

CALLED TO BE A BLESSING (1)

A Meditation on Genesis 12:1-8

The call to Abram included a three-fold requirement: Go from your country, go from your kindred, and go from your father's house. The last requirement was especially personal and pointed. It reminds us of what Jesus said to His disciples: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37). God must be first in our lives and above all other loyalties.

The three-fold call was followed by a corresponding three-fold promise of blessing. First, the LORD promised, "I will make of you a great nation" (Gen. 12:2). This promise would be fulfilled in the nation of Israel, but Israel was just the beginning. Later this promise was expanded, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a *multitude of nations*. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a *multitude of nations*. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into *nations*, and kings shall come from you" (17:4-6). Abram means "exalted father"—a funny name for an old man with one child. Abraham means "father of a multitude"—an even funnier name given Abraham's present situation. But he believes God. From the outset Abraham was assured that in due course, he would become a multitude of nations, not just one.

Second, God promised generally to bless Abraham, and specifically to make his name great (12:2b). At the Tower of Babel, the builders sought to make a name for themselves (11:4). But God is the One who sovereignly determines whose name will be great. God had even changed Abram's name to Abraham, so it would be even greater than it was originally.

Third, the LORD promised, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse" (12:3a). This promise was reiterated when Isaac blessed Jacob (27:29). In Numbers 24:9, this promise was spoken by the prophet Balaam over Israel when the Spirit of God came upon him: "Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you." God is saying with these words that He will protect Abram and Israel to guarantee that the promises all come to fruition.

The first example of how this plays out is found in Genesis 12:10-20. The Pharaoh of Egypt unlawfully seized Sarai, so God curses Pharaoh, and afflicts him and his house with great plagues. This episode is a prelude to the ten plagues that God used later to bring Israel out of Egypt under Moses' leadership, because of how they mistreated His people. If there is no divine intervention and protection by God, the promises would never have been fulfilled. The Israelites would never have entered the promise Land, and Christ would never have been born.

Now what is the ultimate objective of all these blessings? Abram was told plainly, "so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:2-3). Abram is blessed that he in turn may be a source of blessing to the entire world. This is the second great messianic text in Genesis. The first was Genesis 3:15. Once again we have the gospel in seed form. We have the redemption of mankind, and the inclusion of the Gentiles in the blessing of God. If you think this is eisegesis (reading into the text what isn't there), let me assure you that it isn't, since this is how the NT writers understood what God was saying in Genesis. The apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians, "Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture (i.e. Gen. 12:3), foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Gal. 3:7-9). According to Paul, Genesis 12:3 is the gospel; it is justification by faith for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. This is how all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

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CALLED TO BE A BLESSING (2)

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Going a step further, let's probe, "Where is Christ, and His work on the cross in Genesis 12:3?" It's found in the words "in you," which mean Abraham's seed, specifically our Lord Jesus Christ. Bringing clarification to Genesis 12:3, the LORD says to Abraham in Genesis 22:18, "and *in your offspring* shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." Allowing the NT to interpret the OT, Paul provides the final commentary, "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ" (Gal. 3:16).

Consequently, Abraham's seed, Christ, "redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—so that *in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles*, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13-14). The promises of Abraham find their fulfillment in the person and work of Christ, so that "if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:29). This means that we Christians are here today because of the gospel—with the atoning work of Christ on the cross at the heart of it—which was preached beforehand to Abraham, when God said, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Abram received the call to go... "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan" (Gen. 12:4-5a). Abram took many possessions and people with him, but what about all that he may have left behind to obey God? R.J. Rushdoony notes, "Now when Abram was called by God to leave his family and migrate to God's appointed place, Abram was leaving behind vast wealth and a comfortable way of life. Both Ur and Haran were substantial communities, and Abram's family a wealthy one. The purely personal wealth he took was enough to classify him as an important man. In Genesis 14:14, when Abram pursues the army that took his nephew Lot captive, he fielded a force of 318 men from his household. This meant that he left at home approximately as many older men to care for the sheep and cattle, and a like number of young boys, so that the males in his household numbered about one thousand, with an equal number of females, young and old. The original family wealth, of which Abraham would have been heir, was probably much greater. All this Abraham forsook for a *promise from God*" (R.J. Rushdoony, *Genesis*, p. 123).

Genesis 12:5 also talks about the people "they had acquired in Haran." Who are these people? Perhaps they're slaves or indentured servants. Or, more likely they are converts to Yahweh. Allen P. Ross leans toward the later view, he writes, "[T]he expression 'and the people [*nepes*] whom they had acquired in Haran.'...probably does not refer to the acquisition of slaves, for the Hebrew word *nepes* would not likely be used for that. And it certainly does not refer to their children, because Sarai was barren until Isaac's birth (21:1-7). Cassuto argues that this expression probably refers to proselytes. If he is correct, then the narrative implies that, already in Haran, Abram had been sharing his faith in the Lord" (Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, p. 265).

"When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land" (Gen. 12:5b-6). Shechem means "shoulder" and refers to strength. Moreh means "teach" and refers to instruction. And this is exactly what we see Abram receiving in the next verse: "Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land'" (vs. 7a). The land of Canaan will be given to Abram's offspring. There's only one problem, presently the Canaanites occupy the land, so they will have to be overthrown first. This shouldn't surprise us, since the promises of God are always embraced by faith as we fight opposition. Inheriting the land will also require patience—400 years worth of patience (15:13-16).

Abram's next act is a response to God's promise: "So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD" (Gen. 12:7b-8). I concur with James Boice that Abram is claiming the land for God by building an altar. Altars are places of worship, but they also serve as witnesses. Therefore, the two altars that Abram erected in Canaan would serve as two witnesses to Israel of God's promise, and Abram's claim on the land by faith.

But there may be even more taking place around these altars. Ross states, “[A]t the second mention of his building an altar to worship the Lord is the report that he ‘made proclamation of the LORD by name’ (translated ‘called upon the name of the Lord’ in the ESV). This expression, first used in Genesis 4:26, refers to the public proclamation of faith in the Lord. The expression is used in the Bible for prayer or for praise, but in the Mosaic material it seems to be broader although a public proclamation of the faith could include prayer and praise). Martin Luther translated it ‘preached’ . . . , a good rendering in this context” (Ibid., p. 267).

Ross then thinks of how Israel, who entered the land, would view this passage. “For Israel, the call of their great ancestor was instructive. It demonstrated that the promises they lived for were indeed from God—the promises of a great nation, a land, sovereign protection, and future blessings. The Lord’s appearance and confirmation proved that Canaan was their destiny. Moreover, the pilgrimage of Abram provided them with their central march. He came to Shechem, Bethel, Ai, and the Negev; they would go up from the Negev to Bethel, Ai, and Shechem, where the covenant would be reactivated (Josh. 24)” (Ibid.).

How exciting it would have been for that generation to retrace Abram’s footsteps and end up at the very place where God had originally made these promises to their father Abram. I image them standing in stunned awe at God’s faithfulness. Perhaps, with tears steaming down their faces they sang the ancient equivalent of “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” And let none of us in Christ forget that we are all blessed, due to God’s faithfulness to a man He called out of Ur of the Chaldeans many millennia ago.

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Website: www.foxlakechurch.org Email: wchristensen@foxlakechurch.org 847-587-1331