

The Call of Abraham

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[0 : 0 0] Well, tonight I'd like us to turn back together to Genesis chapter 12 as we look at the life of Abraham.

I'm going to read again from verses one to three. The Lord said to Abraham, go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you, and I will make of 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 you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

In our evening services, we are doing a short study on the life of this great figure, Abraham. Last week, John started us off and he looked at the early chapters of Genesis to see the background to Abraham's life.

And in many ways, chapters one to eleven of Genesis function as an introduction to the whole of the Bible. It's a bit like sometimes when you watch films, you can get a wee bit at the start before the main title scene.

[1 : 1 3] It's a wee bit like that in terms of Genesis one to eleven. Here we have a kind of section that's introducing some of the main themes that the rest of the Bible is going to talk about.

Genesis one and two describe God's creation, where everything is made to be just brilliant. And the crown of that creation is humanity, God's people living in God's land, enjoying his presence, his provision, where they are just ready to thrive in God's amazing creation.

Genesis one and two shows that life is created to be amazing. But Genesis three describes the fall of humanity.

Adam and Eve sin against God and that beautiful relationship and purpose and enjoyment that humanity was created to have is ruined.

Creation's cursed, humanity is ashamed, harmony is lost, hostility arises and our relationship with God is broken.

[2 : 2 2] And from that point on, Genesis four through eleven describe the effects of that fall. And in many ways it's just like a downward arrow.

It's a devastating picture. You see murder, hostility, violence and aggression. The picture is bleak and horrible.

And in that early section of the Bible, two key events take place. In chapters six, seven, eight and nine, you have the flood, which powerfully shows us that ultimately sin is going to lead to judgment.

The horrible effect of sin is going to have devastating consequences. And then in chapter 11, you have the tower of Babel.

This was when the people of the world came together to build a tower in order to make a name for themselves. It was a great act of secular rebellion against God.

[3 : 29] People assembled to basically say, it's all about us. We don't need God and we don't want him.

They were building a tower to the glory of humanity. And God's response was to confuse their languages and disperse them.

And the key message of this introductory section to the Bible, Genesis one to eleven, is that humanity is created amazing. But the effect of sin is devastating.

And now humanity is broken. And all around us, we can see that that is true. Humanity still displays the amazingness that God created us to have.

But at the same time, humanity also constantly displays the brokenness that sin has caused. By the time we reach the end of Genesis 11, one thing is absolutely clear.

[4 : 37] Humanity is broken. And then we come to Genesis 12. And there's a sense in which Genesis 12 is page one of the Bible.

Sometimes when you pick up a book, the introduction has got Roman numerals at the start. And then the main story begins at page one.

And there is a sense in which you could do that with the Bible. You could put Roman numerals against Genesis one to eleven.

And then on Genesis 12, you have page one. And that makes Genesis 12 one of the most important passages in the Bible.

When you look at the Bible as a whole, there are several chapters or passages that are big. You can see in the diagram there, you've got the Old Testament running through into the New Testament.

[5 : 40] And there's big events that take place across that timeline. In the Old Testament, you've got creation at the very beginning.

Then you've got the fall. After that, in Exodus chapter 20, you have the record of God's people coming out of Egypt and receiving His law.

You have the establishment of the kingdom with David, and especially 2 Samuel chapter seven, that's a very, very big chapter. After that, things go into decline.

It ultimately culminates in the exile. These are the big moments that take place in the Old Testament. Then in the New, you have the incarnation of Jesus.

You have his baptism in the beginning of his ministry. You have the Sermon on the Mount, which we've been looking at in the morning services. You've got his crucifixion and his resurrection.

[6 : 34] And then you have the day of Pentecost. These are all big moments across the pages of the Bible.

And included in that list is Genesis 12 and the call of Abraham. This is a massive moment.

And the reason it's a massive moment is because this is step one of God's plan of salvation. Genesis one to 11 tells us that humanity is broken.

God's response to that is to say, I will fix it. He makes a promise that he'll fix it in Genesis chapter three. He preserves a means through which he'll do it with Noah.

And then with Abraham, God initiates his plan to save a broken world. Genesis 12 is page one of the Bible's amazing story of how God is going to restore humanity.

[7 : 41] And for that reason, there is so much that we could look at in this passage and we will only barely scratch the surface today. But I want us just to spend a few minutes thinking about this passage and thinking about what it teaches us about how God works.

If this is page one of God's plan of salvation, we are asking the question, well, how is that plan going to work? And in order to summarize what we're going to say, we're going to look at three big terms, two tiny words, and one crucial lesson.

So first of all, we've got three big terms that lie behind this passage. These big theological terms lie at the heart of how God works.

And for that reason, it's very important that we make sure that we understand them and see how they fit into God's plan of action. So first big term is this divine initiative.

That basically means that God takes the first step. And you can see that in verse one. It says, the Lord said to Abraham, so if Genesis 12 is page one, then verse one is line one.

[9 : 03] And the very first thing to happen on that line is that God does something. God comes to Abraham and speaks to him.

And that's showing us that when it comes to God's great message of salvation that the Bible reveals to us, it is God who takes the initiative.

And that is astonishing because if you look back at Genesis one to eleven, at that introductory section, the one thing that's clear is that it's humanity that has ruined things.

It's humanity that has rebelled against God and created the problem. And yet when it comes to putting things right, it's God who takes the first step.

And that's powerfully emphasized by what we know about Abraham prior to this moment. We know that he was an heir of the Caldees, which was a pagan city.

[10 : 03] We know from Joshua 24 verse two that Abraham came from a family of idol worshippers. In other words, there's absolutely nothing about Abraham that makes him special.

Before Genesis 12, Abraham is not a hero of the faith. He's not a model of godliness or morality. He's not calling people to turn back to God.

He does absolutely nothing to merit God's work in his life. In other words, Abraham is just another person in this mass of broken humanity.

And the only reason he becomes crucial in the Bible is because God takes the first step. God chooses Abraham and in doing so, he initiates his great plan of salvation.

So a foundational truth of how God works is divine initiative. And in many ways, it's one of the most astounding truths of the Bible that it doesn't stop at the end of Genesis three.

[11 : 15] When humanity sinned, God could so easily have just walked away, but he didn't. And we might think to ourselves, well, God is amazing because yes, he'll wait for us to turn back to him.

But the truth is, he is far more amazing than that because he doesn't wait for us to turn back to him. He takes the first step.

He initiates an amazing plan of salvation. And I think it's really important for us all to recognize this because very often we can feel that the first step back to God is impossible.

We look at ourselves and we think we're too broken. We've made too many mistakes. We are too far gone. For us, that first step back to God can seem impossible.

But the amazing thing about the Gospel is that we never take the first step. God does.

[12 : 26] It's so easy to look at a great biblical figure like Abraham and think, well, I am nothing like that. Well, if you feel weak, lost, or broken, if you feel like you are a million miles from where you should be, then that does not mean that you are nothing like Abraham.

It means that you are exactly like Abraham. And divine initiative tells you that God has taken the first step to come and save you.

The second big theological term that lies behind Genesis 12 is redemptive history. Now, that seems like a big term, but it's not too complicated.

It's quite straightforward. Redemptive history just refers to the fact that the great work of salvation that God initiates is worked out across the ages of history.

That's presented to us very clearly in the verses that we have before us here. Abraham is going to go to a new land. God's going to make him into a great creation, a great nation where he is going to be a blessing.

[13 : 43] And ultimately, all other families of the earth are going to be blessed as well. And all of that takes time. All of that is spread out over Abraham's lifetime and far beyond it.

And the rest of the Bible describes other key events that take place or that are going to take place as God works out his plan of salvation across the ages of history.

If we go back to that diagram that we had, these are all key events in redemptive history, the creation, the fall, the call of Abraham and how that was worked out in Isaac and Jacob, the Exodus, the giving of the law, the building of the temple, the entry into the promised land, the establishment of a kingdom under David, then that kingdom bit by bit fell apart, culminating in the exile at the end of the Old Testament.

Then as we said, New Testament, incarnation, baptism, Samaritan the Mount, crucifixion, resurrection, day of Pentecost. These are all the big moments in redemptive history.

We are now living in the last days, and we look forward to the final great moment in redemptive history when Jesus returns.

[15 : 05] This is God's plan of salvation, and it involves events in history. And it all fits together perfectly.

The Old Testament gives a shadow of what is to come. The New Testament is the fulfillment, and it's all for the purpose of rescuing a broken humanity.

And it is all worked out across history. And the amazing thing about the fact that it's history is that it means that it's all grounded in real life.

So much religious or spiritual teaching in the world is grounded in mythical or mystical claims. So you get mythical claims about the gods fighting and wandering and falling in love.

You get mystical claims where people will claim to have received a message from God that everybody else has to listen to. It's completely untestable, and often it can seem a million miles from real life.

[16 : 23] The Bible tells us that God's plan of salvation is not like that. God's plan of salvation is grounded in history.

Real people, real places, real events, real life. And when God works out his plan of salvation, he does it across the real life pages of history because God is offering us real, true salvation.

That's why in the Old Testament, if someone claimed to be a prophet and what they said didn't come to pass, God said, don't listen to them.

They're false prophets. That's why in the New Testament, there's this constant emphasis on eyewitnesses. If history simply means that God is working out his plan to save real people in real life, Christianity does not hide behind mythical or mystical claims.

God's salvation is real life. And one of the great pieces of evidence for the real lifeness of God's message is Abraham himself.

[17 : 41] In Genesis 12 verse 2, God says that he is going to make Abraham's name great. And remember that back then, Abraham was an idol worshipping nobody from out of the who-know-swear.

Today in 2020, there's at least four billion people on planet Earth who know who Abraham was.

Redemptive history tells us that what God is doing is utterly real. So we've got three big terms, divine initiative, redemptive history, and then the third one, which is I think the biggest one of them all.

Number three is family. One of the things that the life of Abraham makes absolutely clear is that the heart of God's work of salvation is family.

Back in Genesis 3.15, when God announces that the serpent is going to be crushed, that's going to happen through the offspring of the woman. That means that family, fatherhood, motherhood, childbirth, marriage, descendants, these are all crucial parts of God's plan.

[19 : 07] And we see that with Abraham. God tells him that he's going to make him into a great nation. His offspring are going to receive the land. And that's all the more astonishing because at this moment, Abraham has no offspring and his wife can't conceive.

That's why as we go through the rest of the life of Abraham, we see that a key part of the story is the birth of Isaac, his son, the child promised to Abraham and Sarah.

And then the rest of the Old Testament tells us about how the children of Abraham grew into a huge nation called Israel. And we must always remember that in the Old Testament, nations arose out of families.

So nations like Canaan, Moab, Ammon and Israel, they are all named after people because the nations were the descendants of individuals.

They were all big families. When you read about the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, you are reading about a family. Israel is a family nation all traced back to this promise that was given to Abraham.

[20 : 20] And the great purpose of that nation was to be a beacon of light to the others so that those who bless them will also be blessed and can join that family and those who dishonor them are cursed.

In so many ways, the story of the Old Testament is the story of a family. But the ultimate purpose is not just that Abraham's family are going to be blessed, it's that Abraham's family nation will be a blessing to all the other families on earth as well.

And this is where we see the ultimate reason why God chose Abraham. He chose Abraham to be a blessing to the whole world.

And that is absolutely amazing because in Genesis 11, you read about the whole world coming together to shake their fist against God.

But in the very next chapter, you read of God choosing a man and his family so that ultimately that rebellious broken world will be blessed by God.

[21 : 37] And the culmination of that blessing is that people from across all tribes and nations are going to be brought together into one great family. The separation and hostility that sin has brought into our experience is going to be put right and at the heart of that is family.

That's why when you read on with the rest of the Old Testament, there's a constant emphasis on family, marriage, children, descendants and genealogies. And when you come to the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan in the New Testament, you immediately see that it's just bursting with teaching that's all grounded on the family.

Remember, what's the very first thing that you read on page one of the New Testament? It's a family tree. And the rest of the New Testament tells us that through faith in Jesus Christ, God is our Father.

We are His adopted children and we are all brothers and sisters together in union with Jesus Christ as one big, amazing family.

That means that when God chose Abraham, it wasn't to exclude everybody else. It's to reach them and the same applies to us.

[22 : 57] When God chooses to save us, part of the reason He does that is so that we can bring the hope of salvation to others.

Genesis 3 to 11 is telling us that humanity is broken. But Genesis 12 and the rest of the Bible are telling us that that broken humanity is incredibly precious to God.

At the heart of God's purposes is family. And His great goal is to make you part of that family too.

So here in Genesis, we have divine initiative. We have redemptive history and we see the centrality of family.

These are three big theological terms. But they're actually all summed up by two tiny words.

[24 : 01] If you look back at Genesis 12, 1 to 3, you'll see that there are two tiny words that come up again and again.

They're also repeated in the other big moments of the Old Testament as well. Can you see them? The two tiny words that sum up God's plan of salvation are, I will.

God comes to Abraham. He calls him out of his country and he says, I will show you. I will make you. I will bless you.

And these two tiny words are absolutely central to God's message of salvation. God comes to broken Abraham who lives in a broken city as part of a broken humanity and God says, I will fix it.

And the emphasis in God's call to Abraham and in all God's outworking of his plan of salvation is not on what Abraham is going to do.

[25 : 11] It is on what God is going to do. And the same thing happens throughout the Old Testament. God comes to Moses and he says, I will take my people out of Egypt.

God comes to Joshua and he said, I will give you this land. God comes to David and he says, I will establish your throne at every key point in redemptive history.

God says, I will do it. And the ultimate fulfillment of that commitment is in the coming of Jesus Christ when God, the Son Himself comes because He will do everything that is needed.

He fulfills these promises. He takes our sin upon Himself. He defeats death. He conquers Satan. He rises again in victory.

God says, I will and in Jesus, that is exactly what He does. And the amazing thing for us now is that we can look back from further on in redemptive history and we can see that God has kept every promise that He made.

[26 : 25] And this is where we see the similarity and the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. A lot of people wonder about how the Old Testament and the New Testament fit together.

And some people try to kind of really push them apart and say that things are very different under the Old Testament and have completely changed in the New. So sometimes people will say, well, in the Old Testament, people were saved by their works and by their obedience to the law.

In the New Testament, it's completely different and we are saved by faith. We don't think that. We believe that everyone who is saved is saved by faith, Old Testament or New Testament.

That's the reason why I've got both the arrows running into each other on the diagram. It's one long line. The difference in the New Testament is that we move from a shadow in the Old Testament to fulfillment in the New.

That's why the arrow is bigger to try and convey that. The difference, however, is this, in the Old Testament, people were saved by trusting the God who said, I will.

[27 : 42] And so they looked forward to what God was promising. In the New Testament, we are saved by the God who says, I have.

Abraham trusted a promise that God, when God trusted God's promise, which said, I will. We trust the same God, but we have the amazing privilege of being able to look back into history and see that the God who said, I will has done it.

He's done everything that he promised to do. And in the Persian and work of Jesus Christ, we see that God was willing to keep his promise to bless all the families and nations, even though the cost was huge, even though for Jesus it meant dying on the cross.

But he did that because when God said, I will, he meant it. And here we see the incredible grace of God coming to save a broken humanity that doesn't deserve to be saved.

Here we see the determination of God, that nothing will stop him, not even our own failings. That's one of the fascinating things you see from Abraham, because the very next thing he does after being called by God is to make a complete mess of things when he goes down to Egypt.

[29 : 13] But God does not give up on him. We see the amazing capability of God. One of the great emphasis running through the life of Abraham is that everything just looks impossible all the time.

But God overcomes every obstacle in the life of Abraham and in his whole plan of salvation, whether it's from the barrenness of Sarah's womb or to the horror of Gethsemane.

And above all else, here we see the love of God. It's all so that we can be his beloved children as part of his amazing family.

At the heart of God's saving work is two tiny words, I will. And in the coming of Jesus Christ, these words have in many ways now become I have, because Jesus has done everything that is needed for you and me to be saved from our sins and to have eternal life.

And the amazing thing is that God has done all of that for you. Because in Genesis 12, when God talks about blessing all the families of the earth, that includes you and your family.

[30 : 49] Genesis 12 is page one of God's plan of salvation and you are written on it.

So in this passage, we see three big terms, we see two tiny words and last of all, we see one crucial lesson.

As we've been saying, Genesis 12 is revealing God's plan of salvation and in doing so, it's telling us a crucial lesson about how Christianity works and it's a lesson that we must understand.

And I think it's a lesson that many people have misunderstood and still misunderstand today. Because many people and maybe some of you look at Christianity and think that at the heart of its message, God is saying, you must.

So Christianity is you must do this, you must do that, you must stop this, you must stop that. And we look at Christianity and think, well, it's just basically a big list of do's and don'ts and God is kind of standing over us and saying, you must.

[32 : 13] And many of the world's religions are based on that principle. But that whole idea of you must is not Christianity.

Christianity is not God saying you must. Christianity is God saying, I will.

I will save you. I will rescue you. I will show you a new way. I will protect you. I will be your father. I will love you forever.

And he's proved that because Jesus has come and he has done everything that we need. At the heart of Christianity is not what we do for God.

At the heart of Christianity is what God does for us. And the difference between a message based on God saying you must and a message based on God saying I will is absolutely crucial because they result in two very different responses from us.

[33 : 19] You must produces fear and intimidation and makes us think that we must do stuff to impress God that we have to somehow be good enough for Him and we rely on our own efforts to reach that standard or we just give up in fear or disillusionment.

I will does not call us to do that. I will does not call us to impress God.

I will calls us to trust Him. And that's exactly what Abraham did.

He didn't know where he was going. He didn't know when his child was going to be born. He didn't know what the rest of God's plan looked like.

But he trusted God. And all God is asking of you and me is that we would do the same.

[34 : 26] And that is why the Gospel does not lead us to fear or insecurity or pressure to impress. The Gospel of Jesus Christ leads us to peace and safety now and forever.

Because for every single time you look at yourself and think I failed, I can't do it, I'm broken. Jesus says that does not matter for one second because whatever it takes to save you, I will do it.

And that's what makes following Jesus so amazing. It's not about what you have to do for Him. It's not about what I can do for Him.

It's all about what He has done for us. May God grant that for every one of us. We can see that, understand that and trust Him forever.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much for all that you've done for us.

[35 : 41] And in so many ways, Lord, we have not done anything to deserve that, but we just rejoice that you are the God who was ready to say, I will.

And how we thank you for that. And just praise you for everything that you have in fact done for us through Jesus. And may we all just respond to that by trusting in you.

In Jesus' name, amen.