

Sermon 6, God's Covenant I: Abram's Call, Genesis 12:1-4a

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Proposition: God's call and God's promise come to Abram for the sake of blessing the whole world.

Introduction

The primeval history ends with the narrative of the Tower of Babylon. Or does it? Last week we saw the Babel-builders and their quest to find security, unity, permanence, and a name for themselves by building a city and a tower by which to assault Heaven itself. But this week, brothers and sisters, we see God's response to that quest. In the midst of human defiance, and the human race's climactic sin of uniting against God, God quietly begins working on His master plan, one that will control history right through to the end of time. Babel's failure is answered by Abraham's call, as the narrative makes clear by beginning to recount the generations of Shem as soon as it has finished telling about the collapse of the Babylon project (11:10).

Our text today, then, tells us how God responded to human sin. We'll see that He responded to the global problem of sin by literally acting locally, in and through a single family

line. It is through Abram that the seed of the woman will be continued. So what we'll see today, with God's help, is that God called and blessed Abram for the sake of blessing the whole world.

I. God's Call, v. 1

Abram lived in Ur of the Chaldeans — that is, of the Babylonians. His homeland was Babylon. This is important, because we will see in a few weeks how the Old Testament comes full circle. Abram lived in the land of Babylon, and it's in the land of Babylon that the people of Israel mostly remain exiled at the end of the OT in 2 Chronicles (which is the last book in the Jewish ordering of the OT books). Abram, the father of the faithful, the one to whom almost half of the human race looks as a spiritual father, was a Babylon-dweller and possibly even a moon-worshipper.

A. From the Known

Yet God called him from everything he knew. Notice the triplication here, which highlights just how far from the familiar he would need to go. God begins by speaking in the broadest terms. Abram would need to leave his country.

Which is closer, Jacksonville, Florida or Winnipeg, Manitoba? It's 1800 miles from here to Jacksonville, and only 550 to Winnipeg. And yet Jacksonville is part of our country, and Winnipeg isn't. To cross the Canadian border, even if Canada is about as similar to us another country could well be, is a bigger deal than to go from here to South Dakota, or even here to Mississippi. Yet God called Abram to leave his country.

God then narrows His call: don't just leave your country, but leave your kindred. Leave your relatives, Abram. Leave the people you know, your distant connections, the people you're related to it. In our day and age, of course, with instant communications and rapid travel, leaving is a lot less scary. My sister may be 9000 miles from here, but she's just a phone call away. But whether Abram would even be able to send a letter — I mean, a clay tablet — back to his relatives in Ur is unknown. God was literally asking him to make a break with his old life, to leave his clan and extended family.

But finally, the third thing he had to leave was his father's house. That's his immediate family. Parents, brothers, sisters — God's call was to leave them behind.

Some of you have read *Pilgrim's Progress*; all of you should read it. One of my college professors, Gene Edward Veith, criticized Bunyan for depicting Pilgrim as leaving behind his whole family and setting off alone for the Celestial City. And yes, I know that our text tells us that Abram brought his wife and nephew along with him. But the point remains: God is asking Abram to leave all that is familiar, all that is comfortable, all that is known. He and his immediate family were going to have leave behind those things that used to be theirs.

Now, in our global society, such an act is not as radical — but it is still pretty radical. How many people do you know who have permanently resettled in another country? Chances are, almost everyone you know who's done that has permanently resettled here in the U.S., and has likely done it for the sake of economic opportunity or political freedom. But God doesn't promise Abram either of those things. He simply tells him to go.

This is like the call of salvation today. God may call you to leave behind your entire old lifestyle and the people associated with it, and to venture into a brand-new way of living, thinking, and acting. How will you respond? Or God may call you to some extraordinary service, to mission work or some kind of ministry very far away from your family and your comfort zone. How will you respond?

Indeed, this call highlights for us the cost of following God. God is upfront about His claims. "Abram," He says, "I am more important than your nation, your people, and your father's house. Following me is more important than retaining ties with any or all of them."

Do you believe that? Do you think that God is more important than the most important earthly reality, which is family? Remember, this is God's answer to the problem of sin. This is how He responded to Babel. He came to Abram and said "Leave all this behind and follow me."

B. To the Unknown

And what kind of promise is this, anyway? God doesn't say anything about the destination. He doesn't say where Abram is supposed to go or what he's supposed to do once he gets there.

My little brothers love to show me things. "Caleb, let me show you something!" is their constant chorus. My constant response is "What is it? What are you going to show me?"

Why do I ask that? Because I want to know whether going to see what they want to show me is worth the time and effort required to get there. Is this thing going to be worth seeing?

Well, God approached Abram in exactly the same way. "Abram, come see something!" Abram didn't say, "What is it, God? Is it worth leaving Ur and everything I know for the sake of seeing this wonder?"

I'm not saying God will call you to the physically unknown. He might. But He will certainly call you to the spiritually unknown. He will ask you to deal with things you don't want to deal with, confess sins you don't want to confess, root out habits that you really kind of like, actually, and many other things about which your flesh will scream bloody murder.

God phrased this call in a way that maximized the requirements of faith. He didn't say, "Abram, I'm going to give you this thing that you can see with your own two eyes" — not at first. No. Upfront He required that Abram trust Him, before any more details were forthcoming. God is still this same God, brothers and sisters. He still asks, first and foremost, that you trust Him. He is calling all of us toward a deeper spiritual life, toward a greater level of obedience and commitment, toward a closer walk and a holier life. Will you trust God enough to listen to that call? Will your attention be fixed on the trustworthiness of the one who calls?

This is why Abram is called the father of faith. *He trusted God*. And the rest of the Bible will tell us how that trust played out. For now, let me just ask you. Are you glad Abram trusted God? Is trusting God a good idea? Is He trustworthy? And based on that reality comes the further question: *Will you trust Him?*

II. God's Promise, vv. 2-3

Trusting God in His commands has a flip side — trusting Him in His promises. God called Abraham, but that call had an amazing set of blessings promised. In fact, there are two deep

structures here I want you to notice. The first is that the word “bless” appears five times here, in answer to the 5 times that the word “curse” has appeared in the narrative since Genesis 3. That’s right: every aspect of the curse on the serpent and the earth and on wicked people is more than solved by God’s blessing on Abram! Secondly, this is a sevenfold blessing. God blesses Abram in 7 different ways. Seven is the number of perfection, and the seventh blessing is the climactic one. What are these seven promises God makes to Abraham?

A. The Promise Made

1. Great Nationhood

The first is that he will become a great nation. Remember, this is a promise to Abram, a man who is around 75 years old and whose wife is barren. Many of you in this room have grandparents who are around those ages. Do 65-year-old women get pregnant? Especially when they’ve never before done so? Yeah, I didn’t think so. Yet God here promises to Abram that he will become a great nation.

A man with no children and a barren wife is being told by God that his descendants will form a great nation.

What are some great nations on the earth today? We have the USA, the only superpower at the moment. We have older “great powers,” like Britain, France, Germany, and Russia. And we have rising great powers, like China and India. Beneath them we have mid-level powers, like Saudi Arabia and Australia. And then we have the world’s weaklings, nations like Malaysia and South Africa. Even to be the progenitor of a small country like Switzerland or New Zealand would be amazing, but God’s promise to Abram is that his descendants will move to the front of the line and be included among the great powers. Abram, God says, your descendants will be meeting with the G-7. That’s a promise.

2. Being Blessed

The second element in the promise is that God will bless Abram — that is, that He will give him favor and prosperity, both spiritual and physical. Abram is the living answer to the curse of Babel.

3. A Great Name

What were the builders of the Tower of Babel seeking? To make themselves a name. Rather than being given a name by God Himself, they chose to create their own name. They wanted to craft their own identity. So they began working on the city and the tower. But here God promises that *He* will make Abram’s name great. In other words, He will give Abram fame, reputation, and identity. Abram doesn’t have to build his own brand; God will build it for him.

4. Being a Blessing

We sometimes use this language in Christian circles. “It was a real blessing.” “I was so blessed.” What do we mean by it? That we were built up, that we experienced spiritual uplift, joy, and delight. Rather than being torn down through ill-treatment and injustice, when you’re blessed you experience the goodness of God working and doing concrete things in your life to make you

better off. Well, God has already promised to bless Abram, but now He says that Abram too will be a blessing. This means that Abram will be a source of spiritual uplift and refreshment.

If I say something like, "Sandra is a blessing to this congregation," what do I mean? I mean that Sandra encourages us, builds us up, makes us better people and encourages us to be more like Christ through her selfless activities. Well, God says, "Abram, you will be a blessing." This is another promise from Almighty God!

5. Blessing Abram's Blessers

God proceeds to identify Himself closely with Abram through this promise to bless everyone who reaches out positively toward Abram. Anyone who speaks well of you will be blessed, God says. Anyone who renders you better off will be rendered better off, spiritually, physically, or both.

6. Cursing Abram's Coursers

The flip side is true too: anyone who speaks ill of Abram, who tries to harm Abram, will be a target for God's avenging wrath.

7. Blessing All the Families of the Earth through Abram

Finally, we come to the great seventh promise: God will mediate blessing into every family on earth through Abram's family.

A book was recently published on the Lowell family of Massachusetts. This family was highly influential in American history, and produced senators and Harvard presidents as well as poets and merchants. Even more influential, perhaps, have been families like the Hapsburgs. But according to God's promise, Abram's family will outstrip them all. Indeed, it is through this family that blessing will come to every family on earth.

Already the narrator has set us up for this. He has recounted the 70 nations of the earth in ch. 10. He has made it clear that Abram's line is not the only group of people living on the earth. But it remains for God Himself to show that blessing will come through Abram to all of these nations, to all of these families.

B. The Promise Kept

This is God's promise. It demands your faith, your assent, your trust even as it demanded Abram's assent and trust. Will you believe this promise? Before we discuss that question, and its applications, I want to show you how God kept this promise.

1. In Genesis

The promise begins to be fulfilled right away, even in this very same chapter, as Abram prospers through the gifts of Abimelech in v. 16. Also, Sarai is protected from Abimelech's lust. Her getting pregnant elsewhere could endanger the promise that the descendants would be Abram's. Then, in the next chapter, Abram is already so rich that he and Lot can't live together because of their tremendous possessions. In chapter 15, God clarifies His promises about the great nation that will come from Abram, and indicates that that nation will be enslaved in Egypt for 430 years. In chapter 17, He indicates further that Abraham will father many nations, and changes his

name to “big daddy” accordingly. Well, by the end of Genesis Abraham’s family is 70 people, and they are living in Egypt just like God promised.

2. In the Pentateuch

In the Pentateuch, we see the fulfillment of the great nation promise, as Abraham’s descendants number more than 2 million by the time they leave Egypt. God has consistently blessed those affiliated with Abraham, like Lot and Abimelech, and cursed those who oppose him (and his descendants) — people like Pharaoh and the Amalekites.

3. In the OT

Throughout the Old Testament, God continues to make Israel a great nation, in one sense. Yet it is always relatively small — more like South Africa than like China, more like Portugal than like the USA. Israel is blessed, but their name is never enormously great. Compared to Assyria, Babylon, and the other great kingdoms of the earth, they are decidedly small potatoes. Yes, God blesses those who bless them, and curses those (like Babylon and Assyria) who curse them. But reading the whole Old Testament, it actually appears that these promises were fulfilled most powerfully in Genesis itself, and that Abraham’s family and the blessing associated with it didn’t receive any of these promises in a particularly marked way. That is especially true for the climactic promise. Where did God bring blessing on all the families of the earth in antiquity? Was Plato blessed through Abraham’s family? What about the Buddha? Or Julius Caesar? It would be hard to say that all earth’s families experienced this blessing of Abraham. A few did, here and there — people like the builder of the temple Hiram (who was half-Gentile), and Naaman, and the widow of Zarephath. But though they were non-Israelites, they don’t add up to all the families of the earth.

So did God’s promise fail? Is Genesis 12:1-3 a piece of grandiose verbosity that ultimately fizzled out? Or is this promise a promise so great that it couldn’t be fulfilled within the horizons of antiquity? Is it a promise that will take the rest of history to adequately keep?

4. In the NT, Galatians 3:13-14

The New Testament tells us that it is the latter.

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Gal 3:13-14 NKJ)

It is in and through Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham, that God fully keeps this promise. The fulfillments we saw in Genesis, the Pentateuch, and the OT were only foreshadowings or types of the greater fulfillment of this promise in Abraham’s greater Son. How did Abraham bless all the families of the earth? Because it was from him, according to the flesh, that Jesus came. And it was through Christ and His work on the cross that the promised Holy Spirit came and applied Christ’s salvation to us.

That's the message of the New Testament. These promises to Abraham are being fulfilled in the spread of Christian doctrine and the conversion of people throughout the world to knowing and obeying Christ!

5. In the Modern Era, Galatians 3:29

In Christ, Abraham's descendants are a great nation. Indeed, those who profess affiliation with Christianity are the largest single religious group on the planet. Now that's a great nation! Christians are blessed, and they have a great name. Most people have heard of Christianity and have some idea that it is a religion that focuses on Jesus Christ. Christians are a blessing throughout the earth; we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and places without the Christian faith are very dark places. Clearly, too, all the families of the earth are being blessed through this message of salvation in and through Jesus Christ.

Yet we need to face head-on a particular question. Who exactly is this promise made to? And should we look for its fulfillment in Christians, Jews, or both? In particular, how ought we to take the warning that God will curse anyone who curses Abram?

Many American Christians believe that the primary application of this passage is to the physical descendants of Abraham. They then limit that application to those descended from Isaac, rather than those descended from Ishmael or from Abraham's children with Keturah. Thus, they say, this promise is fundamentally to ethnic Israel. If you want to be blessed by God, do what you can to bless Jewish people. If you want to be cursed by God, then hurt Jewish people.

Other American Christians say that this promise is made strictly to Christians, and they point to Galatians 3, where Paul clearly says, "And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you" (Gal 3:29 NLT).

"But wait," you might say. "That's the New Living paraphrase. What does the text literally say?"

"And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29 NKJ). I must say that it seems the NLT is perfectly correct. If you belong to Jesus Christ, then you are one of Abraham's seed, and you inherit the promises made to him.

Rather than asking whether those who hurt the modern Jewish people are cursed, I want to ask you a different question. Is it through modern Israel that all the families of the earth presently are being blessed? Or will be blessed in the future? If you can in good faith answer "no" to that question, then it seems to me that one must conclude that the six previous elements of the promise are not directed to modern Israel either. It certainly does not appear that modern Israel is destined to join the ranks of the great powers, or that it will be a blessing in any unique way. But it should be clear to every believer that the church is indeed blessed, and a group which brings a blessing that no other group or institution brings.

Asking whether this shuts out modern Jews entirely seems, I think, to be comparable to asking how the banishment of Ishmael and Keturah's sons into the East can be compatible with this promise to Abraham. Surely no Christian today believes that Ishmael's descendants are the

true recipients of the promises in Genesis 12:1-3, or that through Keturah's sons every family on earth will yet be blessed. Rather, it was through Isaac that this promise ran, and it ran from him to Christ, who had no physical descendants. The promises weren't made to all Abraham's seeds, but only to one seed — Christ's. That's what John L. Ronning argues in his dissertation on Genesis 3:15,² and I completely agree.

That means, in turn, that this sevenfold promise is for you today if you are in Christ. You are part of the great nation we call the church. You are blessed because you have Christ, His reconciling work, and His Spirit. Your name is great, because your name is "Christian," "Little Christ." You will be a blessing, because you have something non-Christians don't have. You have the presence and power of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer in your heart and life. God identifies so closely with you that He calls you His child. He describes you as His Son's bride. And that, in turn, means that He will bless everyone who blesses you, and curse everyone who curses you. Finally, it means that blessing is coming to the nations through the Christ you bear. You carry the message of Jesus, and it is He who blesses all the families of the earth.

Do you embrace this promise as being made to you? Do you live as a blessed person? Do you recognize that you have something everyone desires, and do you share that good news?

God's call is still trustworthy. When He asks you to leave everything and follow Him, you need to do so. But His promises are still trustworthy too. He is in the business of blessing every family of the earth.

How should we respond to that news?

III. Abram's Obedience, v. 4a

Well, how did Abram respond? He went. He followed God. Just as God told him, so he did. And that's how you and I ought to respond too. We need to listen to God's call, and embrace His promises. Abram had God's bare word for it. We have almost four thousand years of history, all of it bearing witness to God's trustworthiness in this key promise.

So as you read the Bible, look for the fulfillment of this promise. As you read history, look for the fulfillment of this promise. As you live life, look for the fulfillment of this promise.

Believe God and follow God. Worship God and trust God. When He calls, follow. When He promises, believe it. He's never broken His word, and He never will. Amen.

² http://postbiblical.info/PDFS/The_Curse_on_the_Serpent.pdf