

Blessed to Bless

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[0 : 00] Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's word to you today.! A special welcome if you're new or visiting. We're glad that you're here. And we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community.

And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good, they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it. Which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in his word.

We're continuing our series in the story of Abraham, which takes place in Genesis chapters 11 through 25, in the larger context of the book of Genesis.

So we're not doing the whole book, just this one story. And we're doing it, first of all, to prepare us to go back into our series in Romans, where we'll pick up in Romans chapter 4, which is about Abraham.

So this is all sort of preparatory material to go back to where we were before. It's also a great time for us to ask this question, which the story of Abraham raises, which is what does it look like to follow God in faith?

[1 : 10] What does it look like to follow God in faith? We're looking at a similar, a smaller section of the same passage we looked at last week. And the reason for that is that Genesis is this just rich, multi-layered story.

Just as a work of literature, it's composed in a way that makes it brilliant and deep, with all sorts of angles and meanings.

In fact, we could continue on the same section. I think we could have two more sermons. We could have one on God making Abraham's name great. We could have another one just about the gospel for the nations.

But we're going to move on next week and go to chapter 12 and start at verse 10. You remember last week, we looked at this idea of going, that Abraham was commanded to go.

And we saw that following God's call always involves loss. Which raised the question for us, why is it worth losing for? And we had two answers.

[2 : 10] One, giving it up is the only way to keep it. And two, giving it up is to get something better. So that was last week, the command to go. There are two movements in this passage, though.

Go is the first one. The second main movement is blessed to be a blessing. And so that's going to be our focus this morning. How do we experience the greatest blessing?

What's the purpose of our blessings? What are they for? What's the direction that they're meant to go in? As I say that, then we're going to turn now to God's word, Genesis chapter 12.

And I should note, by the way, that next month, I'm going to observe eight years being on staff here at this church. And in those eight years, I cannot remember a service as full as this one.

I say that for two reasons. First, wow, praise God for all the things that he's doing in this church.

Two, I'm going to call a game time call, and we're going to read just verses one through three.

[3 : 09] Okay? Chapter 12. So I invite you to turn there with me now. You can turn in your worship guide. You can turn on your phone. You can turn in your Bible.

No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's word. God tells us that his word is more precious than gold, even the finest gold. And it's sweeter than honey, even honey that comes straight from the honeycomb.

And so that's why we read now Genesis chapter 12, starting in verse one. Now the Lord said to Abram, 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 dishonors you I will curse.

And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you for your great work in this congregation.

[4 : 19] And we praise you and thank you for your word that you haven't left us to figure it out on your own, but instead you speak to us, you instruct us as a father instructs his children.

We ask that you would do that very thing this morning, that you'd honor your promise in Isaiah 55, that your word will not return to you empty, but it will accomplish great things. And so we ask this morning that you would accomplish great things here among us because of your word to us in Genesis chapter 12.

We ask all of these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Sometimes being a preacher is just going back to English class.

And so I'm going to remind you of something that I bring up from time to time when we get into narratives in the Bible especially, especially Old Testament narratives, sometimes the Gospels, which is this.

When you are reading a story in the Bible, you always make a note when a word is repeated over and over. Repetition is never a coincidence in the Scriptures.

[5 : 28] In fact, as I've also mentioned before, sometimes it's really upsetting for people from a Western culture. We're not as familiar with repetition as other cultures are, and so we think, man, why can't you just get to the point?

You've said this before. But this is not the way that every culture in the world communicates. It's not the way that ancient Near Eastern culture works. And so we are slammed right in the face at the very beginning in this passage with one obvious repetition.

Bless or blessing shows up in three verses five times. Which is the author's way of telling us, guess what?

Genesis chapter 12 verses one through three is about blessing. Remember we talked last week about why Abraham is willing, should give up so many things.

Why it is that he's going to go and leave everything behind. His family, his nation, his father's house. And what's happening here is we're honing in on the second reason.

[6 : 31] Remember we talked about the fact that he's leaving, he's letting all these things go because he's going to get something better. And that is what is hammered home again and again here.

You might say, man, what is the blessing? Well, at some level, it is obvious. There's that old saying, right, that everything is bigger in Texas. We might say in this passage, everything is going to get bigger for Abraham.

He's going to go from his country, verse one. He's going to leave his family, verse one. But what's going to happen, verse two, great nation. So you're going to give up a small thing.

You're going to get a great thing. Verse one, leave your family. Okay, that's a huge loss, but what's going to happen? Verse one, verse three, you're going to bless all families.

So there's this multiplication there, this increase, right? Everything is going to get better. Abraham is a nobody, a shepherd wandering around in the ancient Near East who no one has ever heard of.

[7 : 36] Verse two, he's going to make his name great. There's this threefold blessing that is offered to Abraham. He's going to have a great name, a great nation.

He's going to be a great blessing. Seems like a good deal, right? Everything is going to get better. So at one level, it seems pretty obvious what this blessing is that's coming to Abraham, which makes it make sense for him to give up everything he's hold before and move forward in following God.

At another level, it is not obvious what the blessing is. There are things that are revealed slowly, one piece at a time throughout the story of the Bible.

And so that's why Scott read this morning from Galatians chapter three. Because Galatians chapter three, which is on page three of your worship guide, clarifies what the blessing ultimately is.

Paul tells us in that letter that Scripture preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham. And it preached the gospel to Abraham when it said, in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

[8 : 54] So what is the blessing? On the surface level, in the immediate context, the blessing is name, nation, all the families of the earth.

In the ultimate context, what is being pointed forward to here is that the blessing really is fully and finally Jesus Christ.

Right? Because when Paul says the gospel was proclaimed beforehand, what is he saying? The gospel is the good news of Jesus' death and life and resurrection. How is it that all the nations are going to be blessed?

They're going to be blessed by Abraham because his descendant will be Jesus Christ. That is the way in which all the families of the earth will be blessed.

The New Testament makes this clear, not just in Galatians. If you're familiar with the gospel of Matthew, when it comes to Christmas time, often we'll read the genealogy of Jesus, and Matthew goes out of his way to tell us, this is the descendant of Abraham.

[10 : 09] Which is Matthew's way of saying, hey, remember that promise in Genesis chapter 12. Now it's fulfilled. This is how all the families of the earth will be blessed.

So the point is this. Abraham will be a blessing to the nations because through him and his descendants comes Jesus Christ.

Abraham will be a blessing to the nations because through him and his descendants comes Jesus Christ. And it's at this point, as much as I think it's right that we're focusing just on the story of Abraham, it's at this point that we have a little bit of a disservice that we have skipped chapters 1 through 11 of Genesis.

Because chapters 1 through 11 lay out sort of this narrative tension, the great need for all the families of the earth to be blessed. Genesis chapter 3, Adam and Eve are in the garden.

We have the fall of man as they rebel against God and their relationship with him is ruptured.

Genesis chapter 4, we have the first murder in the history of the world. Genesis chapters 6 through 9, mankind decides we are going to try to serve ourselves.

[11 : 28] We're going to be filled with oppression and violence. And so God has to purge the world with a flood. Then we come back in Genesis 11 and mankind says, you know what, we want fame and achievement and excellence and power without God.

And so there's the Tower of Babel that they build up to the skies and God thwarts them by changing the languages. So there's this cascading just tragedy that happens in Genesis chapters, especially 3 through 11.

And that tragedy is setting us up for this. Hey, there's this great problem. Humankind is so bad that they're separated from God. They're killing one another. The earth needs to be purged with a flood. And they're trying to build a name for themselves without God. How is humanity going to get out of this mess? How in the world could this chaos be solved and healed?

And so it's in the midst of that context that God comes to this man and his wife who are both in their older years and says, guess what? I am going to save the world through you.

[12 : 39] The nations have been scattered in Genesis chapter 11 at the Tower of Babel, and you are going to be part of the solution.

The blessing of Abraham is the beginning to the solution of human sin, rebellion, chaos, and destruction.

We might put it another way. Genesis 12 verses 1 through 3 is one of the most pivotal and important passages in all of Scripture.

This is where the dominoes that lead to Jesus Christ start to fall. Mankind is going to need a rescuer.

Here, we see God begin to fulfill his promise from Genesis chapter 3. Remember, when it comes to the snake that deceives Adam and Eve, he will bruise your heel.

[13 : 46] You're going to crush his head. And now, the pieces are in place. That, by the way, friends, as simple as it may seem on the surface, especially if you're familiar with Christianity, is the heart of what we believe as Christians.

It's the heart of the gospel. As some of you know, back in 2022, I herniated a disc in my back. And so now, for the last three years, I've seen the same chiropractor.

And so I see him, you know, once every two months or so, I think, maybe every three months. And he knows that I'm a pastor. And so from the very beginning of me seeing him, he has wanted to talk about Christianity and faith.

He's fascinated talking about these things. And he's recently, in our conversations, he's begun to tell me, well, you know what? I live as if I'm a Christian. You know, you and me, we're kind of actually the same.

Like, because we're living the same way. And maybe in a certain superficial sense, we could make that work, right? If Christianity is a generic moral code, then maybe he's on to something, right?

[14:56] But we could say the same of Jews and Muslims. Traditional religions have a lot of overlap with their moral code. The problem is this. He doesn't live as a Christian in the most important and fundamental way, which is this.

He does not worship the living God. He's mistaken what it is Christianity is about, right? He keeps on bringing up moral code. Well, I live as a Christian lives.

You don't have a problem with the way that you live. He has a problem with his relationship with God. He does not serve him, worship him, or obey him.

And he does not keep the moral code as well as he thinks he does. Because none of us do.

Remember, Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, Matthew chapter 5, goes after people who think that they are good because they do the right things morally.

And he says, that's great that you haven't murdered someone. Have you hated them in your heart? That's great that you haven't committed adultery. Have you ever lusted?

[16:05] You fall much farther short than you think you do. Right? And so if we think, well, I do the right things.

I keep the Ten Commandments. We have misunderstood Christianity. We've underestimated how holy God is, how far short we fall.

You might think, why are we talking about chiropractors and Christianity and sin? It's because this gets at the heart of what the blessing is.

The blessing is the restoration of the relationship between God and his people. That is the content of the blessing. That is the purpose that all these other things serve.

Makes sense, then, what happens in the section I didn't read. I'll just mention this briefly. So I read 1 through 3 of chapter 12. If you look at the whole of verses 1 through 9, what does Abraham do as he walks around after this encounter?

[17:12] He twice, verse 7 and verse 8, builds an altar. In other words, Abraham worships God. He understands that what's happening here, what must happen, is the relationship between God and man must be restored.

And so Abraham is beginning to act that out in the promised land. Acting out the blessing, the restoration of God and humanity. I neglected to tell you, but I'll tell you now.

There's two points to this sermon. We just finished point one. Blessed. Second point is to bless.

And you don't have to remember that. It's in your sermon title right there on whatever page we're on now.

Page 7. Blessed to bless. So Abraham is blessed. The content of his blessing is not just these superficial things. It's not just name, nation, all the families of the earth.

No, his blessing is greater than that. It is the beginning of the restoration between God and his people. But it is not simply or merely or only that Abraham is blessed.

[18:25] He is also doing it to be a blessing. Look at verse 2. 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.

In other words, all of these things that I'm giving you, they're instrumental. They are meant to serve this greater purpose and drive in a specific direction.

These blessings are not arbitrary. And they're actually not just for you to enjoy. You're not just supposed to sit there and marinate in great nation. No, they're meant to go somewhere.

They're meant to be something. They're meant to be used in a certain way. Last Sunday, I started out by telling you a story about my college pastor many years ago.

One of the other things he liked to say, he liked to ask this question. He said, when you think about Christianity in your faith, do you think about it as a sauna or is it a gym? Is it a place where you're just there to soak it all in and enjoy and that's it?

[19:33] Or is it a place where you work out to head in a direction? Of course, the answer is the second one, right? This is not meant to be a place where we simply soak up Christian fellowship and go and pat ourselves on the back and say, man, I'm so glad that God has blessed me in this way.

No, it's meant to go out in a direction in the same way that Abraham was called to be a blessing to the nations. Blessed in order to bless.

On December 31st, 2024, yes, this was not that long ago, my father went in for his last day of work before he retired.

So he made it to 65 in October of last year and then decided to see it through to the very end of the calendar year. And maybe coincidentally, maybe not, for Christmas, my father received two larger gifts.

He received the great blessing of the Instant Pot. And he received the great blessing of a blender. And what do you think my father did with those when he received them?

[20 : 46] Did he put them on his bookshelf to look at? No. And why was my father given those things of all Christmases, Christmas 2024?

I don't think my dad received any kitchen gadgets in Christmas 2023. Because as my dad retires, he is receiving new responsibilities. And it is his job to take over more cooking in my parents' household than he has in the past.

And so we might say that my father was blessed to be a blessing. You laugh, but Christian, that's exactly what's going on in this passage.

Abraham is receiving all these things. You are poured out all the riches and inheritance of being connected to Jesus Christ. It is to serve a purpose. You are blessed to be a blessing.

Great name and nation and blessing for Abraham is not so that Abraham could sit in the sauna of God's grace and do nothing.

[21 : 58] No, it is given to him for the sake of the nations. Brothers and sisters, the same is true of us.

All of God's blessings for his people are to serve his mission to reach his world.

The purpose of Abraham is now the mission of the church. The purpose of Abraham is now the mission of the church.

You'll see this in the back of your worship guide. If in Christ we inherit Abraham's blessings, which is what Paul is saying in Galatians chapter 3 that Scott read, we also inherit Abraham's mission. That is to go and be a blessing to be the means by which God's blessing comes to others. At a fundamental level, starting right here in Genesis, that is who we are, the children of Abraham.

[23 : 05] And that is what we are here for. To participate in God's promised mission of bringing people from all nations on earth into the sphere of God's redemptive blessing through Christ.

Brothers and sisters, that is what we are here for. We are here to participate in God's promised mission of bringing people from all nations on earth into God's blessings through Christ.

That is why we're focused as a church on fervent witness, that we would share our faith with those around us. That's why we're focused as a church on Gospel Hub, because we know that God has positioned us in a place where we can equip and send out to further his mission.

Whatever it is that God has given us, it is for the blessing of the world. If God has given you a house, great.

who can you invite into it to share Christian community with them? If God has given you a table, who can sit around it?

[24 : 27] God has given us this church building. God has given us this church building. He has not given us this church building. He has not given it to us so that we would never have to set up chairs again.

God has given us it as a tool, an instrument in our job, our mission of reaching this community. Why has God blessed you with kids if he has?

It is not for your own fulfillment. It is not to prove something to the world. It is not to take care of you in your old age.

God has given you kids to send out as a blessing in this world. Why has God given you work?

It is not so you would make a great name for yourself. God has given you work so you can extend his blessing in so many ways.

[25 : 30] God has given you work so you can extend your blessing in your life. And as we talked about last week, everything in our lives will be twisted and skewed until we get that right. Until we put our hope in something that can bear up under its weight.

Is our church a sauna? It is in fact not. It is a gym. There's a pastor at another Presbyterian church in town who talks regularly with his congregation about what type of church they want to be.

And he describes two types of churches. He says we can be a for me church or we can be a so that church. The for me church, we think, man, what are the ways that I can marinate in this sauna? How can I get as much as I need? How can my consumeristic religious needs be met? A so that church, radically different.

How do we serve and follow God and his mission to reach the world? And of course, as we do that, we follow Jesus who used his blessings to bless.

[26 : 46] That's what Philippians chapter 2 tells us. Have this in mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And so that's why we sing together, grant, O Lord, that we may hear your people be a witness to your faithfulness, your light for all the world to see.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you for your many blessings. And we ask that you would remind us of their purpose and their end, that you would use us as your instruments here to bring your blessing to this world.

Not so that our names would be great, but that yours would be lifted up. And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.