

The Mission Declared

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[0 : 00] So I'm going to read verses 1 to 9 of this passage this morning, Genesis chapter 12. Now the Lord said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you.

And I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonours you, I will curse. And in all the families of the earth you shall be blessed.

Or sorry, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So Abram went as the Lord had told him and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Heron and Abram took Sarah, his wife and Lot, his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered and the people that they had acquired in Heron.

And they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem to the oak of Moray. And at that time the Canaanites were in the land.

Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said to you offspring I will give this land. So he built there an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him.

[1 : 15] From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord.

And Abram journeyed on, still going towards the nega. Okay, in our morning worship we are looking at the theme of the mission of God, the purpose of God that we see right through the Bible, right through His revelation.

And by nature we are only dipping into each of these sections. Even reading it I realise there is a huge amount I am going to have to miss out. And really it would be worthwhile reading verses chapters 12 right through to 15.

Because chapter 15 has got the formal covenant that God makes with Abram. But the great thing I hope about this series, one of our aims certainly in the series is to contrast with what we sometimes do, which is that we treat the Bible like a kind of magic book with special words.

What's it that you get when you go to the Chinese? You get these things? What? Fortune cookies. We treat the Bible a bit like a fortune cookie that we open at various places and just find something really important and significant for us on that day.

[2 : 47] And we take verses out of context that may be particularly comforting. And we ignore vast quantities of the Bible, maybe particularly the Old Testament, because that's difficult.

I can't deal with that, I don't understand it. So I'll just go to Matthew. I'll just go to the Gospels. I'll just go to the nice passages. I'll go to the Sermon in the Mount. I'll go to different bits that are easy to understand and that I can apply readily into my life so we can sometimes lose out on this whole united picture that God is revealing to us in Scripture.

And that can play into a philosophy of life, which is a secular philosophy of life, which is we just want something for the day. We just want our religion to be little bite sizes for the day that will keep us going and will help us to be happy for the day.

Just living for today, living for the pleasure of today and hoping that God will give me a nice comforting, pleasurable word that will just cheer me up on my way. Now, I'm not saying He doesn't do that.

And I'm not saying that's not important for us sometimes. But we miss out on something far greater that God is doing with you and with me in our lives if we make Scripture like fortune cookies, if we just pick and choose, if we pick and mix little bits here and there that suit us and cast away and throw away bits we don't understand.

[4 : 19] Because God, every part of God's word is given and it's revealing His mission which involves us as it involved Abraham. And that gives us in our lives a sense of perspective and purpose and meaning and accountability and a future.

And that's a great thing. We're not just living for ourselves. We're not just living for today. God isn't just our big bearded Santa Claus figure who gives us what we want when we're struggling but we're part of something much greater, much more amazing and the truth.

And that's why it's so important. And here we have the call of Abraham which is part of this unfolding of the mission of God that involves us and that is unfolded in the Bible because He's telling us what He wants us to know.

What I'm going to do is I'm going to look at the immediate context and then I'm going to look at the wider context and kind of repeat myself. So if you're really struggling and it's hot and you're too hot sitting, you can sleep for one of the halves because it's mainly the same thing I'm saying but I'm repeating it but in a wider context, okay?

But I hope you can stay away for both because the immediate context feeds into the wider context and applies to us in our lives. So the immediate context of this Genesis chapter 12 verses 1 to 9 is Genesis chapter 3 to chapter 11.

[5 : 57] So God is written chapter, we have chapter 12 because God didn't write it in chapters. We have chapter 12 following on from the previous 11 and the previous eight chapters.

Cori looked at the first three and now by way of introduction he's bringing us up to Genesis 12 by remembering what God is setting in place before Genesis 12.

He's setting in place Genesis 3 to 11, okay? Are you with me? Are you still here? Good. It's important that you keep up with us. It's very significant because these chapters, what they do is they're highlighting chaos.

We saw that sin entered the world and humanity tried to reach up to God and to abandon God and leave God out of the picture and the resulting actions and the resulting future was chaotic.

It's almost like it's a reversal of the beauty of creation that is unfolded in Genesis chapter 1 where God brings order out of chaos. It's like we're returning in these chapters in humanity towards chaos again.

[7 : 11] And there's almost a reversal happening. I'm going to bring up a few slides with texts on them today but I'm just having to give the information to the guys at the back.

The first one is Genesis 4.8 which says, Cain spoke to Abel his brother and when they were in the field Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. So the beginning of chaos is there is the fratricide, there's murder right at the very beginning and the killing of two brother.

And then moving on to Genesis 6 verse 11, we have now, this was before the flood, now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and the earth was filled with violence.

It's a really powerful description of what the world had become. And so God judges that world and destroys that world saving only Noah and his family as we know that story well.

And is it going to be a new beginning? Is it going to be a new start? Is this going to be the great new plan of God? Is this where the seed is coming into this new world? No, because despite the grace that's shown to Noah and the mercy that is given to him and his family because of their faith, he's no saviour, he's no redeemer.

[8 : 28] He gets drunk the first time he comes out of the ark and things are chaotic. And shortly after that, we see the world descending further into chaos because the world has no time for God and doesn't want God in its life.

So we come to the Tower of Babel. So communities have been set up, cultures have been set up. And we come to the self-confident autonomous society that want to be significant and important and stay together and be better than God, be stronger than God.

They want to build a tower that's basically a single finger pointing up at God and saying we don't need you God. We can build this tower that will reach you. And we are a powerful and strong people and we're told in 11 chapter 4.

So I'll come to that. So leave that up, leave that up. But we recognise that they wanted, we're told in that chapter that they wanted to make a name for themselves and they wanted to reach up, to reach God, to reach heaven, to be like God but without reference to God, by ignoring God.

And so we find that the situation is godless in society and the problem of sin has made things desperate.

[9 : 52] That's the context that we come to Genesis chapter 12 and we get God's response in two ways. First of all we get God's response in Merciful Judgment in chapter 11 verse 8 that we have there.

So the Lord dispersed them, that is the people of Babel, over the face of the earth and left off building the city and he confused our language as well.

He scatters the people. He knows, God knows the power and the potential of evil when sinful humanity is bound together in its purpose.

So he disperses them, interestingly, kind of against our will. He confuses them by introducing all the languages and he disperses them which actually was the original command he gave to go into the whole world.

They didn't want to do that, they wanted all to stick together as it were against God but he disperses them but it's Merciful Judgment because he knows the evil that they could create together.

[11 : 02] And we see that mercy also in earlier parts of Genesis where he gives protection to Cain who killed his brother when he allows the nations to be formed, when he allows life to happen and babies to be born and celebrations to be had, when he redeems and saves Noah and after the flood when he makes a covenant of preservation so that there's always going to be rain and sun and seasons and there will never be another flood.

All of these things speak about his mercy but that is not the core of who God is. The core of who God is comes in chapter 12, the promise of the Gospel.

Can we have the next slide up? That is there. If we have one? No? No more so. Technology, can't you trust it?

Okay, it's probably because you have it in front of you in the scripture reading. That's why I read from Galatians chapter 3 because in Galatians chapter 3 we have that great verse which says that Abraham, God would justify the Gentiles by faith and so the Gospel was preached beforehand to Abraham saying, in him all nations shall be blessed.

That's an astonishing statement that the Gospel, the good news that we all know what that is, was preached beforehand to Abraham and so we have here in Genesis chapter 12 the Gospel preached to Abraham.

[12 : 41] That's the mission of God. That's right in the heart of the Old Testament. That's New Testament talk in the middle of the Old Testament book that we have and I want you just for a moment to think, to work through the connections between what happens here in Genesis 12 and the Gospel that we know.

There are connections, think of them. It's God's initiative just like the Gospel. Now the Lord said to Abraham, go from your country.

God speaks. This is the recreation. This is the Gospel mentioned beforehand to Abraham. God is the one who speaks into the chaos, into the sinful darkness of society and he speaks with a word of redemption, of recreation, of newness, of hope.

It's paralleling the language of Genesis 1. Out of chaos comes order, out of darkness is coming light. God speaks into the situation and speaks to Abraham and Abraham responds in faith and in obedience.

Now that's ratified in chapter 15 in the covenant. Now we sadly don't have time to do that in our series today but Tim Keller has some quality sermons on Genesis chapter 15.

[14 : 09] Tim Keller, the minister of Redeemer, Presbyterian Church in New York. I know his sermons are available. I think there was certainly going to be some link towards that.

If not, look up one of the sermons from Genesis 15. Genesis 15 is a marvellous passage where God cuts the covenant with Abraham and there are so many powerful things in it for us that we can't look at today.

But here we see that God initiates something new. He's saying to Abraham, right, you've got to go. This old community, this sinful, dark community that we have, Babylon and Babel, isn't where redemption will come from.

You need to start something new. Start a new place in a new community with a new relationship with me as king and as the God of blessing.

And that Gospel mentioned beforehand must remind us that the Gospel we proclaim and we live is God-initiated. So often we scabble about in the darkness thinking I'm not good enough myself and need to try harder.

[15 : 20] I can't seem to keep on going because we think it's up to us. And it's our efforts and it's our best works and it's how we dress and how we act in public and how we live our Christian lives that God accepts.

No, God initiates the Gospel and God redeems his people and we accept that Gospel by faith and in gratitude we live lives of obedience.

It's God's initiative. It's God's work. He doesn't let us go. But we also see it's relationally surprising this Gospel that's mentioned beforehand to Abraham.

The Lord said, the Lord spoke to Abraham. Who is Abraham? Who is he? He's a nobody. But the promise that we spoke of from Genesis 3 the redemptive promise, the seed that would come it's being unraveled here and throughout Scripture until we come to Christ that God wants his people.

He wants to relate to his people. He wants communion and fellowship that has been broken because of sin with his people. And he chooses the most unlikely people with whom to relate to choose and to be the recipients of salvation.

[16 : 44] It is Abraham. He's just an ordinary guy. He's become, you know, adored by Jews and by Muslims and we can rightly say is the father of Christianity.

And yet, who is he? He's an old bloke in his 70s with an old wife with no children. How can he pass a childless marriage?

How can he possibly be the one through whom the seed will come? How can great nations come from his dead body and his wife's dead body at that level?

How will his name, his ordinary, unglamorous name be made great? It's interesting there isn't there's a great contrast.

Genesis 11 speaks of the town of Babel that they wanted to make a name for themselves without God. And here we've got God saying, look I'll make your name great as you put your faith and trust in my salvation and my redemption.

[17 : 52] But isn't that a relationally surprising element that the choice he makes? Isn't that true right through Scripture? Don't we see it with the murderings of rather timorous Moses or the rather sneaky Jacob or Rahab the prostitute or Ruth the widow who was a moabiteess or David the kind of runt of the family, the youngest smallest of these massive strong brothers or Mary the teenager or the uneducated disciples?

Isn't that often the relationally surprising thing we see about God that he doesn't look at the swabs, sophisticated, gifted, talented, self-made people because exactly they seek often and we seek often when we have that attitude to make a name for ourselves.

1 Corinthians 1 verse 27, but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. That is the relationally surprising element that is founded in the choice of this old barren marriage between Abram and Sarah.

Needy, unnoticed, bypassed. He wasn't one of the big guys that was building the tower. He wasn't one of the main people there. He was unknown, unnoticed, relationally surprising.

That's the gospel mentioned beforehand. To all of us in our ordinariness today, God makes our name great. We battle with the challenge of trying to make ourselves great without God and he says, look, I'll make your name great.

[19 : 35] But it's also, of course, redemptive in Galatians 3. Again, there's the last section there that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a law for us, for it is written, cursed is everyone in the angst on the street.

So that in Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles. So this gospel mentioned beforehand, the blessing to the nations comes through Jesus Christ.

There's a redemption that we know about, that we speak about. Jesus, this covenant is pointing forward to a saviour who will come and bridge the gap between earth and heaven.

It's not going to be a tower of Babel that will bridge the gap. It's not going to be our efforts to do our best to reach up towards heaven that will bridge the gap.

It's not, in other words, a man-made solution. You can't live as a Christian, Christian in inverted commas, in your own strength doing your own things, trying to reach your way to pleasure and to please God.

[20 : 46] It's not a man-made solution, but rather, just as God had to come down and look at the tower of Babel and say, what on earth is going on here? He comes down in the person of his son to bridge the gap.

He comes. Christ comes. God is the solution. He restores the blessing. That is what will affect the nations. And it's interesting that Abraham, in order to bless the land and the people and the country that he comes from, needs to leave it and start something absolutely new.

The only way the world can be blessed is not by trying to make a name for themselves and making them great in their own strength. It's by accepting the gospel and what God has done through Abraham.

So that is a little bit of the context, the immediate context, that is the gospel preached beforehand. Now briefly, can I just go through the wider context, how this mission of God that is beginning to be unfolded here fits into the wider context of the mission of God as it's beginning to be unfolded in the gospel.

And some of this is repetitive, but I think it's worth repeating. Because the Bible is the narrative story. It's the story God's given us.

[22 : 16] So you look at the difficult bits and you say, well, what a waste of time. What on earth is that all about? What is Slavicus about? What is it there for? Don't think of it like that.

Think of it in terms of this is part of God's revelation of his mission and he's given us it for a reason. There's a reason he has that. Is it partly just to highlight how holy he is?

What even at a human level, what was desperately needed to enter his presence that could only be temporary. But think through what it means.

It's the narrative story of his mission and the Old Testament unfolds it progressively till we come to Jesus. Now we are very privileged.

We sit here with hindsight. Hindsight is a great thing, isn't it? And we've got biblical hindsight. We've got the New Testament. We've got the cross. We've got salvation. And it should make the Old Testament much more significant for us.

[23 : 16] But what is the wider context that is mentioned or that is in seed form here that we know about? And there's four things very briefly. First is God's mission is anticipatory.

It's anticipatory. In other words, God acting here with Abraham is anticipating that Jesus is going to come. Genesis 3, the promise of the seed of the woman is anticipating that Jesus is going to come.

It's preparing for Jesus coming. It's anticipatory. So this act where he speaks here to Abraham is preparation for his own great act of coming in the person of Jesus Christ.

And I imagine heaven at all these different stages was shocked by God's revelation of his grace and who he worked with.

No more so than the sending of his own Son. So the Old Testament anticipates Jesus coming. Now we have Christ, but the anticipation hasn't stopped.

[24 : 29] And that brings me right back to the beginning of the sermon when I talked about perspective. So very often we just live for today and for getting through today and having a good old time today.

And yet faith requires us to live a life of anticipation because the best has yet to come. That's part of the story of Jesus at the wedding of Cana where he turns convention on his head and says the best is still to come.

The best wines were still to come. And that was speaking of the kingdom and the celebration of God and what he plans to do. And for us as believers there is an...

there remains an anticipatory element for us in the battles and struggles. The best is still to come. The greatness of our names written on the forehead of the Father is still to be revealed.

But we are great because we're adopted into his family and he has a purpose and a plan for us. And if you're living your life trying to make a great name for yourself without God, without Christ, which is so easy to do and which we're tempted every day as sinners to do, we need this anticipatory element that keeps us going when it's a battle, when it's a struggle, in the bad times it gives us perspective, in the good times it keeps us from just thinking that the good times will end and we better make the most of them.

[26 : 05] It's anticipatory. And you know what? I even think that it's going to continue to be anticipatory in heaven. One of the great things of life anticipating something good is one of the great things, one of the great things.

Somebody would say that looking forward to something is better than the actual reality. Looking forward, the anticipation. I think heaven would be a bit boring if there was no anticipation. If it was all kind of laid out there for us and we had everything on a plate, I think it's going to be an explorative place of anticipatory searching and examining and exploring and finding out new things throughout eternity.

Otherwise, God is finite, isn't he? And we can say after 3,628 days in heaven, well, I know everything there is to know about this new heavens and the new earth and the God who made it.

And it's as if we'll become gods ourselves. No, there's this great anticipatory element that will always be hunger, anticipation, satisfaction, fulfillment as part of God's mission for us.

The second thing is also it's personal. I mentioned at the end the fact that it's also international, but this is a call to Abraham. And it's a call to Isaac. And it's a call to Jacob.

[27 : 19] And it's a call to Isaiah that we read. And it's a call to Zacchaeus up in a tree. And it's a call to Saul, the murderer who becomes Paul, the great apostle.

And it's a call to you. And it's a call to me personally. This great mission of God has behind it this reality of being called out by God, leaving behind something and starting and being part of something new.

That is a miracle. That there is fruitfulness that is unimaginable when you think of Abraham and his wife and the age they were at and the barrenness of their lives.

Nations of the world would come from them. That is unimaginably personal and miraculous. And the Gospel is that.

Never think that you just know the Gospel in your head only. It's a miracle. It's God's intervention. And it's a heart inclination and change that only he can give to us that we obey by faith.

[28 : 30] And in gratitude we follow and know his blessing even in the midst of struggle. So it's personal at that level because he works at that level and he wants something new for us.

So even as a community, as a church, we are to reflect the newness of the Gospel in our community, the newness of Christ, the new kind of Gospel so that we don't gossip and backbite and are vicious to one another.

But we reflect the forgiveness and the grace and the perseverance of Jesus in our relationships because it's a new community through the personal newness that Christ has breathed into us when we come to him.

So it's anticipatory, it's personal. And at the same level it's restorative. God speaks here about the blessing that he wants to bring. The blessing is a very powerful concept in the Old Testament and it's kind of related to the blessing of the land, the blessing of health, the blessing of riches, the blessing of life and the fullness of life.

Very physically expressed in the Old Testament. More spiritually expressed in the New Testament but leading towards a fusion of the spiritual and the physical in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

[29 : 57] So there's restoration. So the mission of God, and think of this, the mission of God wants to give to humanity everything that humanity is looking for without him.

Everything that humanity looks for without him. Health, wealth, relationship, peace, joy, all of these things.

Which communities and life and living people seek without reference to God. God says you can only get that in its fullness.

My way. Because sin needs to be... Sin corrupts all of that. Sin ultimately destroys all of that. Sin lets you smell that sweet smell for a while and then takes it from you. Because that's what sin does.

And that's what death does. The restorative reality of the Gospel is that we come out of the old way and find blessing and wholeness and life and restoration through God's mission.

[31 : 13] That is by trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. It's restorative. Lastly and briefly, as well as it being anticipatory and personal and restorative, it's also global.

So here in the narrow-minded, bigoted Old Testament with a vicious and capricious God who only cares about his own people, here is the promise of God and it says that all the families of the earth will be blessed through Abraham.

And that is kind of emboldened in chapter 12 in the formal covenant that he gives. The mission of God has societal impact. And that means for you today, don't hide away.

For you as a Christian today and for me, we can only bless the world that we're a part of and be a blessing when we're different from the world that we're part of.

It's only in the newness of the Gospel that we can go back into the world and be the blessing that God wants us to be to this world and to redeem this world by the Gospel.

[32 : 21] Jeremiah 29 has a great practical emphasis of that where the people were taken into exile in Babylon, interestingly, Babylon, the kind of nation from which the Tower of Babel was formed at the time.

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf for in its welfare you will find your welfare. Okay, the blessing of God to Edinburgh comes when we are as different from Edinburgh as light is from darkness.

Because we will go in with the light of the Gospel with our conversation, with our morality, with our ethics, but above all with our love for Jesus Christ and we will offer to the world something they don't know and don't have and are looking for in the wrong places.

As we love our God and love our neighbour we are fulfilling the law and we are being a blessing to this world and we believe people will be drawn to Jesus Christ.

Now we know that this world is ultimately to be destroyed but our calling is to bless and be a blessing and to be salt and light because this world is not only going to be destroyed it is going to be reformed and renewed and we are going to be part of that.

[33 : 49] We saw that when we looked through Ephesians 1 verse 10 the theme of the whole book as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in heaven and on the earth.

So we have this glorious future that will be a blessing to all who recognise Jesus Christ as Lord from all the families of the earth. A cataclysmic rebirth of the heavens and the earth in the new time that we will live in and explore and enjoy health and all that goes with the relationship with God it will be a place of unity of all people, of all creation of birds and trees and animals and rivers the curse will have gone we will be part of that glorious new world that has global implications where God will restore and renew and recreate gloriously what was lost in the beginning the difference being it will be a place where righteousness dwells and where sin will be expelled.

So to be out of Christ is to be living in sin and brings with expulsion from this glorious hope and future.

We don't want to talk about hell and death or death and hell, that's hell. That's death, that's the second death to be out of Christ and to be out of what he has promised has promised for all who will come to him by faith the call of grace.

If you're not a Christian today you are called by the gospel as it is preached by Jesus Christ as Lord and God and by this unfolding of the mission through his word.

[35 : 52] Deal with it. Deal with it. Deal with a living God. Stop procrastinating and stop faffing about trying to build your way to heaven, your own way, in your own strength, without reference to him.

Get a grip of the gospel and of the mission and of the grace of God and stop the pretense of being righteous enough not to need him.

And as Christians, let's stop that nonsense too and be people who are daily and hourly dependent on this great and glorious God who loves us more than we can ever know and ever appreciate, who gifts us more blessing than we will ever deserve because he loves us.

Now if that isn't motivation to serve I don't know what is. Let us serve and follow him with grace and with joy. Amen. Let's pray. Father God forgive us when we are grumpy and self-absorbed and unthankful to you for grace when we have treated it as an ordinary thing, when we cast aside the Old Testament as complex and irrelevant to us and don't give you the honour that is due to your name that you know what you printed for us that you know the word you gave us that you gave us it for a reason that every sentence is there because it's what you want us to have in understanding your purpose and your mission and your plan there's not random books and random sections some clearly more difficult than others but Lord forgive us for just wanting everything on a plate forgive us for not working through and wrestling with these things forgive us above all for despising your grace as we do so often and trying to make great names for ourselves without you when you say I will make your name great our names will go on into eternity that is greatness in your kingdom

Lord help us to see that we are so often blinded and help us not to be and help us to live not simply for today but with the great perspective of eternity and of your purposes and plans in grace for us Amen