

“Blessed to be a Blessing”

Genesis 12:1-9

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My brother Jeff is a great guy three years younger than I am who has struggled with epilepsy since he was a baby. He grew up having grand mal seizures, even as many as ten a day. We were always afraid he would have a bad seizure and fall down and hurt himself whenever we were out in public. When he was 17 years old his doctors felt the best chance for his success was to fly to Montreal for brain surgery to remove scar tissue from his brain. It was a dangerous operation, so my parents explained the danger. The surgery could help, or it could kill him. But Jeff said, “Mom and Dad, I can’t lose.”

Mom said, “Jeff, what do you mean?”

He said, “If the surgery makes me better, then I’ll praise God for the rest of my life. If it kills me, then I get to go be with Jesus, and that’s the best of all. But if it makes me worse, then I’ll need him more, so I’ll love him more.”

He had the surgery, and it helped eliminate most seizures from his life. A year ago, Jeff had a heart attack, and the seizures started coming back, violent seizures that are endangering him. The doctors feel surgery is once again the best hope, so they are going to operate on Jeff’s brain tomorrow. And Jeff is looking at it with the same kind of trust in God he had 30 years ago.

This morning we look at another great story of faith that comes from Genesis, the story of Abraham.

Here in chapter 12, he’s known as Abram. Later, God’s going to change his name to Abraham, which means “father of a multitude,” and in a way he really is a spiritual father to us. He really is an important person in the Bible—his name appears 234 times in the Old Testament, and 74 times in the New Testament. He’s so central to the story of faith, that the New Testament calls him “the friend of God” (James 2:23), and “the father of us all” (Romans 4:16). God even calls himself by the title “the God of Abraham” (Exodus 4:5).

What does his story have to say to us?

It’s a story about faith.

Abraham’s story shows reveals God’s covenant faithfulness, and it also shows how God wants to elicit faith in his people. The Apostle Paul writes about Abraham,

“What were his experiences concerning this question of being saved by faith? Was it because of his good deeds that God accepted him? If so, he would have had something to boast about. But from God’s point of view Abraham had no basis at all for pride. For the Scriptures tell us, ‘Abraham believed God, so God declared him to be righteous’ (Romans 4:1b-3).

Martin Luther was a 16th century monk and a professor in Wittenberg, Germany. He had struggled to understand how he could get right with God, but he couldn't find peace of mind. But then he found the place in the Bible where Paul wrote,

“It is through faith that a righteous person has life” (Romans 1:17c; see also Habakkuk 2:4, Galatians 3:11, Hebrews 10:38).

Luther saw that new life comes by faith, not by doing enough good things, not by being religious enough, not by becoming a pastor. Trusting Jesus is what makes us right with God.

Paul drives the point home in his letter to the Ephesians,

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

That's what Abraham discovered. It's all about faith.

Faith is Following Where God Calls You.

God didn't tell Abraham to keep on doing what he was already doing. He told him to demonstrate his faith by following.

“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, and from your family and your father's house, to the land which I will show you’ (Genesis 12:1).

Notice the directions. God told Abraham he had to leave everything he knew, and said “Go to the place I'm going to show you.” “Begin the journey, trust me, and you'll see where I take you.”

The conditions for faith would seem anything but ideal. Abraham's wife Sarah was barren. He was 75 years old when God called him. There were already people living in the land God sent him to. Above all, Abraham had to go without knowing the destination. But faith means commitment, trusting God no matter what the circumstances. It's not waiting around until the conditions are favorable. Do we do what God tells us to do even when we think we have better plans, better places to go? Faith trusts in the promises of God.

Think it might've been hard to trust God's promises? But faith means commitment. It means trusting God no matter what your circumstances.

It's like Noah, when he built the boat, without seeing the rain clouds in the sky. It's how he must have felt when he couldn't see land behind him, no shore in front of him, waiting on the faithfulness of God.

Have you ever felt like that? You've moved out in faith, but you can't see the other shore yet. Like, “God, I'm trusting you, but I can't see the other shore yet, and I really hope you'll get me there!” That's what being a Christian is all about—it's actually following Jesus, to wherever he calls. It's not waiting around until we have all the answers.

God tells us to go, and sometimes “go” is a lonely word. It’s to forget the past, and make the journey in response to God’s claim on your life. Abram had to get his focus off what was behind by cutting himself off from his home and friends and family. Maybe he would’ve liked to stay in the big city, the center of the kingdom. He didn’t have an address, didn’t have a map, no GPS, just God’s promise he’d show him the path.

It was like that for all the great Reformers of the church. When they moved out on faith, they didn’t know the shape of the future. They didn’t know where God would lead. All they knew was that God was calling, and that he was faithful.

Would you have gone like Abraham did? Are you willing to do what he says when it goes against what seems to make sense and against what you feel like? Faith steps out and takes God at his word. Abraham made the decision to trust God.

I’d like to think about that by taking a look at four promises God makes to Abraham.

First, God says, “I will make you a great nation.”

Ever since Adam and Eve ran away from God in the Garden, God has worked through human lines to bring about the promise of a Savior to crush Satan. Now, that promise would be through Abraham and ethnic Israel. When God called Abraham to leave his family and his country, he was preparing him to produce a nation. Abraham would witness to all people about God’s plan to bless the world. God’s ultimate purpose in choosing Abraham was to prepare the world for God to come into the world to save it.

Second, God says, “I will bless you.”

The word bless appears five times in the first five chapters of Genesis. Now, it appears five times in the first three verses of chapter twelve. God wants to bless his people. He wants to bless the world. It’s why he has a plan for Abraham. It’s why God’s involved in our lives, and he’s involved for our good. That’s good to remember when God stretches us.

It’s like he tells his people through the prophet Jeremiah, that even through the hard times of exile, he’s still up to something good in their lives. He says, when the exile is completed, he will fulfill his promise and bring them back home. He says,

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for blessing and not for evil, plans to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

The thing to notice is his blessing comes through his plans, not ours. God’s promising blessing, yes, but he’s also saying, “My plans are not your plans. I’m going to shape you through exile in a foreign land.”

That was a hard experience. But don’t you think God knows what he’s doing better than we do? The God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who made us and knows us inside and out? So when he tells us to move, it’s for our good and ultimate blessing. God’s plans are good, even when they’re not our plans.

Third, God says, “I will make your name great.”

To have a great name is to know who you are. It's to have a good reputation. The guys who built the tower of Babel tried to make a name for themselves, to grab prestige and power in the world. But Abraham's prestige and power come from God.

That's pretty much our choice: to make a name for ourselves, or rely on God to build us up. God has made us to want greatness, but not like the world defines it. Jesus says,

“Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:26).

In other words, we don't make our name great, not in what matters, but God can. Real greatness comes from being the least, from losing your life for the sake of Jesus, for being last now so you can be the first in the kingdom. It's like the letters, JOY, that stands for Jesus, Others, and Yourself. Joy comes from putting life in that order.

Fourth, God says, “You will be a blessing.”

This promise has to do with *how* God will make Abraham's name great—by being a blessing to others. God chose Abraham in order to start his great work of saving the world. It's the way God works—we don't experience his best for our life until we let him use us to help somebody else. Like Peter says,

“Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called, that you might inherit a blessing” (1 Peter 3:9).

God's plan is to bless the whole world; it's not just for Israel. It's why he promised the prophet Isaiah,

“In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance’” (Isaiah 19:25).

The promise is wide. God says anyone who blesses Abraham will be blessed, and anyone who curses him will be cursed. It's a way of saying, everything hinges on what he's doing through this line. Everything depends on what he's doing to save the world through Jesus.

You know, it's still his way today. He is saving the world through his people, and that now includes us. We're supposed to share the good news about Jesus with the world. We're what God is doing to bless the world. That's why he says again,

“In you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).

The greatest promise of all is that God will himself come through Abraham's line to lead his people. As Paul said,

“God gave the promise to Abraham and his child. And notice that it doesn’t say the promise was to his children, as if it meant many descendants. But the promise was to his child—and that, of course, means Christ” (Galatians 3:16).

It’s why Jesus said,

“Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced as he looked forward to my coming. He saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

Paul sees the promise to Abraham fulfilled in Jesus. And Jesus says that Abraham’s faith was really faith in him, the Savior whom God would send. When God promised Abraham he would make him a great nation; that he would bless him, that he would make his name great, that he would bless the world through him, those promises were all fulfilled in Jesus. Those promises God made to Abraham are for us, too.

Is it hard for you to trust God? Do you ever feel like a stranger in a strange land? Your life is never too barren to trust him. You are never too old, and the challenges are never too great. When you exercise a little faith, God will give you much. When you believe and you act on that belief, God will prove faithful. The Lord spoke to Abraham, and when you follow Jesus where he calls, even through the struggles, he will meet you. He says,

“So do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10).

Faith like Abraham’s steps out in obedience. It trusts God’s promises. It grows through the struggles. God is faithful no matter what our circumstances, and when we put our faith in him, we cannot lose. All of life changes when we trust him with our future.

Like my brother Jeff discovered, God is faithful, no matter what, and when we put our faith in him, we can’t lose.