

God's Covenant with Abram

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it's not easy being a foreigner in another country. You may know if you are a foreigner from another country, especially in our country, in light of recent events we've seen in the news.

The evils of xenophobia have made headlines again. It is not easy being a foreigner in this country. But in any country, it's not easy to be a foreign national.

Being away from your homeland comes with many difficulties. It means being away from what is familiar, being away from the place that you grew up and the people that you know and the culture that you know, living in a different culture than you used to.

Maybe you've lived overseas and you've found difficulties that you never expected, living in a different culture where there's different expectations. Not having the support of family close by, that support system that is so important for us.

Not having that if you're in a different country, far away from your family. And often, just in many ways, small and big, being made to feel like a second-class citizen by the native-born people of the country you're in.

[1 : 1 0] So there are many difficulties that foreigners in countries that are not their own face. Well, if that's you, it might encourage you to know that God has always shown a particular favor towards foreigners in his dealings with the human race.

See, I think he has a soft spot for foreigners, does God. People who are not home. People who are in countries, not their own. Because, for example, not only does God command the nation of Israel to have a special care for foreigners within their borders, he makes laws around that in Israel.

But, what we discover in this morning's passage, it's remarkable. What we discover is that the most important covenant God ever made with human beings, the covenant upon which his great plan of salvation for all nations is based, and what the rest of the Bible is about, was made with, of all people, a foreign refugee.

Not a king, not a particularly wise or holy man, but a pagan Iraqi goat herder, a thousand kilometers away from his homeland.

A man named Abram, of which nothing good is said. See, in this passage, unlike other passages and other men in the Bible, Noah and Job and them, in this passage, there's no Abraham was a righteous or blameless man in the sight of God.

[2 : 4 8] No. He was a nobody. All we're told about this guy Abram is that he was the son of Terah, and he was from the land of Ur of the Chaldeans, which was a godless, idol-worshipping nation.

In fact, the only note the narrator makes about Abram is that his wife couldn't bear children. So not only was he a nobody in a land that is not his own, but he had no future. His family had no future. And yet, that's who God chose. It's this nobody without a land or a future that God gives a great name with a great future whose family will one day inherit the whole earth.

Because that is what our God is in the business of doing. You'll be pleased to know, if you feel like a nobody this morning, that God is in the business of making nobodies into somebodies.

And he is still doing it today. In fact, you could summarize the gospel as God making nobodies who have nothing and deserve nothing into somebodies who have and will have everything.

[4 : 0 4] Bringing people into his kingdom, giving them a name and a future, is the business that God is in. But he's doing that today all because of the promise that he made to a pagan Iraqi goat herder 4,000 years ago.

So let's see what that promise is and what it means for us today. Have a look in your Bibles from 12 verse 1. The Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

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.

Okay, so God appears out of the blue and he makes a covenant with this man Abraham. Now we've learned previously what that word covenant means, right?

In the Noah story, if you were with us, we learned that a covenant is a special arrangement with a specific person or group of people through whom God is going to continue his good purposes for the world.

[5 : 23] And he, as he did with Noah, saves these people from his judgment so he can, through them, continue his good purposes for the world. And so with Noah, the promise that he gave Noah was a promise to rescue him and his family from judgment in the flood and then never flood the world again.

Which is, it's a great promise, isn't it? Every time we look at a rainbow, we know, phew, the world's not going to get flooded. So it's a great promise, but all of God's promises to Noah were kind of negative.

They were promises to not do something bad. They weren't promises to do something good. But with the promise to Abraham, now God is taking his covenant further and he's making positive promises to bless Abraham and his children abundantly.

So that word, bless or blessing, appears five times in two verses here. It's the essence of God's promise to Abraham. Unlike his promise to Noah, which was to not do a bad thing, now he is promising a particular man and his offspring to do an amazingly good thing.

To bless Abraham, to bless those who bless him and to make him a blessing to all peoples on the earth. But now to understand what that promise actually means, before we even ask, well, what does it mean for us?

[6 : 51] 4,000 years later, who are not Jewish, we'll get there. But what does blessing actually mean? Because when we think of the word bless today, it's either some fancy word that a priest says in a church, he gives a blessing, or it's something you say when someone sneezes, or it's the British version of Achshem.

Ah, bless. Have you heard that? But what does it actually mean? You see, the meaning in the Bible is none of those things. The meaning of blessing in the Bible is much more than that, much more important, especially in the context of Genesis.

Because you see, Genesis shows us, which we've seen already, that the whole problem with the world is the curse that came because of sin. The ground is cursed.

The world is cursed. Now again, we need to define our terms. What is a curse? Well, again, we tend to think of witch doctors and voodoo dolls when we think of curse.

But in the Bible, a curse simply means something that makes life not work like it's meant to.

Something that makes life hard. Something that literally sucks the life out of life is a curse.

[8 : 10] All the frustrations of life that make us unhappy, I'm sure you could list a list as long as you're on of those things in your life that make you unfulfilled or unhappy or frustrated.

Relationship problems, health problems, economic problems, political problems, all those things you see on Dr. Ahmed's flyer that he claims to have a mootie for.

They all actually spring from the curse that came on the world because of our sin. Life in this world doesn't work as per design because of sin.

And sorry, Dr. Ahmed, there's no mootie for that. There's no mootie for sin. There's no mootie that's going to change your heart. Well, you see, that is curse.

And that is why curse is here. But blessing is the direct opposite of curse. Blessing is life working as per design. It's something that makes life enjoyable, that makes life work well and not be a frustration where we are not in need, where we are not unhappy and where everything is working well.

[9 : 31] Basically, the word blessing sums up the state that God initially intended and still intends for His world and our lives. That is what blessing means.

In fact, if you read here carefully the promise that God makes to Abram as well as the one down in verse 7, what you begin to see if you chew over what He's actually promising Abram here, you begin to see that God is promising him what He had given to Adam before the fall.

In essence, He's promising Abram a new Eden, a new world. First, He promises him a nation or family.

Second, He promises him a great name. Now, we saw last week a name that the guys at Babel were trying to get for themselves and they failed means it's a shorthand basically for significance and life, immortality.

Third, in verse 7, God promises Abraham a place, a land. So, a nation, a name, a place.

[10:39] And then He promises that Abram will be the source of blessing to the rest of the world, right? So, you see that here in Genesis 12. A nation, a family, a name, a place, and that he will be the source of blessings.

Well, we've heard that before, haven't we? Genesis 2 with Adam. God gives Adam a wife and therefore a family, descendants. He gives him a name, significance as the ruler of creation and access to eternal life.

And He gives him a land, Eden, that provides all his need as an end. Remember the rivers from Genesis 2? Yes? Please remember the rivers. He intends, we saw there, for Adam to take Eden's blessings to the rest of the world and be a blessing to the rest of the world.

And so, God's promise to Abraham is essentially a promise to bring about His original creation purposes for this world before the curse. That's what's going on here and that's why it's such a central promise in the Bible.

God is promising that Abraham and his family will experience pre-cursed living and that they will then be the source of that pre-cursed life to the rest of the world.

[11:54] And that is why this promise here in Genesis 12 is the gospel. And I'm not making that up.

Paul, the Apostle Paul, calls this very promise the gospel. Not a prelude to the gospel, not a preparation for the gospel, but this promise here that God gives Abraham is the gospel.

Paul says, Galatians chapter 3, verse 8, I'm going to read it. He says, Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham, quote, all nations will be blessed through you.

That is the gospel right here in Genesis 12. What God promises Abraham here is His plan of salvation for the whole world. Now the rest of the Bible, of course, is necessary because it fleshes out how God achieves and fulfills that promise to Abraham and how God can actually give life to sinners who deserve nothing but death.

And that's what we've got to read the rest of the Bible to understand how that's possible and where Jesus comes and fits in and makes it possible. But this right here, according to Paul, is that gospel, is God's gospel promise.

[13:12] But then what we also discover, not only do we discover just the hugeness the hugeness of what God is promising to Abraham here and how it's what the rest of the Bible is about, but we also discover that there are conditions for these promises to happen.

Did you see them? First, Abraham has to do what God says for these promises to happen. Like Adam, he needed to submit to God's rule for the blessings to happen.

And God's rule here, His command to Abraham, is no small thing. He says, right at the beginning, go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land I will show you.

Become a foreigner. Become a foreign refugee, essentially, was the requirement for the blessings. Abraham had to leave everything he knows, his land and his name and his identity behind, in order to have this new identity and this new name and to father a new people in a new land.

To be a blessing, there needs to be a leaving, a departure, first. He's got to forsake his current citizenship to become a citizen of God's kingdom.

[14:30] As far as I understand it, you can't any longer in South Africa have dual citizenship without special permission. If you become a citizen of another country, you risk losing your South African citizenship.

Well, for Abraham to become a citizen of God's country, to become a citizen of this new Eden that God is promising him, he first needed to do something very important. He needed to lose his citizenship, his present citizenship, his present identity.

That was an essential requirement. Do you see that? And that's because that's how God's kingdom works.

If you want to enter the life and the land that God intends for you, the first requirement is to lose whatever name and identity and citizenship you had before. It's what Jesus meant, or part of what

he meant when he said, to save your life, you must first lose it.

Remember that? And it's a very important part of the Christian's life, learning how to leave our old life behind, just as Abraham had to do in Genesis 12.

[15:42] So in that way, Abraham is a pattern for anybody in future to come into God's kingdom. This requirement for there to be a leaving, a departure of the old, leaving it behind first.

So that's the first condition. But then, there's another condition that was needed for blessing to flow from Abraham to others, which we should be very interested in.

If we have any hope of enjoying any of these blessings. How does Abraham's blessings and the blessings of his family flow to others?

Well, I wonder if you spotted that not everyone in the world will be blessed through Abraham. Not everyone in the world will be blessed through Abraham. Yes, the promise says all peoples on earth will be blessed through you, but that means people from all over the world, not all individuals, without exception.

Otherwise, the previous statement wouldn't make sense. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse. And so those who bless Abraham will be blessed, while those who curse him won't be blessed.

[16:54] Now, the verb, there's a lot of language work we have to do to understand these promises properly, but the verb to bless here means something slightly different from the noun blessing that we've already looked at.

Because while God blesses his people, the Bible also speaks, and you may have come across it, of people blessing God. I will bless the name of the Lord.

I will praise the name of the Lord. And people blessing each other. And so what that means, basically, is to express favor towards, but it can also mean to recognize and honor as the source of your blessing.

So when we bless or praise God, we're not only expressing our favor towards him, but we're actually recognizing and thanking him as the source of blessing to us.

And in the same way, those who will be blessed by God, according to this promise, are those who bless Abram by showing him favor and honoring him as the source of God's blessings.

[17:56] Recognizing that this is the man that God is with, and this is the man through whom God is working. That's what it means to bless Abram, not just to say, hey, bless you when he sneezes.

Or it's not a small thing. The full meaning of blessing Abram is showing him favor and recognizing that this is the conduit of God's grace to the nations.

And we see examples of this later on in the Abram story, like King Abimelech and King Melchizedek. These are two kings who interacted with Abram, and they both recognized and stated that God is with him, and they were blessed for that.

And so that's an example of what it means to bless Abram. And that's the promise. That's the requirement. So not only is it the promise, but it's also the requirement for these blessings to happen.

So, let's continue in the story. How does Abram respond? Well, he obeys. He goes. He does what God says he must do. He believes God's promises. Of course, if he didn't believe God's promises, he wouldn't leave.

[19:06] He wouldn't leave everything he has behind if he's a bit skeptical about God's promises. He goes because that's a response of faith in God's promise. And of course, believing God's promise means that he can't but go, because if he understands what God is promising him, he would be an idiot not to do what God says and to go.

So what he's doing here, his response, is to believe God's promises and then act in line with them. And that was his only part to play. In the whole thing. And that's normally how it is with God's covenants throughout the Bible.

Those to whom God makes the promise, their only role in the covenant is to believe and live in line with that promise. Which Abram does here by setting out for Canaan where God then appears to him in verse 7 and promises that this, Canaan, would be the land from which he will bless the nations.

This will be the new Eden. And that is the next surprising twist in the story because what do we know about Canaan so far?

It's the land of curse. Canaan's got no good connotations attached to it at this point in the story.

[20 : 25] All we know about Canaan at this point in the story, Genesis 12, is that it's a bad place and it's filled with bad people. Canaan was the nation no but cursed because of Ham's sin in chapter 9 and the Canaanites were a nasty and wicked people, some of the fiercest enemies of God's people later on in the Bible.

And so, of all the countries we'd expect to be the source of blessings, Canaan is not it. And yet, that's where God sends Abram. That's the land he promises him.

And I think that's the point here. See, God wants Abram and his family to bring undoing of the curse. So where does he send him? To the very hot spot, the very epicenter of the curse in the world.

To the middle of the brokenness. Like a fireman putting out a fire. If a fireman is called to respond to a house fire or a felt fire or whatever it is, he doesn't go to the outer edge and start watering the little fires on the edge.

No, a good fireman will go right to the heart of the blaze and start battling it there to stop it. The most intense part of the fire. And so, when Abram made that altar in verse 8 and started calling on the name of the Lord, you know what he was doing?

[21 : 45] It was a profound thing. He was planting a flag of the new Eden in the very middle of a cursed world. In the very epicenter of a cursed world. He was starting or anticipating the new world to come.

Okay, so that's what's happening here. At least in the first part of the story. But now, let's fast forward 4,000 years to 2019. And if you haven't yet been asking, you should be asking at this point, well, where is this land of blessing that Abram apparently was there to begin to start?

And where is his family? Who is his family that God said would be the blessing to the nations? Well, the obvious answer is Jews in the state of Israel.

And many people still believe that to be the case because they are technically the children of Abram, right? They're the descendants biologically of Abram.

His children. And yes, if you read the Bible story, the whole Old Testament, well, at least to kind of halfway through the Old Testament, you see that the Jews, the state of Israel, was for a time the recipients of these blessings to Abram.

[23 : 04] under the covenant of Moses, especially under the kings, David and Solomon, if you read about what happened under their rules, many of these promises to Abram were fulfilled to an extent.

They had land. Israel, for a time, was a great kingdom and it had a great name and it was a blessing to nations. In fact, nations, the Queen of Sheba and others came to Solomon and just to see the greatness of the kingdom of Israel and to learn from them and be blessed.

And so, for a time, there was a kingdom in this world that did see the at least partial fulfillment of these promises but then what we read, if we carry on reading in the Old Testament, is that sadly, over time, Israel showed through their disobedience and them not actually believing the promises that God made to Abram, that they were no longer true children of Abram.

They no longer were believing the promises God made to Abram and so they lost their place in the covenant. They lost their place in the covenant that God made with Abram.

And that is one of the major points Jesus makes to the Jews of His day. So, the Jews, the Pharisees, when Jesus was around, they were claiming to be children of Abram. You know what He said to them, John chapter 8?

[24 : 30] He said these words, If you were Abram's children, you would do what Abram did, but you are trying to kill me and so you are of your father, the devil. Those are harsh words.

He was telling these Jews who their main identity, their whole significance was rooted in Abram being their father and Jesus said, No, he's not.

The devil is your father. It was really harsh what he was saying. And so, what Jesus is saying is that these Jews had lost their place in God's covenant with Abram because they had rejected Jesus, who's the very one who came to make the covenant happen, who came to make the covenant promises possible when he died for the sins of Abram's children on the cross so that they can live in a pre-ful, pre-sin world and have eternal life in the land.

You cannot do that. Because sin is the cause of the curse, you can't live in a non-cursed world if your sin is not dealt with. And so, Jesus had to come.

Jesus had to die for these promises God made to Abram to be fulfilled. But there's more. Okay, so, let me just pause there to summarize what I'm saying. The Jews, because they didn't accept Jesus as the Messiah and trust in him, they lost their place in the covenant.

[25 : 54] But, there's more. And this is what the rest of the New Testament develops, Paul and others. That not only are many Jews no longer the children of Abram, but, here's the good news, many non-Jews through faith in Christ get to be children of Abram now.

They get to change their citizenship. They get to leave their people and their country and become part of Abram's people and his country. Paul says this in Romans 4.

He says, Abram was made the father of all who believe but are not circumcised, i.e. not Jews.

Okay, so back to our original question. Who are the people today who this promise in Genesis 12 is talking about?

God's promise to Abram. Who are the people who will benefit in all the nations from God's promise to Abram? Well, I'll tell you. all those who bless Abram and his offspring, specifically, a particular offspring, Jesus Christ.

All who bless him. In other words, all who recognize that Jesus is the source of God's undoing of the curse of this world. That he is the one who went right into the epicenter of sin and took its penalty for Abram's children.

[27 : 14] they are the ones from all nations who will be blessed along with Abram by becoming themselves Abram's children. And that is what you want to be.

You want to be a child of Abram. If these promises were made to Abram, we've already seen in Genesis so far that all the nations in Genesis chapter 10, they had no hope.

They were expanding and they were building and they were advancing in civilization and we've seen that over thousands of years, all the great things that civilization has done but we're all going to die. And we have no hope of anything more, no hope of life, no hope of salvation apart from a particular line God chose which led down to this man Abram.

And if you are not part of that line, you are doomed. But God has made a way for you to be part of that family, Abram's family, through Christ. when you bless Abram and his offspring Jesus Christ by recognizing that that is the way that God has made and the only way to be saved.

While all those who curse Abram and his seed, Jesus, those who do not see them as the source of God's blessing to this world and do not see God's covenant with Abram and Jesus' death on the cross as the only way to be saved from God's judgment, they will remain under God's curse and they will suffer His wrath and that is terrifying.

[28 : 40] Okay, so there's only two options. You're either in Abram's people or you are not. Okay, but now if that's true, if it's true that those who have come to believe in Christ are blessed along with Abram are counted as his family and if that's us, believers in Christ, then, well, where are those blessings now?

that's the next question we should be asking. We live in the middle of a cursed world as recent weeks have reminded us in the news. The promises God made to Abram and his descendants don't seem to have come true, do they?

I mean, where's this land of blessing that he promised? Where's this life working as it's meant to work? We don't feel that. We don't see that. Do you? Does your life work the way it's meant to work?

No. So where are these promises? Well, that's what the very next part of the story is here to show us, the very next thing that happens in Genesis 12 because that little story teaches us that these blessings don't come right away because look what happens next.

What we discover is that the promise is threatened. The promise is at risk right from the word go.

So look from verse 10 onwards. Now there was a famine in the land and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.

[30 : 09] As he was about to enter Egypt he said to his wife Sarai, I know what a beautiful woman you are. Oh, what a romantic. But then, when the Egyptians see you they will say this is his wife.

Then they will kill me but they will let you live. Say you are my sister so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you. When Abram came to Egypt the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman and when Pharaoh's officials saw her they praised her to Pharaoh and she was taken into his palace.

So no sooner does God make these promises to Abram than they are at risk of not happening. The promise of land is threatened by the very curse which Abram is meant to undo.

the curse of the ground famine. Rather than Abram bringing blessing to the land he is driven out of the land by curse. It's the very opposite of what's meant to happen here.

And so already this plan of blessing seems to be a non-starter. And then the blessing of family descendants is threatened because Abram loses his wife through a stupid decision on his part to pretend that she's not his wife.

[31 : 25] And without a wife you can't have descendants, right? And so already in the very next story in Genesis 12 after these great promises God makes to Abram all of the promises are being threatened.

First by famine in the land and second by fear in Abram himself. By external threats and by internal threats. But this story is here not just to give us an interesting bedtime story.

The story is here for a very important purpose. It's here to show us something about God's covenant promises to Abram. It's here to show us that God will fulfill those promises no matter what despite the curse on the outside and despite Abram's own shortcomings on the inside.

Because look what happens next. Not only was Abram blessed in spite of his stupidity with cattle and donkeys and servants and camels but God cursed Pharaoh.

Do you notice that? God cursed Pharaoh for dishonoring Abram albeit unwittingly poor Pharaoh but just like God said he would. Whoever curses you I will curse.

[32 : 45] And so the story ends with Pharaoh not only giving Abram back his wife but Abram leaving Egypt with all of these riches way more blessed than he was when he entered it.

And so despite all the curse and Abram's own fear God keeps his covenant promises and nothing not even Abram's own shortcomings will stop that.

in spite of all the threats God ensures that his promises always come to pass and those who fall under those promises today those who have made their way into the same covenant through faith in Christ we can rest on that assurance that even though we might feel the effects of the curse around us even though we might feel fear within us even though we might make stupid decisions that won't stop God from carrying out his promises to his covenant people and eventually blessing us with all the precursor blessings that he has planned for us even though in the meantime we might find ourselves in the midst of a cursed land like Abram did if we do and we look around and we see the just the sadness and the brokenness of this world and we despair we must remember this is precisely where God has put us his people to be a source of blessing to the nations to be a source of blessing to the cursed world around us when you look around at Cape Town and South Africa you might want to run away like Abram did to Egypt you might want to run away to Australia or to England or wherever but it's then that you've got to realize that God has put us into the very epicenter of curse in order to be a blessing God has put us here the people of St Mark's who are by the way not South Africans or Zambians or Irish no if you have come under the rule of Christ your citizenship has changed you are now a child of Abram and you are given a name and a future by God and you are called to be a blessing to a broken world through good works that anticipate the world to come and as we await that world in the meantime we are to live in faith in God's covenant promises and live in line with them in obedience to his covenant promises just like

Abram did even before he saw those covenant promises take place turn with me to Hebrews chapter 11 Hebrews chapter 11 if you don't know is a example of the kind of faith that Christians are called to have and so the author to the Hebrews lists all of these Old Testament examples of people who had the kind of faith that God is seeking in us and amongst them a prime example of this is Abram and this is what Hebrews 11 tells us to do the kind of faith and the kind of lives it calls us to have Hebrews 11 from verse 8 listen to these words by faith Abram 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

[36 : 25] Isaac and Jacob who were his heirs with him of the same promise for he was looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God and so you see like Abram we are all foreigners in a land that is not our own aliens and strangers in this world Peter says but we live and work here now to be a blessing to a broken world even though things are not working as per design and why do we do that and why do we work for that despite our lives being frustrated despite us feeling the effects of curse despite us having fears within why do we do that well

because we know we have a country a world where life works as per design without end the country the land that God promised to Abram and all his descendants and we look forward to a city yet to come not a

Babel that we build for ourselves but a lasting city in a restored creation with foundations that will never perish because its architect and its builder is God let's pray Lord we thank you for revealing to us these promises that you gave to our father Abram we thank you that we can be counted even Gentiles from or previous Gentiles from many different nations gathered here this morning we can be counted as children of Abram through our faith in Christ thank you for bringing us into that covenant that you made with him and we pray that you would help us now to live lives in line with your promises believing them firmly and living as a blessing to the broken world around us through our words and our works and we look forward to the day when Christ returns to bring your promises finally to pass help us and strengthen us until that day in Jesus name
Amen Amen