

## “God Never Gives Up: A Promise”

So, we are in the third week of our series of an overview of the Bible that we have titled God Never Gives Up. First, two weeks ago, we had creation where God created something good and we were made in God’s image. Then last week we had rebellion away from God and the painful results of that which we are still feeling today. Now I don’t know about you, but if I created something really wonderful and then my creation immediately tried to push me out and become their own god, I would be pretty offended. I would probably say, “well I’m done with that project.” But thankfully for us God did not do that, because as we have titled this sermon series; God never gives up. So God has a plan, the plan that was briefly mentioned right after the rebellion. And now God puts his plan into motion. And it begins with Abraham and a promise. So let’s look at Genesis chapter 12.

Genesis 12:1-7

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

<sup>2</sup>“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.

<sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you.”

<sup>4</sup>So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. <sup>5</sup>He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

Now to put this account of Abraham into perspective, I think we need to note what we have skipped by going from Genesis 3 to Genesis 12. We skipped the story of Cain and Abel, the first murder because Cain does not understand what pleases God but Abel does. Not understanding who God is...this is going to become a theme here. Then you have the story of and the ark and people tease Noah for following God’s commands (again, they don’t understand who God is or why Noah is following him) and then the flood proves what God had said. And then after the flood in Genesis 9 which is the end of the flood story we have a rainbow which is a covenant from God to all creation. All of God’s creation is promised God’s faithfulness. So the covenant process actually begins in Genesis 9. But then the tower of Babel happens, where people get the idea that they can reach the heavens on their own and be worshipped for it. Again, they don’t understand who God is. So God scatters them by giving them different languages. And at the end of Genesis 11 you have a lineage which leads to Abraham.

You may have noticed that in the passage I read his name is Abram. And I am calling him Abraham. They are the same person. God changes his name later in Genesis 17 when he furthers the details of this

covenant we are going to look at today. And that is a cool thing to think about and it happens several places in the Bible. God gives people a new name when they come to know God. It is one of the ways in which God shows that they are someone new once they follow God. I actually know people today who chose to change their names when they were baptized. A way to remind themselves every day that in Jesus, they are a new person. So for the sake of familiarity I am going to refer to Abram as Abraham for today.

So, God made a covenant with all of creation back in Genesis 9. Now God's promise gets specific. God is going to make a covenant with a person, the creation that was made in God's image. So here in Genesis 12 God says: "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you."<sup>2</sup> "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."<sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Now think about Abraham for a moment. Let's look at the back story. Abraham is 75 years old. You don't have to raise your hands but those of you in your 70's or past that know what that feels like. On top of that his wife, Sarai is barren and they have no children. So what would you think if God came to you in your 70's with no kids and told you to leave your home, go move to a far away land, and you are going to have lots of land and lots of kids. I have a cartoon for this.



I don't know how excited I would be in my 70's about this. And this brings me to my first point which is that God's promise is big, but there is a cost. God's promise is big, but there is a cost. And the interesting thing is that there is a cost to Abraham and an even bigger cost to God later...that will be Jesus on the cross. But here we have a big promise from God. God is promising relationship with humanity and God is going to do this through Abraham and it will continue to all nations. Notice here that God says all nations. This is not a promise for just what will become the people of Israel. From the beginning here the promise is for all nations. This is something that will come back in the New Testament when Jesus starts talking to Samaritans and gentiles. When Peter has to learn that the Holy Spirit really can come to Cornelius, a gentile. The Jewish people got caught up in elitism but that was never the plan. The promise here says all nations. This covenant serves as way for God to reveal himself to humanity, through Israel first and then to the world. This is a big promise.

So, God's promise is big, but there is a cost. Abraham has to leave his home, leave his comfort zone, and follow a promise for a future family that is unlikely given Sarai has been barren. Following God is a choice that does cost us. There is a cost isn't there. What all Christians past and present have in common is that there

is something we need to leave behind in order to embrace the claim of God on their lives. We don't always get to do what is convenient or what the world would prefer. We have to give up time to get to know God. We have to say no to activities that God says are not God's will for our lives. As Pastor Steve pointed out last week God's laws are not meant to be a rule book but rather guidelines for what is good for us. And sometimes going the direction God wants us to go is not what we prefer. When I was in seminary I had regular interviews with a committee from our denomination called the committee on preparation for ministry. As is typical with Presbyterians we give things complicated names and then create an acronym. So the committee on preparation for ministry is commonly called CPM. Anyway, I was having my annual interview with them and one grouchy member of the committee said to me, "what do you think you are going to do when you get out of seminary? We have no open pulpits that will be available to you." And I replied "I don't plan on being a pastor. I want to work in urban ministry. So I don't plan on needing a pulpit." Well... God had other ideas. This did not turn out the way I planned. And life was not going to go the way Abraham planned either. However, God will bless us beyond what we can imagine in our human circumstances. Abraham could not have imagined the church around the world today.

The promise is big, but there is a cost, both to us and to God. Now when God says that Abraham will be a blessing in verse 2, it is important to note that the verb for blessing is passive. This means that Abraham will not do what is needed to be a blessing. It will not be Abraham's faithfulness to God that perpetuates the blessing. Rather God will be doing everything through Abraham. God will do the action of blessing. Again, God is the main character of the Bible. Abraham, the long-revered father of Judaism, Abraham is not the one making things happen. Trust me, Abraham is going to mess up. He is going to mess up multiple times. If the blessing were up to Abraham, it would have been very short-lived and we would not be talking about God today. We won't be going through all the chapters about Abraham's walk with God but Abraham disobeys and tries to do things his way rather than God's way multiple times. Chapter after chapter Abraham will make a mess of things. And the generations that follow him will mess up even more. Wait until we get to Jacob. Jacob is a hot mess. But it is because God is doing the blessing that it works. I like how scholar Iain Provan words this. He is a professor up at Regent College in Vancouver. After talking about the arrival of sin that we looked at last week he says this: "This is a story that is still going somewhere. The presence of evil notwithstanding, there is hope in this story that God will still fulfill the plans he had in mind in creating the cosmos in the first place...the promise to Abraham survives, somehow, the problem of childlessness...it survives famine...it survives danger in Egypt...and most fundamentally it survives the threat posed by the all-too-often poor moral character of God's people themselves. It survives because it is a covenant with God. The promise is the promise of God. And God, in biblical perspective, is determined to see his creation flourish."

So, God is the one doing the blessing. And this should be of great encouragement to us. Despite our mess, God can bless us. Despite when we are disobedient or downright indifferent, God blessing humanity will continue. It is not up to us. We do have a responsibility and there is a cost, but this is not ultimately up to us. God is at work and this is God's covenant, a promise we can trust and a promise God sees through. Now sometimes God blesses us directly, as God did bless Abraham. It will take a few chapters but Abraham will survive all sorts of obstacles and will be blessed with land and children and indeed become of the father of Judaism. Sometimes we are getting blessed by God, probably every day, but sometimes God is also using us to bless someone else. And sometimes this is uncomfortable. It was for Abraham at many times in his life. I'm sure he was not feeling blessed when he was sitting there with his wife who was barren, or when he had to battle for Lot, or travel all the way to Dan and back. None of that felt like a blessings I am sure. But God was using Abraham to be a blessing. When I lived back in NJ I was a chaplain at a teaching hospital. And although

I loved what I did, there was a stretch of weeks where every shift I worked included a difficult death. I started to measure how my day went by how many deaths I had witnessed. In fact some of the other chaplains started calling me the angle of death, a designation no chaplain wants. And I remember talking to the head of pastoral care there at the hospital about this and asking him why all of the hard cases are happening on my shifts. And he replied “perhaps you are the one God wants there.” What I was having to do was difficult and I did not feel blessed at all. But God was blessing others using me. And God will do that in your life as well. Sometimes you are the very instrument that God needs to bless someone.

We have covered the blessing part of this covenant. But what about the land part? Why did God promise land to Abraham? And is this relevant today? That land is fought over to this day. There has been war over that land for centuries and Jews and Christians and Muslims all share the blame in that war. What does the land part have to do with it? Well, the offering of land to Abraham is significant at this point in Genesis. It is a sign that God will help humanity thrive. At the beginning of Genesis, at creation, God gave them the garden. They were given the land that they needed to thrive. But ever since rebellion in the garden, God has been driving people out of places. For the last nine chapters, ever since sin and rebellion, there has been instability. Adam and Eve are forced out of the garden. Cain is forced away to a foreign land. The flood takes land away from human beings. And the tower of Babel forces people to scatter to multiple lands. But here God now gives land. God sets the stage for God’s people to thrive. It’s like a reset from the Garden of Eden. God is promising to help Abraham and future humanity thrive.

To review, the promise is big, there is a cost, the blessing is going to extend to all of humanity, and land in part of it. And why should we care thousands of years later? God makes a covenant with Abram. So what? Who cares? Well, what we experience today is a result of this covenant. God never giving up on us, applies to us. The covenant with Abraham is still be carried out today. This is why Paul, in his letter to the Galatians which we read from today, Paul who is an apostle to the Gentiles explains that even they are children of Abraham. Paul said this “Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham:” We are still receiving that blessing that God started through Abraham.

If this is the case, then it bears the question, what really is this blessing? We know for Abraham it involved offspring and land. But for us what does this blessing involve? Well, fundamentally this blessing was about a relationship with God. God wants to establish a relationship with people. People cannot have a relationship with a God they do not know. So the covenant is a way to establish who God is with God’s people. This is the beginning of a relationship that will continue through the whole Bible with the law, then the kings and prophets. The climax of the relationship is Jesus Christ, and then it continues through the church. So this blessing is about relationship.

Now if this blessing is about relationship, a relationship initiated by God, extended to rebellious people, then this blessing is about grace. The relationship lost in the Garden is going to be restored on the cross. This blessing, all the way back in Genesis, is about grace. One commentator put it this way: “Genesis gives us a chance to explore the brightly shining stars in the dawn of the theology of grace.” This is where it all starts. This blessing of grace with Abraham has extended all the way through Jesus Christ to the church, to us today. The question is, what do we do about it now?

Well, first of all we have to receive the blessing. Receive the grace of God into our lives and have that active relationship. We have a choice. We can be in relationship or not. In this story of God never gives up there are plenty of scenarios where people struggle with this relationship or even reject it. And there is a lot to

learn from the Bible about this relationship. That is why we go to it for help. But honestly, you have to be willing to participate in the relationship and receive the grace. That's the first thing.

The next part is continuing the blessing. It is meant to be passed on. That is how it got to us in the first place, right? We are the current day receivers of the blessing that God said to Abraham would be extended to all nations. So now the church becomes part of who God uses to bless others. If God, at the time of Abraham, could see all the way to today and this church (which God could and can see because God is not limited by time like we are), if God could see this back then, when he appeared to Abraham, then we have to accept that God can see way beyond today and we are part of a story that continues beyond us. We have to continue the blessing of relationship with God by God's grace. As Philip Yancey put it as agents of grace we have to be dispensers of grace, not collectors. Dispensers of grace. This is how we continue the covenant God started with Abraham. So I want you to think about this between now and next Sunday when we have our annual meeting of the congregation. How are we, as a church, continuing the covenant? What is our relationship with God? How is it going? And how are we dispensers of grace in our community? This passage in Genesis means that God will use us to extend his blessings to the next generation. And I think the annual meeting of the congregation will be a good opportunity for us to explore how we are supposed to live that out. The promise God made to Abraham still stands. The question is, how do we respond? My prayer is that we all, individually and as a church, be dispensers of grace. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.