had a plan. And in His infinite wisdom and sovereign control He ordained that one day the seed of a woman would be born who would right the universe and bring everything back to the way God ordained. And God covenanted with us, putting Himself on the hook to ensure this would happen. And He elected a family line out of obscurity, totally by grace, through which this would happen. And He established that relationship with Him would not be about building towers up to heaven, but about Him coming down to us. He meets us where we are.

And that brings us up to the end of chapter 11, and a huge transition. In Chapter 12 all of a sudden the story of Genesis becomes historically verifiable. What I mean is there are lots of accounts of the people and places in the stories from now on can be found in non-biblical sources. And so in that sense we've entered into history.

Now I'm not saying the stories from Genesis 1 to 11 didn't happen, but I am saying that the point of those stories is not so much to give us an account of what happened or how it happened, rather those chapters care about the more important questions of why it happened and who did it. Those are worldview chapters.

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But now something is different and, like we got with the seven days of creation, the 7<sup>th</sup> day was different – it was about relating to God. Similarly, now the 7<sup>th</sup> aspect of worldview that Genesis lays out is different from what has come before. Up until now we have received principles and ideas, now we get a relationship. And relationship is always personal. And so we need a person. And Abram, who gets his name changed to Abraham, becomes that person.

Now don't worry too much about the name change. Abram means "father" and Abraham means father of nations. So it's basically like "dad" and "Big dad". And Big Dad is an important guy. Actually, he is arguably the second most important person in human history next to Jesus.

You see today there are 2.3 billion Christians in the world, 1.8 billion Muslims and several million Jews – together roughly 55% of the global population. And all of us consider ourselves children of Abraham.<sup>1</sup>

Just think of how important that makes this guy. Think of how impossible it is to understand global religion or world civilization without understanding who this man was. He is seriously Big dad!

So what made Abram unique? Well, the vast majority of people spend their lives waking up, going to work, going to school, eating when they're hungry, hanging out and going to bed when they're tired – basically reacting to life. But life didn't just happen to Abram – he happened to life. Abram's the Chuck Norris of the religious world.

So Abram stood alone against everything that was normal in his day. Most of the world today takes monotheism – the belief that there is one God – for granted. But in Abraham's day this wasn't the case. He was the only one.

And he left his family and his homeland to set out in response to the call of God on his life. God called Abram, he listened, and it has made all the difference in the world.

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Now Abram's story actually begins in chapter 11 where we read:

Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot... [then] Haran died in Ur.... Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai.... But Sarai was unable to become pregnant and had no children. (Genesis 11:27-30)

This is the context that drives Abram's story. And it's an incredibly negative context – almost an apocalyptic one – here's why.

In the first 11 chapters of Genesis we saw how everything started out good but got progressively worse as people moved away from God.

But one family was elected to bear the seed and bring the promise God made the snake to pass – [a seed of] the woman will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." And Seth's line was chosen, and out of that Shem's line, and out of that Eber's line, all the way down to Terah the father of Abraham. God chose Terah to bear witness to Himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center demographics projections, 2015

But Terah means moon. And Joshua tells us Terah and Abraham and Nahor worshipped other gods before God called them – they were moon worshippers.<sup>2</sup> And so the last family of faith on earth was corrupt – that's how the story starts. And on top of this, the last faithful father of humanity has a barren wife. So when this story picks up the whole world is going to pot – it's not just Canada that's going to pot.

And it's into that context that God speaks. Look at Genesis 12 verse 1:

[Read Genesis 12:1]

Out of brokenness, God calls Abram to leave everything behind and go somewhere.

Now there is a lot in this verse. First of all God is speaking, and so here we get the 7<sup>th</sup> beginning. Remember that God's words are creative. They called the universe into being, and now they call relationship with God into being. God speaks to a person.

Now did God speak in a vision? Was it a dream? Was Abram outside planting potatoes and he heard an audible voice? We don't know. But what we do know is what God communicated a call – Abram knew what God wanted him to do.

The spectacular thing here is that nobody else got this call. It was just Abram. But this becomes the new normal. Our God is a calling God. And the fact is that from this moment on God has been calling all His children to Himself. And so when Jesus shows up He tells His disciples: "follow Me" – that's the call. And God is still doing this today. Every person who is following Jesus is doing so because God initiated and called them to follow. And today God is calling some of you to follow Him, maybe for the first time or maybe to return to His call.

And God's call is always the same: leave your life of meaninglessness behind and set out on a quest for adventure and meaning and abundant life that is going to count; a quest directed by Me to a destination I'm only going to reveal to you one step at a time.

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Look what God says to Abram, verse 2

[Read Genesis 12:2-3]

Now back when we looked at Noah we saw that the main way God was going to relate to His people was through covenant. And a covenant is a binding commitment between two parties. And Genesis 12 is full of covenant language. God is obliging Himself to do something for Abram on the condition that Abram leaves everything behind.

And what God promises is huge. God promises to solve the problems Abram has. He is going to deal with Sarai's barrenness, and He is going to take care of all Abram's pesky enemies. And on top of this God is going to make Abram's name great. And as far as living a life of meaning goes, God is going to use Abram as the conduit to bless the whole world.

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<sup>2</sup> Joshua 24:2

That's as big as it gets! Arguably there has never been a better offer made. And Abram takes it. Abram obeys and goes. Look at verse 4:

[Read Genesis 12:4-9]

Abram went. He left his homeland, dropped what he was doing, and followed God's command. And by doing this Abram is entering God's covenantal relationship and he begins receiving the gracious gifts God promised.

Now here we need to clear some stuff up about grace and mercy. Mercy is when you don't get something bad you do deserve. And grace is when you get something good you don't deserve.

So when you go to work and payday arrives you can say "Thank you", but the fact is, if you agreed to work for \$20, and you got \$20 then you deserve it. That's wages. Mercy and grace is when you agreed to work for \$20 but then you didn't show up. But then, mercifully, instead of getting a pink slip that says "you're fired" you graciously get paid anyway.

Now something is wrong. And you probably feel guilty. And so, you go to your boss and say "you made a mistake, I don't deserve this." And if your boss says, "Don't worry about it, I'm happy to pay even though you didn't work." Then you've arrived at the Millennial dream and come tell me because I want that job too!

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When it comes to following Jesus, we are always talking about God's mercy and grace. And we talk about how they are freely given to people who don't work for them.

But look now at what God's offer to Abram is and what it isn't. It is merciful because Abram, the moon worshipper, doesn't get what he deserves. And it is gracious because the blessings are way more than he deserves. But the one thing it isn't is unconditional. Abram has to do what God says. Verse 1 comes before verses 2 and 3. And we get the same thing in chapter 17. Turn there with me. Let's pick it up in verse 1.

[Read Genesis 17:1-9]

So again the covenantal offer God extends to Abram is merciful and gracious and conditional. God says: "Walk before Me and be blameless. Then I will make My covenant between Me and you."

Now we need to sit here for a second and take this in because this is the answer to the faith and works debate. Here's the picture:

Let's say you knew someone with an anger problem and a lead foot when they drove. And they murdered someone. And that murder went unsolved for 10 years. And then one day they received a letter from an anonymous billionaire that said "I know what you did. But I like you. So here's my offer: If you become a model citizen, drive the speed limit and don't kick your neighbours pesky dog, then I will have someone serve your jail term, and I will deposit 10 million dollars into your account every year for the rest of your life. Deal?"

Wouldn't that be stupid? Like who cares that you like this guy, he's a murderer! Lock him up! And what about that poor guy who is going to do his time? What the heck?! And \$10 million dollars a year, that's way over the top. And all you want him to do is not kick the dog and drive the speed limit? Everyone is supposed to do those things!

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That's what we get in this story. This is the offer God extends to Abram. It's totally unfair. Abram doesn't get what he deserves. And he gets way more than he deserves, and all he gets asked to do is live the way all people are supposed to live.

And this is the same offer that is extended to each one of the lying, lusty, jealous, bitter, envious, angry, backbiting, non-forgiving sinners in this room. God says live like I designed you to live and My Son will take the punishment you deserve, and I'll put My righteousness on you and give you abundant life that starts now and lasts for eternity.

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Isn't that a crazy offer? That's not earning salvation. That's free grace and mercy to the extreme. But it's not unconditional.

So would you take that offer? Would you drive the speed limit and not kick the dog if all that was on the line?... Even if you had a lead foot and an anger problem?

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Well Abram takes the offer. He goes. And then between chapter 12 and 17 God gives him 4 tests to see whether he is really going to walk before Him and be blameless.

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First test: Immediately after God tells Abram that He is going to take care of him, Abram finds himself in a famine. And so he heads to Egypt his wife. The problem is she's a 65-year-old hottie (old guys, look over at your wife and say "this text applies to me.") And Abram is scared that Pharaoh is going to kill him and take her. And so Abram comes up with this dastardly, fear-ridden, anti-chivalrous, #metoo worthy plan. He says: "Look, you are a very beautiful woman. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife. Let's kill him; then we can have her!' So please tell them you are my sister. Then they will spare my life and treat me well because of their interest in you." (Genesis 12:11-13)

Can you imagine how long Abram is sleeping on the couch after that? What a man!

But it's worse than this. Sarai is central to God's promise. It's a package deal. If Abram is going to be the father of many nations Sarai is going to be mother. So Abram's move here is faithless. God has just finished telling Abram that He is going to deal with anyone who so much as curses him. But Abram decides he's going to risk God's promise to protect himself.

Now God makes it all work out, but test 1 is a fail.

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Test 2 is a financial one. In chapter 13 Abram and Lot don't know it yet, but they are on the border of the Promised Land, and God starts blessing them like crazy. They are shepherds and their flocks are just exploding all over the place so much that ironically, the land can't support them. Anyone wish they were so blessed Prince George couldn't handle you? Well fights start happening.

So Abram sits Lot down and says "We've got to split up. So which way do you want to go? You choose first, and whatever way you go I'll go the other." And they are sitting on a mountain and on one side is the whole plane of Jordan. It's a river valley, and it's green everywhere. And so Lot chooses the best land – that's pretty human.

What's not so human is that Abram lets him take it. Abram is the older and the stronger. He could have taken what he wanted, but he chooses to let God provide for him instead. And in verse 14 we read:

After Lot had gone, the LORD said to Abram, "Look as far as you can see in every direction—north and south, east and west. I am giving all this land, as far as you can see, to you and your descendants as a permanent possession." (Genesis 13:14-15)

Now Abram is 1 and 1.

Test 3 happens in chapter 14 with a guy named Melchizedek. This is a mystery guy who somehow was a priest of God before there were any priests of God. Now he is awesome and he shows up throughout the Bible, but all I'm going to say here is Abram passes this test. He gives this guy a 10<sup>th</sup>, or a tithe, of all he has earned in a battle as a way of saying money isn't my God, God is my God. And God blesses him.

Abram's now up 2 to 1. And then we get chapter 16 and the story of Hagar. Hagar is Sarai's servant girl, and since Sarai still can't have kids she gives Hagar to Abram and Hagar gets pregnant. This could be on Netflix. And this was not God's plan. So now Abram is 2 and 2.

And that's when we get to chapter 17 where God says:

The LORD appeared to [Abram] and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before Me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make My covenant between Me and you." (Genesis 17:1-2)

Now Abram just batted 50% which is great if you are playing baseball and bad if you are walking faithfully. If I'm faithful to my wife 50% of the time that's called not faithful!

But here's the point of the Bible: The Bible is full of characters like Abram and Isaac and Jacob and Rehab and David and Solomon and Gideon and Samson and Esther and Peter and James and John and Matthew and Paul and a whole bunch of others who stumble along messing stuff up as much or more than they get things right. And the ones who receive God's grace and mercy all have 3 things in common. And if you are following Jesus today then you have these things in common too:

First, 100% of them responded to God's call and gave themselves to living faithfully and blamelessly for God's glory. They all left what they knew and set out to follow God. Friends, there is nobody here that God didn't call first. Nobody comes to God, God always comes to us first. And He always comes with a call to give up the mediocre and meaningless life we've been living and accept His quest to pursue the abundant life He designed us to live.

Second, all of them screwed this offer up. They all royally dropped the ball even though all God asked was that they live the way they were designed. And nobody has ever gotten this right!

And that means that third, 100% of the people who received God's mercy and grace kept receiving God's mercy and grace as they went along.

It turns out this is what God wants. To walk faithfully and blamelessly with God doesn't mean figure out sinlessness and start earning the mercy and grace God offers. It means enter into the relationship God designed us for which has always been one where we recognize we are the recipient and He is the merciful and gracious Saviour who is calling us to Himself.

And because this offer is so extreme and so extravagant and so undeserved 100% of the people who receive God's mercy and grace have given themselves to following His commands the best they possibly can. And they grow in this, continually becoming more and more like their Saviour, though they don't arrive until they reach glory. People who don't do this aren't saved.

So friends, are you living for a Saviour who keeps unfairly extending His mercy and grace to you in such an amazing way that everything you've got is worth leaving behind to get Him and please Him? Have you responded to His call? Are you responding to His call? Are you saved?

Let's pray.