

Abraham and the Promise - Gen 12:1-9

Let me ask you a question to start with. How is it possible for us to keep going in the Christian life when things seem so strange and random? How do we keep going as Christians when we life is hard, when you don't understand what's happening to you or to the world?

What do we do when we see hundreds and even thousands of Christians persecuted for their faith across the world? If you've been following the news lately, you'll know that there are many Christians who have been persecuted in Iraq by a group called the Islamic State. Or what do we do when God calls us to go somewhere or do something we're not sure about? When God calls us into the unknown, to take a leap of faith?

Well today we're going to look at Abraham, and hopefully looking at his life will help us to answer those questions. We're going to be focussing on the passage we read from Genesis 12, so if you're able to have that in front of you that would be great.

Now let's just spend a moment recapping what we've been looking at in Genesis over the last three weeks. We started out thinking about creation, and how what God created was good. There were Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden, in a good relationship with God, experiencing his blessing and all the blessings of creation. But then came the Fall. Adam and Eve rebelled against God; they decided to go their own way and broke that relationship they had with God. So death entered the world, and all of creation fell under God's curse.

Last week we were looking at Noah and the flood, and how the flood is almost an act of *de*-creation, how God wipes out almost all of mankind and the things he has made because of their wickedness. But, in his grace, God saved one righteous man and his family.

That really sums up the story of the first 11 chapters of Genesis. So now we come, in Genesis 12, to Abraham, or Abram as we should call him at this point in the story. Abram is introduced with a brief genealogy at the end of chapter 11, which we don't have time to go into now, and then we come to **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.'"

Just think about that for a second. What would you do if God told you to pack up your house, pack up all your things, say goodbye to all your extended family, and head off to another country *which you didn't even know yet*? It's hard to imagine, isn't it! And it would have been doubly so for Abram. In Abram's day, leaving your family and your inheritance would have been a much bigger deal than it is today. The family unit was much more important, and leaving your Father's household was a huge thing. Think about the parable of the Prodigal Son - when the Son left his Father's household, it was almost as if he was saying "I don't want to be your son anymore."

But that's not all God says to Abram. He gives him a promise. In **verses 2-3** God says:

'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.
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 I wish we had more time to look at this because there's a lot you could say - it's no exaggeration to say that these are some of the most important words in the whole of Genesis, even the whole Bible. Why is that?

Think about the story of Genesis so far. At the beginning, Adam and Eve live in the Garden of Eden under God's blessing. God tells them to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it. Then, after the Fall, they are expelled from the garden, separated from God, and under God's curse. Instead of being fruitful and multiplying, Cain murders his brother - the opposite of God's intention.

Now look at what God promises to Abram here. He promises blessing, he promises a great nation, and he promises land. What God is doing here is saying, *this is my plan to reverse the effects of the Fall. This is my plan to bring about blessing where there was a curse; a land where there was exclusion from the garden of Eden; and a great nation where there had been murder and envy.*

This is massively significant. This is the start of God's rescue plan to redeem humanity and reverse the effects of the Fall. God's promise to Abram would eventually, as he says, bring about blessing to the whole world - "all peoples on earth".

So God doesn't just tell Abram to go without any reason, God tells Abram "go - and I promise that I will do all this." It's an exercise in trusting God. Abram believed God, he believed that God was fully able to keep his promises. So, we see in **verse 4**, "**so Abram went, as the LORD had told him.**" Abram didn't know where God was doing to lead him, but he knew what God had promised and he knew that God was trustworthy. At 75 years old, note - you're never too old for God to do something new!

So Abram sets out for the land of Canaan. Now I don't know if any of you are interested in maps or geography, but it's actually quite helpful to think about Abram's route, especially in relation to the Promised Land. Harran, where Abram starts out, is right up to the north, beyond the North-Eastern border of Israel. Shechem is much further south, towards the South-Western border of Israel. In other words, the journey that Abram makes, if you can imagine it for the moment, is from the North-Eastern border of the country down to the South-Western border. He journeys throughout what would become the Promised Land.

In fact, God tells Abram in **verse 7** "**to your offspring I will give this land**", and Abram responds by building an altar and worshipping God. And then, in **verse 8** we see that Abram "**pitched his tent**" between Bethel and Ai, and "**called on the name of the Lord**". This probably means that Abram stayed there for some time, he worshipped God, and he called on God to fulfil his promises. Do you remember back in Genesis 3 that the relationship between Adam and Eve and God was broken by the Fall? Here we see a reestablishment of the relationship between God and man, through Abram. Abram calls on the name of the LORD.

So let's recap. God commands Abram to leave his home and go to the land that God was going to show him. God promises him blessing, land, and people - a nation. Abram trusts in God, so he obeys

and travels down throughout the length of the Promised Land, and worships God in the land. In a sense, as Abram travels throughout the land and worships God, you could say that Abram took hold of God's promise by faith. Although Abram didn't actually *see* the end result of the promise, he believed God's promise - what his eyes could not see he was able to see by faith.

Now, you might be thinking "that's all very interesting, but how does all this relate to us? How does this little story have any bearing on us in 2014?"

The point is that this story is *very similar to our story*. Abram's story is like the story of any Christian. Let's flip over to the New Testament to see how that works out for Christians.

Firstly, look at **Galatians 3**. Here, as part of the case the apostle Paul is making, he says in **v7**: "**Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham.**" He says a bit further on in **v29**, "**If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.**" What Paul is saying is that if you have faith in Christ Jesus, then you are a child of Abraham. You are part of God's promise to Abraham - that's amazing, isn't it? You are part of the fulfilment of God's promise.

But the important point here is *faith in Christ Jesus*. If you remember, what God promised to Abraham in Genesis 12 was blessing, land, and a people - a great nation. Now, those things were fulfilled in the nation of Israel, to an extent. But, to take one example, the Israelites didn't really enjoy God's blessing for very much of the time because they sinned against God. The nation of Israel was not the ultimate fulfilment of God's promise. Jesus is the ultimate fulfilment of God's promise.

In Christ Jesus, we are promised blessing instead of curse: because of Christ Jesus, God can look on us favourably as forgiven sinners and bless us. Because of Christ Jesus, we know that God has prepared a place for us. Because of Christ Jesus, we know that we are members of his body, part of a kingdom that cannot be shaken. And because of Christ Jesus, our broken relationship with God is restored. As Paul puts it in **2 Corinthians 1:20**, "**For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.**"

But yet we know that not all these promises have reached their fruition. They are still yet to find their fulfilment in the new creation. We don't yet see the kingdom that cannot be shaken. We don't yet see everything in subjection to Christ. We don't yet see God face to face. But we will, because we have God's promise. This is where we are in a very similar situation to Abraham. We, along with Abraham, have a promise which is not yet completely fulfilled. God calls us to trust him even though we do not yet see everything clearly. God calls us to obey him and follow him even though we may not know where we are going. But we can be 100% sure that God will keep his promises.

The writer to the Hebrews says this in **Hebrews 11:8-10**:

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. 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. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Do you remember, back in Genesis 12, it says that Abraham pitched his tent between Bethel and Ai? He pitched his tent and didn't build a house. The writer to the Hebrews says, that's because he was

looking forward to the "city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." We have that same hope.

We started out with the question, how is it possible to keep going as a Christian even when things are hard, even when things go wrong, even when we don't know why something has happened to us. What the story of Abraham shows us is that we need to look to God and his promises. Our obedience, our ability to keep going, is rooted in trusting God and his ability to keep his promises.

And, of course, we do have the advantage over Abraham: we are able to look through the Bible and see just how God's promises have been kept over thousands of years. We can look to Jesus, and how he is the fulfilment of God's promises. We have a mountain of evidence to show that God can and will do what he promises to do.

What that means for us in practice is that it gives us the power to, as Paul puts it in **2 Corinthians 4:18**, "fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." Perhaps that means we don't have to worry so much about having a perfect house. Perhaps that means we don't have to worry about fulfilling all our hopes and dreams now. Perhaps that means not worrying so much about finding a husband or wife. Perhaps that means we can be generous with our possessions, for we know that we have treasure in heaven. Abraham gave up his family, his home, his security - because he believed in the promise of God that was to come. This world is passing away, but we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, we look forward to the heavenly city whose architect and builder is God. We can lift our eyes from whatever our current situations are to the knowledge of what we already have in God's promises.

So we're left with two choices. Are you going to be like Abraham, who responded to God's promises with trust and obedience? Abraham didn't see the fruition of all God's promises, but he trusted that they would come and was obedient. Abraham trusted that God was good, that he was capable of fulfilling his promises, and that God was worthy of obedience

On the other hand, the other option is to disbelieve God's promises, to not trust him. If we don't believe in God's promises, we might as well spend every moment living for today, because God has not promised anything to come. But, as we talked about earlier, those who do not trust in God remain under God's curse.

The question is, are you going to be like Abraham? Let's pray together.