

Blessed to be a Blessing

In the Tracks of Trust

Genesis 11:27-12:3

Call: Is 12:2-6

Scripture: Gal 3:6-9

I. Introduction

As we just sang our theme song for this fall - "Father Abraham had many kids, many kids had father Abraham," today we begin a study in the life of Abraham and his wife Sarah, two people who lived 4000 years ago. Why? Why study a man and a woman who lived 4000 years ago? Why? Because Abraham and Sarah show us concretely what it means to walk in trust of the living God. As Paul says in Romans 4, Abraham is the father of all those who walk in his footsteps of faith. Abraham and Sarah will show us concretely what trusting the living God looks like.

I have called our series, "In the Tracks of Trust." I chose the word trust instead of the word faith. Why? Well, when I worked with Middle Schoolers, I found that the word trust helped them because it more clearly implied action. It helps me too. Hopefully it helps you. The word faith can sometimes sound cerebral, although I know it's not. But, the word trust implies action. Corrie Ten Boom's famous line is appropriate here, for the Abraham narrative is: "A Fantastic Adventure in Trusting God" (Lloyd-Jones, 7). So, this fall, I'm inviting us into a fantastic adventure in trusting the living God.

But, what about this word trust? How should we define trust for this series? I'm going to define it this way, which is how Luther defined it: Trust is throwing our entire weight upon someone or something. As you can see, it is very active. Here are a few simple examples:

A trampoline is a good example. We throw our entire weight upon a trampoline don't we? A few years ago, a good friend gave us a trampoline. It took me all day to put it together and my children who were probably 4 and 6 at the time were waiting all day. I finally got it together, and they jumped on it and began playing around on it. And, I thought, if I was a good father, I'd jump on it first to make sure it was ok. So, I removed my children from it and got up on and jumped as high as I could. And, I came down and that trampoline broke and I fell straight through it, landing on the ground. As I'm sitting there, my daughter comes over and looks down at me and says, "Dad, you broke our trampoline!" I threw my entire weight upon that trampoline and it was untrustworthy.

Ex. On the other hand, I have this backpacking chair here. It's very small, and I'm very large. I can stand here all day, and say I trust this chair. But if I don't sit down in it, do I really *trust* this chair? No. It is not until I sit down in it do I demonstrate my trust in the chair.

Now I know these are simple examples, but they help us understand this word trust. Ultimately the question for each one of us this fall, the question that will arise in every text of the Abraham story is, who or what will we trust with our lives? Who or what will we throw our entire weight upon? We all trust someone or something with our lives. Who or what is it? The usual answers tend to be either myself or God, and we'll see this throughout the Abraham narrative. I was talking to a friend of mine who is dealing with an aging father. His father is in his 90s and is in declining health. Recently as they were talking about his future with his declining health, and his father made the comment, "I'm good. I believe in me." As we will see, Abraham will say essentially the same thing a few times in his story.

In whom or what do you trust with your life? In whom or what do you place your entire weight upon? That's the ultimate question. And, that is the question we are invited into this fall.

What is the context for the Abraham story?

II. Context

The story of Abraham and Sarah begins at the end of Genesis chapter 11. And, up until this point, we see a 4 cycles of grace, rebellion, judgment and new grace.

1. **Cycle 1** begins at creation. Creation is an act of grace as God gives everything Adam and Eve need to live in intimate communion with him. But Adam and Eve rebel by eating the fruit. God pronounces Judgment on the ground, on the serpent, on child-bearing and on work. But, there is new grace. God clothes Adam and Eve and promises that someone will come who will destroy the serpent. That's new grace.
2. **Cycle 2** begins with Cain and Abel. Cain rebels by murdering Abel. God, in judgment, sends Cain away. But, there is new grace, another son, Seth, is born.
3. **Cycle 3** begins with runaway wickedness on the earth. That's rebellion. And, God, in judgment, sends the flood. But, there is new grace in that Noah and his family is preserved.
4. **Cycle 4** begins with the Tower of Babel. Humanity rebels and tries to build a civilization independent from God. The text even says that mankind tries to make their name great without God. It is the culmination of the first 11 chapters of Genesis, of man trying to live independent from God. And, God, in judgment, confuses the languages and scatters people throughout the earth.

But, then nothing. And, we are left wondering if God will finally give up on humanity? Will he finally say he is going to wipe them out and start over again? Answer: No. In the face of rebellion and sin, God starts a new thing, by calling one man and one woman out of the same Babylon where the tower was built. If Abraham and Sarah are willing, God will make their name great (12:1-2). However, God's ultimate goal in the call of these two ancient people is universal. He wants to bless the entire earth through this man and woman. Why are we studying these two ancient people from 4000 years ago? Because their story is bound up with your story and my story, even the story of the entire earth.

After that long introduction, I now invite you into our text this morning, Genesis 11, verse 27.

III. Sarai's Barrenness (11:27-32)

27 Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. 28 Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. 29 And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. 30 Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

Gen. 11:31 Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. 32 The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran. (ESV)

A. Sarai is Barren

Well, we begin here with Abram's family tree (Abram will later become Abraham). And, this family, moves from Ur, in Mesopotamia, to Haran, some 600 miles away to the Northwest. And, in the middle of this family tree, you get one statement that sticks out like a sore thumb - what is it? Sarai is barren! Hebrew narrative rarely gives character description, so when it does, it is very important. Sarai, who later will become Sarah, is barren. This is a punch in the gut. This is devastating. In that culture especially, barrenness was a sign of rejection by God. It is a sign of lifelessness and hopelessness. And, because family was so important at that

time, barrenness was the most common reason for divorce (Walton, 68).

You have to feel for Sarai. She must be feeling angry, worthless, disappointed, desperate, etc. She's probably wondering what she did wrong. I know some of you have been there, and it is a very painful place to be.

B. God is the Hero

And, we wonder how this is new grace? God, this is your response to the Tower of Babel? This is grace? We begin with a barren woman. We begin with two people who have no human potential from a worldly perspective. We begin with a dead end. We begin in an impossible place. Yet, this fact will drive the rest of the story, even the rest of the Bible.

I never get tired of following this theme through scripture and into the New Testament. God's new grace actually begins in three impossible places. Not only is Sarai barren, but Rebekah, Isaac's wife, is barren, and Rachel, Jacob's wife, is barren. The first three mothers of Israel are barren. Who would ever start a story this way? This is what gives the Bible the ring of truth. And, when we come to the New Testament, the theme explodes as Mary is not only barren, she's a virgin. She can't get pregnant at all – it's impossible upon impossible! But, what we learn in the Abram story and in the Biblical story is that *impossible* is nothing for God. Abram and Sarai's story begins in futility, from man's perspective. And, yet, as Joyce Baldwin says, "It is situations of human helplessness that provide occasions for God's power to be demonstrated and recognized" (Baldwin, loc 445). If this story is going to work and succeed, it has to be God – not man. It won't happen any other way. See, primarily this story is a story about God. It *is* a story about a couple, but primarily it is about the living God, as all stories in the Bible are. God is the hero of every text.

So, this family, after we're told that Sarai is barren, travels from Ur in Babylon, up the Tigris river to Haran to begin a new life.

Let's move to chapter 12, verse 1.

IV. God's Promises (12:1-3)

1 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. 2 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. 3 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."

A. God Shows Up

After traveling to Haran, Abram and Sarai settle down. And, one day, as Abram is going about his daily business, God shows up. Ever have that happen? You are going about your everyday things, and God shows up unannounced? Maybe in a sunrise or a sunset, or in a conversation with someone? Maybe in a thought? Maybe on a walk or a jog or a bike ride? Who knows how this happened to Abram? We're not told. But, God shows up, and he says remarkable things.

B. God Says Go

First of all, God says "Go." This is same word used at the very end of the Abram story, in that gut-wrenching scene, when God tells Abram to go with his son to a mountain that he would show him.

God tells Abram to leave and follow. He tells him to leave his country, leave his culture and leave his kin, and follow him in trust. Leave and follow! Abram is called to physically leave these things, which are especially radical words in that time and place. For leaving country, culture and kin would be virtually impossible at that time. Leave it all Abram! Make a break from where you live and follow me. It's a call of radical trust.

But, not only is God calling Abram to leave physically, he is calling Abram to leave his old ways of life behind. God's call upon Abram is not just physical, but emotional and spiritual as well. God's call upon Abram is to also leave his old ways behind. Abram is called to leave the values, priorities and behaviors of his country, his culture and his kin. Leave the ways of living in his country, culture and kin, and follow me. Essentially, God is telling Abram to leave his entire identity behind. God is inviting Abram to do the impossible.

C. God's Word: Blessed

But, God's not finished. After inviting him into this adventure, God makes a 7-fold promise to Abram, verses 2-3. Seven being the Biblical symbol of completeness. In other words, this is the complete promise to Abram. The seven elements are these:

1. I will make you a great nation
2. I will bless you
3. I will make your name great
4. I will make you a blessing
5. I will bless those who bless you
6. I will curse those who dishonor you
7. All families of the earth will be blessed through you.

These are extraordinary verses loaded with hope. And, it's no exaggeration to say that the whole of the Old Testament and the whole of the New Testament is an unfolding of these promises spoken to Abram 4000 years ago.

The key word, of course, in these extraordinary verses is "bless." Note that with this word, we are not dealing with God's sentimental wish for happiness. It is also not a convenient phrase to use when someone sneezes, "God Bless you!" It is also not for finishing a conversation, as in "May God bless you." This word is a deep and profound word, filled to the brim with goodness and hope. Bless essentially means "the power for life, for the enhancement of life and the increase of life" (Waltke, 205). It is God's gift of power and vitality, even the power to overcome. It is God pouring out all his strength and goodness upon Abram, so that Abram can live life abundantly and bless others.

Bless is used five times here. This counterbalances the use of five "curses" from chapters 1-11 (3:14, 17b; 4:11; 8:21; 9:25) of Genesis. As I alluded to earlier, one of the great questions heading into the Abram story is what kind of God is this God? Is he a God who wants to bless, or is he a God who wants to curse. In other words, is he good? Is this God good? The answer comes immediately in the story. In the first verses of the Abram story, we find that this God, the creator God of Chapters 1-11, is a God who desires to bless, and to bless his *entire* creation, for the final promise is the objective of the first six promises. As Terence Freitheim says, "God's choice of Abram and Sarai is an initially exclusive move for the sake of a maximally inclusive end" (Freitheim, 34).

Notice also as I alluded to earlier, that whereas the tower builders were trying to make their name great, God tells Abram I'm the one who will make your name great. You don't do that, I do that, God says. When we come to the New Testament, God will make Jesus' name great, for he gives him the name above all names that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:9-11). This story leads directly to Jesus, which is the reason for the curious sixth promise involving cursing and dishonoring. Judgment and salvation fall depending on what we do with Jesus. But, I get ahead of myself.

D. Blessed to be a Blessing

But, here's the key: Abram and Sarai must leave and follow God to be blessed to become a blessing. They must leave and follow in trust. They must leave not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually, their country, their culture and their kin behind.

They must leave their country of Ur, and leave the values, priorities and behaviors of this place. At this time in history, Ur was a highly-civilized place, with innovations in language, government and architecture. The Sumerians from this area are famously known to have invented writing, the wheel, the plow, modern time-keeping, poetry and law codes. And, if you don't like math, you can blame these people. In order for Abram and Sarai to be blessed and become a blessing, they must leave the comfort of this highly-civilized place, both physically and in terms of their values, priorities and behaviors.

Secondly, Abram and Sarai must leave their culture behind. The ESV translates this word kindred. It can mean people. Abram and Sarai must leave the culture of their people behind. They must leave the values, priorities and behaviors of the culture behind. Ur was known to be radically polytheistic. Over 300 gods were worshiped there, with moon worship being the dominant cult. Therefore, a normal lifestyle in Ur revolved around these 300 gods. Abram and Sarai must make a break and leave that all behind. They must leave the ways of the worship of 300 gods behind, and follow this God in trust.

Lastly, Abram and Sarai must leave their kin behind. They must leave their father's house behind and follow this God. Joshua will later say that Abram's father and grandfather were idol worshipers (Josh 24:2). Abram and Sarai must make a break from the worship practices of their family. They must leave their family values, priorities and behaviors behind and follow in trust.

In order for Abram and Sarai to be blessed and become a blessing, they must leave and follow. They must leave physically, but also the values, priorities and behaviors of their country, culture and kin behind and follow in trust of the living God, even though they don't know where they're going.

V. Implications for Us

A. Blessed to be a Blessing

The same applies to us. 2000 years later, Jesus shows up and he says what? "Follow me." Leave everything else behind and follow me! But Jesus, where are we going? Doesn't matter. Just follow. But, Jesus, how are we going to get there? Doesn't matter. Just follow. Where are we going to stop along the way? Doesn't matter. Just follow. Don't worry that you can't see the finish line. Don't worry that you can't see where you will land, as Ryan reminded us in the Joshua series. Just follow me. Leave everything else behind and follow me. I am with you and will never leave you. You can trust me. It's a call to radical trust.

And, like Abram, it is in the leaving and following that we are blessed and we become a blessing. Unlike Abram, it may not be physical. It may be, but it may not be. But, it will inevitably require leaving the surrounding lifestyle behind, leaving the values, priorities and behaviors of our country, our culture and our kin that do not agree with Jesus' ways. We leave and follow, and embrace a new identity as a follower of Jesus, and we are blessed and we become a blessing.

Paul tells us in Ephesians that when we are in Christ, when Christ calls us to follow him, and we leave and follow him, we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies (Eph 1:3-14). He names only seven of them: we are chosen, we are adopted, we are redeemed, we are forgiven, we are given knowledge of his will, we are given an inheritance and we are sealed with the Holy Spirit. We are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies. We are much richer than we think or feel, are we not. But

we must leave and follow Jesus to be blessed and become a blessing. Maybe not physically, but emotionally and spiritually, we must leave the values, the priorities and the behaviors of our country, our culture and our kin behind and follow Jesus. It's in the looking different that we are blessed and become a blessing.

It means national values and behaviors no longer have the highest priority. Our allegiance and loyalty and identity is ultimately found in Christ. That means we are Christians before we are Americans or Canadians or Koreans or Chinese. We get ourselves into trouble when we begin to take on the values and behaviors of our national identities which stand against the Gospel. We must be careful to always do the Lord's work *in the Lord's way*. As Os Guinness laments about Christians in politics, too often we look like the world by "demonizing our foes with relish or indulging in fear-mongering" (Guinness, 88). We forget that the way of Jesus is loving our enemies, even if they are of a different political party, and forgiving others, even if they look different than us.

It means cultural values and behaviors no longer have the highest priority. As one writer says, "The more the church becomes one with the modern world, the more it becomes compromised" (Guinness, 21). As followers of Jesus, we live counter-culturally. We beat to Christ's drum, not our cultures. One key cultural value we must move away from is the self-absorption that is so rampant in our culture. And, how do we resist it? We commit to community. We commit to a church community. We prioritize things like our picnic today. We prioritize things like family camp. We prioritize things like small groups. We commit to community.

This has been especially important in my life. After I graduated from college, I moved away from home with my first job as an engineer. But, here I was on my own, in a new place, with no friends. And, that's the ideal conditions for a "descent into self," which is exactly what happened (Buber, 131). I turned inward to find truth and meaning. But, there's no life there and zero possibility of transcendence. Not in the self. I landed in an impossible place but impossible is nothing for God. God moved me 3000 miles away in order to participate in a healthy community, where I began looking beyond myself. All of sudden, life had purpose again.

It also means family values and behaviors no longer have the highest priority. If your family does not follow Christ, you must leave spiritually, as Abram and Sarai did.

B. Salt of the earth

It's in the leaving and following that we are blessed and we become a blessing. We must look different from our surroundings. Jesus used the metaphor of salt (Matt 5:13). Salt has no impact unless it is different from the food. It must be different to be effective. Jesus even says that we are the salt of the earth, we are the taste of the earth, we are the flavor of the earth, not because of who we are, but because of who he is and our attachment to him. But if we lose our saltiness, if we lose our distinctiveness, we are no longer a blessing to the people around us.

VI. Conclusion

For, it's in the leaving and following Jesus that we are richly blessed and that we become a blessing. And, that is good news for us and for the bay area. Amen.

Benediction

As you go, like Abram went,
and follow Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep,
May the Lord bless you and keep you,
May he make his face shine upon you and give you peace.
That you may be a blessing to those around you.
Go and watch what he does in and through you this week.
Amen.

Resources

Baldwin, Joyce, *The Message of Genesis 12-50 (The Bible Speaks Today Series)*

Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*

Freitheim, Terence, *Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith*

Guinness, Os, *The Last Christian on Earth*

Lloyd-Jones, Sally, *Thoughts to Make Your Heart Sing*

Waltke, Bruce, *Genesis: A Commentary*

Walton, John, *Genesis (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)*

Von Rad, Gerhard, *Genesis*