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Genesis 11:10–12:7

37th Message

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THE GOD OF ABRAHAM PRAISE

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

The God of Abraham praise! Thomas Olivers wrote this hymn after visiting the Great Synagogue of London where he heard the Yigdal. Sung every day in synagogues this is a doxology, beginning *yigdal elohim chai*: Magnified be the living God! Olivers was so taken by the hymn that he wrote a Christian text to the same tune. It is full of references to the Old Testament as befits a hymn inspired by the synagogue: it is a hymn of praise to the God of Abraham. But since this is a Christian hymn it is full also of New Testament imagery: it is a hymn of praise to the God of all nations. And so in the last verse Olivers wrote, “Hail Abraham’s God and *mine!*”

Our call to worship was from Psalm 72, a royal psalm entitled “For Solomon.” The psalmist asks that God bless the king, making his rule universal so that it be a blessing to all. Christians recognize this as a messianic psalm, which finds its fulfillment in Christ. Isaac Watts, the father of English hymnody, wrote Christian versions of this and most other psalms, publishing them as *Psalms of David imitated in the language of the New Testament* (1719). We sang his setting of Psalm 72: “Jesus shall reign where’er the sun.”

So, we’ve had two examples of Christian texts inspired by Jewish ones. Some might even say that these Jewish texts were expropriated for Christian purposes. Is this valid? What is the relationship between Jews and Christians, between Israel and the Church, between Old and New Testaments, between promise and fulfillment? What allows me, a Gentile, to sing “Hail Abraham’s God and mine!”?

Today we finish our series on Genesis 1-11, the primeval history. The section closes with another genealogy, the account of Shem.

Shem’s Genealogy (11:10-26)

This is the account of Shem’s family line.

Two years after the flood, when Shem was 100 years old, he became the father of Arphaxad. And after he became the father of Arphaxad, Shem lived 500 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Arphaxad had lived 35 years, he became the father of Shelah. And after he became the father of Shelah, Arphaxad lived 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Shelah had lived 30 years, he became the father of Eber. And after he became the father of Eber, Shelah lived 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Eber had lived 34 years, he became the father of Peleg. And after he became the father of Peleg, Eber lived 430 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Peleg had lived 30 years, he became the father of Reu. And after he became the father of Reu, Peleg lived 209 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Reu had lived 32 years, he became the father of Serug. And after he became the father of Serug, Reu lived 207 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Serug had lived 30 years, he became the father of Nahor. And after he became the father of Nahor, Serug lived 200 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Nahor had lived 29 years, he became the father of Terah. And after he became the father of Terah, Nahor lived 119 years and had other sons and daughters.

After Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. (Gen 11:10-26 TNIV)

This is the last of the five accounts (*toledot*) of the primeval history. It is similar to the genealogy of chapter 5, the account of Adam’s line. That one ran for ten generations from Adam to Noah and his three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. This one runs for another ten generations from Shem to Terah and his three sons: Abram, Nahor and Haran. The major difference between the two is the rapidly declining life spans in the second. The major similarity is ten generations ending with three sons, both times indicating a terminus.

These two genealogies divide the primeval history into two epochs: from Adam to Noah and his sons, and from Noah to Terah and his sons. And they highlight three pivotal men: Adam in the first generation, Noah in the tenth, and Abram in the twentieth. Both epochs commenced with the Lord blessing humanity, “Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth” (1:28; 9:1). After the first ten generations humanity had multiplied on the earth, but this brought a multiplication of human evil upon the earth (6:1, 5). The Lord responded to this corruption of his purposes by wiping the earth clean with the Flood and starting over again with Noah. The second epoch was no better: it produced a concentration of human evil in Babel. This time the Lord responded by mixing up human language and scattering humanity upon the earth.

In both epochs one message is very clear: left to its own devices the natural direction of humanity is downwards not upwards. Humanity does not find its way back to God. Instead it heads away from God, wandering further and further east. But there is hope. There is a line that leads beyond Babel: the line of Shem through Peleg. The earth was divided in the days of Eber’s two sons Peleg and Joktan (10:25). Joktan’s genealogy led to Babel, but Peleg’s genealogy leads beyond Babel to Terah and his three sons. A terminus has again been reached. How will God now act? After the first terminus he responded with the Flood, but he has bound himself not to do that again. So how will he respond? His response begins Israel’s history.

The Account of Terah (11:27-32)

This is the account of Terah’s family line.

Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. While his father Terah was still

alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth. Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milkah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milkah and Iskah. Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive.

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there.

Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Harran. (11:27-32)

A new account begins here, the account of Terah. But this beginning is more than just a new account. This is the beginning of Israel's history. The pre-history is finished, now the history proper begins. The rest of the book of Genesis comprises the patriarchal history, focusing on the lives of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Just as there were five accounts in the primeval history, so will there be five accounts in the patriarchal history. But they are very different. Three long accounts: the generations of Terah (11:26-25:11), of Isaac (25:19-35:29), and of Jacob (37:2-50:26), are divided by two short genealogical accounts: of Ishmael (25:12-18) and of Esau (36:1-37:1).

The opening paragraph of Terah's account is arranged as a chiasm. The outer bracket is marked by death: the death of Haran in Ur and the death of Terah in Harran. The inner bracket is marked by taking: the taking by Abram and Nahor of wives matched by Terah's taking of Abram and Lot to journey from Ur to Harran bound for Canaan. This structure focuses attention on the center-line, verse 30. It is very brief, and in these few words the same thing is stated twice, first positively, then negatively: Sarah was barren, she had no children. This establishes a tension that will run through the next ten chapters.

By the end of this first paragraph of Terah's account, Terah himself is dead. But this account is not about Terah himself; it is about his generations, his family line. It is primarily about his son Abram, to whom attention turns in the next paragraph.

The Call of Abraham (12:1-3)

The LORD had said to Abram, "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." (12:1-3)

The Lord called Abram to leave everything that was familiar: his country, his people, his family. He was to leave Ur, a sophisticated city in Mesopotamia, and go to another land. He was to leave the land of pre-history and go to the land of history. He didn't know this land, he didn't even know which land: it was the land the Lord would show him. Abram had to accept that on faith.

The Lord laid out his purposes in a seven-fold statement. The word "bless" is prominent, used five times. God had created the world for blessing, but humanity had frustrated that purpose. God is determined to bless his world, so this is what he started to do with Abram. The Lord's purpose statement is a rejection of humanity's purpose statement at Babel (11:4). Humanity gathered to build a

great tower for itself, but God will do the building for Abram, making him into a great nation. Humanity gathered to make a name for itself, but God will do that for Abram, making his name great.

What had Abram done to deserve such blessing? Nothing! Abram and his family served other gods (Josh 24:2). He was a pagan idolater, just like everyone else in Mesopotamia. But God chose him. Many people dislike the concept of election, saying that it is unfair. Yes, it is unfair; it is not what people deserve. But that's the whole point! The pre-history has shown time and again that humanity heads away from God. If there is to be any hope, then God has to intervene, God has to take the initiative. This is what he does with Abram, electing him to be the *recipient* of his blessing. But God also elects Abram to be the *instrument* of his blessing. Not only will God bless Abram, but he will make Abram a blessing to others so that ultimately all peoples on earth will be blessed through him.

The call of Abraham is the beginning of the rest of the story. The rest of the Bible is the story of the fulfillment of this purpose statement: the restoration of blessing to the world both in and through Abram. Blessing *in* Abram by making him into a great nation; blessing *through* Abram by using him to bless all other nations. God called Abram *from* the nations, but he called him also *for* the nations.

Abram Heads West (12:4-7)

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. (12:4-7)

Taking God at his word, Abram set out in obedience. He journeyed west, reversing the direction in which humanity had been wandering since Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden. When he arrived in the land of Canaan the Lord promised it to him: "To your offspring I will give this land." To the promise of a seed (offspring) was added the promise of a land. Henceforth this land of Canaan would be the Promised Land. But there were impediments to both the seed and the land: Sarai was barren and the Canaanites were in the land. God would overcome both impediments in his own time. Meanwhile Abram had to live by faith: he "believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (15:6). Later God made a covenant with Abram, solemnizing his promises of the land and the seed (15:18-21; 17:4-8). He gave him a new name, changing it from Abram (exalted father) to Abraham (father of a multitude), "for I have made you a father of many nations" (17:5). Abraham had a part in this covenant: he was to circumcise himself and all other males. But what really identified Abraham was not circumcision; it was faith. Faith came first.

God kept Abraham waiting 24 years for the promised son to show that nothing is too hard or wonderful for the Lord (18:14). He subsequently overcame the barrenness of Rebekah and Rachel, to make it clear that the enlargement of Abraham's seed was the Lord's doing. Along the way he continued the process of election, choosing Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau. By the end of Genesis the seed that went

down to Egypt numbered seventy, equal to the number of nations in the Table of Nations. In Egypt, despite the efforts of Pharaoh to oppress the Hebrews, God multiplied them greatly (Exod 1:12, 20). He kept Abraham's descendants waiting 400 years for the promised land, until he judged the sins of the Amorites (Canaanites) to be complete. Only then did he bring Israel into their land. Later he gave Israel a king whose son built a temple where God could dwell in the midst of his people. So far, so good. By midway through the reign of Solomon it looked like all God's promises had come true. The Lord had made Israel into a great nation, given it the land, and under Solomon Israel was a blessing to other nations (1 Kgs 4:20-34).

But then everything fell apart. Rather than live differently, Israel copied the other nations. It repeated the sins of the Canaanites until it too suffered their fate, being vomited out of the land. God had fulfilled his promises, but Israel had broken covenant. So Israel was expelled from the land back to Mesopotamia, back to the east.

But the prophets said that God remained faithful to his covenant promises to Abraham and to David. What has happened to those promises? In particular, what has happened to the promise of a seed and a land? Who are the children of Abraham today? And what is the Promised Land? These are thorny questions. I am very aware that here I am venturing out into another minefield!

We begin with Jesus and a discussion he had with the Jewish leaders about the identity of the children of Abraham. He said to them,

"I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word. I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father."

"Abraham is our father," they answered.

"If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the works of your own father."

"We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself."

Jesus said to them, **"If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning."** (John 8:37-44)

The Jewish leaders' response to Jesus showed that they were not true children of Abraham. Though physically descended from him, they did not share his core identity. Abraham was a man of faith who responded to God in faith. But these leaders rejected God and his servant Jesus; they responded in unbelief. The leaders took great offense at Jesus, picking up stones to stone him. They were not able to kill him on that occasion, but later they did, as they had killed other prophets whom God had sent.

After the resurrection and immediately prior to his ascension, Jesus told his disciples, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). This did not happen the way the disciples were expecting. Their spreading out from Jerusalem was the result of persecution, so that the church in Jerusalem was scattered (Acts 8:1). As the believers scattered they

spoke about Jesus, and people believed: first Jews, then Samaritan half-breeds, then God-fearing Gentiles, and finally pagan Gentiles. It is clear this is not what the church was expecting, but it came to realize that this was in fulfillment of Old Testament promise. In the Old Testament scattering was divine judgment, but now God scattered his people to bring blessing to the world, blessing not just to Jews but to all nations. The apostles realized that the children of Abraham were not those who shared his physical DNA but those who shared his spiritual DNA of faith. Observing that Abraham was justified by faith before he was circumcised, Paul wrote to the Romans,

And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Rom 4:11-12)

Abraham is the father of all who believe, whether circumcised or not, whether Jew or Gentile. For the Jews circumcision is not enough: Abraham is their father only if they also follow in his footsteps of faith. Paul wrote a similar thing to the Galatians:

Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Gal 3:7-9)

Again it is clear that the children of Abraham are those who have the faith of Abraham, be they Jew or Gentile.

I am often accused of replacement theology, that the Church has replaced Israel. I prefer not to use that term. There is and always has been only one people of God. In the Old Testament it was primarily ethnic Israel, though Gentiles could be incorporated and Israelites excluded, as we saw a few weeks ago in the exchanging of places by Rahab the Canaanite prostitute and Achan the disobedient Israelite. Rahab was included because of her faith; Achan was excluded for his unbelief. In the New Testament age it is Jew and Gentile together as the one people of God. The defining characteristic of God's people in both Old and New Testaments is faith: the faith of Abraham, the man of faith. This is no replacement. Rather, it is an expansion of God's people to include all nations, as God had envisioned when he called Abraham in the first place. The church is not a replacement of God's promises to Abraham, but the fulfillment of them. God called Abraham *from* the nations, but also *for* the nations. It is in the church that God joins all nations together as the children of Abraham.

Take a good look at the verse on the cover of the bulletin:

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:29)

The immediately preceding verse is:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile...for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)

What does this mean for the Jews and for the land today? Many Christians became very excited over the establishment of the state of Israel in part of Palestine in 1948, seeing it as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. But if I take these verses seriously then the establishment of the current state of Israel has nothing to do with Biblical prophecy. Neither the seed nor the land are the same any more.

Here it is important to understand the concept of the two ages: this age and the age to come. This division of time into two ages was part of the framework of Jewish self-understanding in the first century. In “this age” things were not right: God’s promises were unfulfilled, his enemies were ascendant and were oppressing his people. But in “the age to come” all would be right: God’s promises would be fulfilled. The transition from one age to the other would occur on the Day of the Lord when three significant things would happen: judgment on God’s enemies, salvation of God’s people, and vindication of God’s righteousness.

At the time of Jesus the Jews saw the problem as Roman oppression. Israel needed to be free and independent in her own land again. But Jesus saw the problem as much deeper: sin and unbelief. The apostles realized that the age to come had arrived in the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ and in the gift of the Spirit. In Christ we enter into the age to come. God has defeated the enemy: sin and death; he has brought salvation for his people; and he has vindicated his righteousness, being faithful to his covenant promises. He has done all this in Christ. Here, in Christ, we have eternal life, the life of the age to come. Here we live in the age to come, in the church as a colony of heaven on earth, while those around us who are not in Christ live in this age. For them the Day of the Lord has not yet arrived. Return to the land, rebuilding the temple, restoring sacrifices does not bring the Jews into the age to come. There is only way: through faith in Christ, by belonging to Christ.

What about Romans 9-11? Though Paul called himself the apostle to the Gentiles, he maintained a strong passion for the Jews. He used the analogy of an olive tree. Unfruitful branches were broken off because of unbelief: that’s the Jews. Wild shoots were grafted in: that’s the Gentiles. Speaking to the Gentiles about the Jews he said,

they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith... And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. (Rom 11:20, 23)

Again it is clear: the Jews are excluded because of unbelief, while Gentiles are included because of faith. But if the Jews turn from their unbelief they, too, can be included, they can be grafted back in. Paul longed that the coming of salvation to the Gentiles would make the Jews jealous so that they would cease their unbelief and turn to Christ in faith. We are privileged to have here at PBCC some Jews who have done just that.

What about Israel today? The great majority of Israelis are secular; they are not religious Jews. Those that are religious find their identity in the keeping of law, following the prescripts of Talmud which is a codification of and commentary upon the oral law which Jesus dismissed as the traditions of men, the traditions of the elders. But membership in God’s family is not by keeping law; it is by faith in Christ. The great majority of Jews reject the Messiah whom God has sent to his people. They continue in their unbelief.

Who are God’s people in the land? They are those who belong to Christ. Most are Palestinian. This comes as a shock to many, who assume that all Palestinians are Moslem, and have never considered the possibility of Palestinian Christians. But there have been Gentile Christians in the land since the first century, since long before the rise and spread of Islam. Some Palestinian Christians are merely nominal, but others have a vibrant faith. There are also Jewish fol-

lowers of Jesus, who have left their unbelief and turned to Christ in faith. Both Jewish and Palestinian believers face hostility.

What of the land? Many Israeli Jews want to occupy the whole land, arguing that God promised it to Abraham, and gave possession of it to Israel under Joshua; therefore it belongs to the Jews in perpetuity. For over a hundred years, under the banner of Zionism, Jews have been moving into the land, steadily dispossessing the Palestinians, among whom are many Christians, of the land on which their families have lived for many generations. Especially since 1948, many evangelical Christians have given them strong support, thinking that such Christian Zionism is helping to fulfill Biblical prophecy. But I find this very troubling: that evangelical Christians support unbelieving Jews in dispossessing our Christian brothers of their land, and doing so in the name of God.

The land was where God brought his people to dwell in rest, the land he prepared for them to belong in. Today that is not a physical place, it is not a country. Today that is Christ. There is no physical holy land. We may call the modern state of Israel the Holy Land when we go there on pilgrimage, but it is no more holy than any other place on earth. The place where God puts us to be at rest is Christ himself. When we come to Christ, we come home; we belong. God no longer localizes his presence to a piece of real estate. Wherever God’s people are, anywhere in the world, if they are in Christ then they can be at rest.

I don’t say this to be anti-semitic. We should have a heart for the Jews. We should yearn for them as did Paul. We don’t show true love for the Jews by supporting Christian Zionism. There are other good reasons to support the state of Israel, but not for the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. We show true love for the Jews by longing and praying that they turn from their unbelief and turn in faith to Jesus the Messiah, that they be provoked to jealousy, even that they be provoked to jealousy by Palestinian Christians—not so as to take their land but to join them in Christ.

This year I have led two trips to Israel. On the second one we had the privilege of meeting with a Jewish follower of Jesus, and also with some Palestinian evangelical Christians in Nazareth and Bethlehem. For me this was the highlight of our trip. These are our brothers. They are also brothers one to the other, Jews and Gentiles together in Christ who has broken down the middle wall of partition.

It is important that we understand that Jesus was Jewish, very Jewish, that he was the son of Abraham, the son of David. Indeed, Jesus was true Israel, faithful Israel narrowed down to a single man. He is the Messiah whom God sent to Israel to save his people. But he is the savior not only of Jews but also of Gentiles. That salvation is appropriated by faith, the faith of Abraham. When we turn to Christ in faith then Abraham is our father and we become heirs to, and recipients of, the blessing promised to Abraham. To focus instead on trying to restore Israel to the land and rebuild the temple is to deny the centrality of Christ. He is the turning point of history, the hinge in the middle, the one in whom we are the people of God.

Those who belong to Christ, be they Jew or Gentile, are the children of Abraham and heirs according to the promises. The God of Abraham praise. Yes, “Hail Abraham’s God and *mine!*”

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