

1. Promises and the Promise Maker

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Genesis 12:1-9

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A dying man got his three best friends together at his bedside (his doctor, lawyer, and pastor) and he handed each of them an envelope with \$25,000 in cash inside.

He made them each **promise** that they would place the envelope in his casket because he was determined to take it with him.

A week later, he died.

At the visitation, the doctor, the lawyer, and the pastor each placed an envelope in the man's coffin before it was shut.

By chance, the three men met about a month later. The pastor, feeling guilty, confessed that there was only \$10,000 in the envelope that he put in the casket. He told them that rather than waste all of that money, he had sent \$15,000 to a mission effort in Africa and asked for their forgiveness.

The doctor then told the other two that the envelope that he left only had \$8,000 in it. He had given the rest of the money to cancer research.

The lawyer was outraged. He told the two men how disappointed he was with both of them. He said, "I'm the only one who kept my promise to our friend. I want you to know that I put the full amount in my envelope in the coffin. I wrote out a personal check for the entire \$25,000."

Promises, promises...

As we open the Bible today we are starting our new series, from Genesis 12-25. This is a story all about promises. God's promises to Abraham, and how those promises play out in his lifetime. But more than that, this section of the Bible is kind of Bible 101 – it lays the foundations for understanding God's plans and promises for his people, for us! It's going to be a great series.

So why don't we pray and ask God to speak to us today...

Dear heavenly Father, as we open this part of the Bible today, will you remind us of all your promises to us. And will you grant us faith to trust in those promises. We pray this in the name your Son Jesus. Amen

It's so good to be back in the book of Genesis with you. It has been more than a year since we studied the first 11 chapters together. That was way back at the end of 2020. And if you're anything like me, you might be struggling to remember what happened in those 11 chapters.

The good news is that we're only on like p15 of your Bible. To read the complete backstory, you could probably sit down with a cup of coffee this week and get through chapters 1-11 chapters in an hour or so.

And if you do that, then you might consider reading Genesis 12-25 as well. It's one way to get more out of the Sunday sermons, because you get a chance to reflect on the ideas more than once, and really apply them to yourself. We also have Bible Study materials based on Genesis 12-25, and I know some of our groups will be using them over the next little while. If you want to be in a group doing those studies, let me know and we'll try to find a group that works for you. You could also take a copy of the notes and work through them on your own or with a friend. There is such value in the Scriptures, and this is a great chance to dig deeper.

Anyway, there are two themes from the backstory in Genesis 1-11 that will really help us as we open Genesis 12 today.

1. Blessing & Curse – the back story

The first idea is ***blessing***.

In Genesis chapter 1, God creates the world and everything in it and it's all good. On the sixth day he creates man and woman in his own image. **And he blesses them**. He blesses them and tells them to be fruitful and multiply and to be the rulers over the earth. (Genesis 1:27-28) And God looked at everything he had made and it was very good. (Genesis 1:31)

Right from the first chapter of the Bible we see that God wants to bless human beings. God's plan for people is to bless them. And ***the world is very good when*** people are enjoying God's blessing. ***Blessing*** is God's natural inclination when it comes to his creation, and especially to man and woman who are made in his own image.

That's really important to remember because the second big theme of Genesis 1-11 is ***curse***.

The goodness of creation was tainted when Adam and Eve ate the fruit that God had told them not to eat. They distrusted God; they disobeyed God; and they disrespected the God who'd held out every blessing to them.

And so humanity had its first taste of God's judgment – instead of blessing, Adam and Eve understood the curse of sin, which brought guilt and shame and unhappiness to their perfect world. And with it, death...

But despite the intrusion of sin, God never gave up on his plan to bless his creation and to restore it to good order... And so even in the midst of judging Adam and Eve's sin, we see a hint of mercy, a hint that the curse will give way to blessing. The serpent will be crushed: evil will not ultimately prevail.

And so that pattern continues through Genesis 4-11. Cain and Abel; Noah and the flood; the tower of Babel. Judgment gives way to mercy... Curse gives way to blessing...

God's character remains faithful to his original purposes for creation, despite every sin of humanity. God **will** restore blessing to his people...

2. Promise

And that brings us to Chapter 12, and the story of Abraham. Which is really a story about ***promise***.

This is the story of God promising that he will restore blessing to all the people of earth through one man and his family – Abraham, or Abram as he's called at this stage of the story.

We meet Abram back in chapter 11.

Abram is descended from the line of Noah's son, Shem. (Genesis 11:10) You might remember Noah had 3 sons, and Shem was the good son.

Well, Abram is a descendent of Shem. In the generations since the Great Flood, the tribes had spread out all over the Middle East. Abram's family is living in Ur of the Chaldeans (Genesis 11:28), somewhere in southern Iraq.

We actually know quite a bit about Ur of the Chaldeans. The ancient city was identified by archaeologist Henry Rawlinson in 1862, then it was excavated by Leonard Woolley in 1927. (A bit Indiana Jones!)

What it revealed was that Ur was a city built around the worship of the moon. And it seems that this was the religion of Abram and his family – his father Terah, his niece/sister-in-law Milkah and even his wife Sarai all have names associated with the moon gods of Ur.

So that's Abram. A nomadic moon worshiper from the Middle-East, who has lived all his life within the tribal context of his family, a family small enough that marriage between close relatives is not unusual.

This is the man that God speaks to, calling him to a very different life... (12:1)

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

*² "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.*

*³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:1-3)*

They are three huge promises that God makes to Abraham –

- He promises to give Abram a land (v1)
- And in that land he will make Abram's family into a great nation. (v2)
- And (v3) God promises to bless Abram, and to use Abram's family to bring blessing to all the peoples of the earth.

Land, nation, blessing.

So these promises to Abraham in Genesis 12, they're the key to understanding the big story of the Bible. From this moment on, the entire rest of the Bible is the unfolding story of how God keeps ***these three*** promises.

How he brings his people (nation) back into a place (land) where he can bless them (blessing), just like in the Garden in the beginning. These promises will 'reverse the curse' and restore creation to a perfect relationship with the Creator...

Three brilliant promises, aren't they?

The Trouble with Promises

They are great promises, but do you know what? As humans we have a bit of a problem with promises. We know that promises are easily made but not easily kept.

Even when we have the best intentions to keep our promises, *often* as humans we just don't have the capacity to keep promises we make. Promises are hard to keep.

And when we look at the promises God made to Abram, they look like difficult promises to keep. God promised Abraham ***land, nation*** and ***blessing***.

But a bunch of obstacles stand in the way of God fulfilling the promises.

The great nation? Well Abram is 75 years old (12:4). His wife Sarai is 65 (Genesis 17:17) – And as a couple they’ve been unable to conceive. Sarah is infertile. Yet God promises to make Abram’s family into a great nation. How’s that going to happen?

Perhaps Abraham could bring with him all of his father’s family from Harran? But no, God says leave them behind. *Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you...*

Most of us would count our families as some kind of blessing. And God wants Abram to leave that blessing behind – to leave behind his family, his roots, his identity to answer this call. It’s hard not to see that as an obstacle to God’s promise being fulfilled.

The land is another obstacle in the way of God’s plan. Abram knows that Canaan is full of Canaanites who won’t give up their territory easily.

So many obstacles.

So I keep wondering, **how could Abraham trust that God would keep his promises?** How could Abraham trust God enough to pack up everything he owned, to follow after a promise that seemed impossible? Would you have done it? I don’t know that I would have.

How can anyone trust that God will keep his promises?

3. The Promise Maker

Our problem with promises is that we are used to human promises.

We’re used to broken promises, and broken promises lead to broken hearts. We learn not to trust the person who makes promises to us.

But what if the promise maker was not like us? What if the promise maker had the power to do whatever he had promised? And what if the promise maker was **not able to not keep** his promises? In other words, what if the promise maker **had** to keep every promise he made, because it’s not in his character or nature to tell a lie?

Well that is the sort of promise maker that God is.

When God reveals his character to us throughout the Bible, what he shows us is that he is trustworthy and true – faithful in everything. Psalm 33 says this about God:

*⁴ For the word of the LORD is right and true;
he is faithful in all he does.*
(Ps 33:4-5)

God is trustworthy and true, and his word is a reflection of his character. The words that come out of God are consistent with his character. They can't be otherwise.

And so God's word is his promise. Did you notice that even though I've been talking about promises, the word promise doesn't occur once in Genesis 12?

It doesn't need to. In fact, there is no Hebrew word for promise. There are other words for covenants and contracts. But here, God speaks a word and his word reshapes the world...

And it's not the first time. Psalm 33 continues...

*⁶ By the word of the LORD were the heavens made,
their starry host by the breath of his mouth
[...]*

*⁹ **For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.***

*¹⁰ The LORD foils the plans of the nations;
he thwarts the purposes of the peoples.*

*¹¹ But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever,
the purposes of his heart through all generations. (Psalm 33:9-11)*

God's word is his promise. And so when God promised land, nation and blessing to Abraham, it was impossible for God not to make good on his promise.

Over the next 7 weeks we are going to see these promises of God unfold. To Abraham. But also to us. Because we are included in this story. These promises are not just a nation building story from a far off time, but they help to explain what God has been doing in the world since time began. And they help us to understand where God is taking this world, taking us. Land, nation and blessing is **our** story, and our promise, our inheritance.

You see, when we come to the New Testament, it says that it is through Jesus that the blessing given to Abraham comes to Gentiles, to non-Jews, which I'm guessing is most of us in the room today. It's right there in Galatians 3:13-14 on your handout.

¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole." ¹⁴ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

Jesus redeemed us from the curse of sin, so we can receive the blessing of becoming part of God's people. By faith, we're part of Abraham's family – the family of God, the people God will

gather around himself not in an earthly city but in a heavenly city, to live with him forever just like it was in the beginning. Before the curse, when everything was good.

That's the promise for us and for everyone who has their faith in Jesus.

The question as always is, can you trust that promise?

Because you and I are like Abraham. Even though God promises this eternity with him through faith in Jesus, there seem to be so many obstacles standing in the way of that becoming a reality.

I've never seen God, but I'm meant to trust in him, and to trust in Jesus? I've been praying forever and I just don't feel like God is answering my prayers... My life has been one let down after another. How can I trust that there is a God who is looking out for me? I feel angry. I feel betrayed. I feel the weight of my sin. I don't feel anything.

Is that you?

Then God has a word for you this morning. And his word is this – it comes from Hebrews 11:8ff

*⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because **she considered him faithful who had made the promise.***

Hebrews 11:8-11

God has prepared a city for you, a land of blessing, and he has called you to be a part of his people, through faith in Jesus Christ. The one who made this promise is faithful. So the question is - will you trust in him?

Let's pray.

