

# God Promises a Family

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, again, let me welcome you all. We're through the holiday season and a lot of travel, a lot of kind of irregular schedules, but I think most of us are probably back in the groove by now.

And for some of you who are perhaps newer to the church or if you've not been around for the past couple of weeks, we're starting something new tonight. We're actually in light of the fact that we are in a new calendar year, and many of us are thinking about the year to come, goals that we want to set, reflecting on the past year.

It's just the kind of time of year when we tend to do that. We thought it might be good to do that as a church, to spend a little time maybe reorienting, trying to remember what we're about, who we are, why we're here in Washington, D.C., what our church is here to do.

And so we're going to be asking these questions for the next few weeks. You know, what does it mean to be a church in a city like Washington, D.C.?

And it's interesting when you sort of listen to different people and the way they think about church and the associations they have with church. Some people think about buildings.

[ 1 : 12 ] They think about Gothic structures. They think about beautiful buildings like this. They think about the institution of church. They think about structures and systems. Other people would vehemently argue against that and say the church has nothing to do with that.

The church has nothing to do with buildings or places or spaces. The church is the people. That's what church is. It's relationships. Some people primarily think of church as a kind of vehicle for social activism.

And if you're not doing that, you're really falling short as a church. Other people passionately hold to the opposite perspective, that people who are members of the faithful Orthodox Church should hunker down, have as little to do with outside culture as possible, and wait and pray for the coming of Jesus.

There are other people who think of church primarily as the service they go to, mostly on Sundays. Or they think of church as a great place to meet people and make friends, maybe meet available single people.

Or they think of church as a place to go to get a little more spirituality. You know, I've got a good job. I've got some good friends. I'm happy with where I'm living, but I need some spiritual stuff in my life.

[ 2 : 25 ] So I'm going to dip into a church every now and then. These are all ways that we think about it. And they all contain maybe a grain or so of truth. You know, there's some truth in each of these statements.

But all fall woefully short of really capturing the essence of what it means to be a church. And one of the ways the Bible talks about God's people, of all of the ways that you see in the Bible of all the images and metaphors that are used, there's one that really runs through the Bible beginning to end.

It runs from Genesis all the way to Revelation. And it's an image that I believe really captures the essence of what the church is meant to be in the world. And really, I think, can help guide us over the next few weeks as we think about what we're called to be as Church of the Advent.

And the image is this, that the church is called to be a family. It's called to be a family. The church is God's family in the world. And not to put too fine a point on it, but as we think about our culture and where we are today, at least I feel, this is just my own opinion here, that with all of the rhetoric and particularly conservative Christians doing so much to defend the traditional family and defend traditional family values, that it may be that we've lost sight of the fact that we as the church are actually called to be a family, specifically for people who don't have families.

That we're called to be a family for the lonely, to be a family for people who, for whatever reason, are alone in the world. And so we're going to be looking at this idea because I believe that everybody in this room and everybody in the world needs a family.

[ 4 : 14 ] Some of you came from healthy families and some of you from broken families, but we all need family. And I think we all long for family. I don't think I have to convince you of why you need family.

I think everybody in here feels in your heart that you want that. And if your family's broken, you long for it to be healthy. And if your family's healthy, then you realize that even the healthiest families fall short of that deep longing that we have to know that we belong in a family.

So over the coming weeks, we're going to look at five key passages that flesh this out. And my hope is that the more we understand this, who we are as God's family in the world, the more that will orient us and help us prioritize the kinds of things that we need to be thinking about here in D.C. So tonight, we're going to be looking at Genesis chapter 12, verses 1 through 3, and then chapter 15, verses 1 through 6. We'll primarily be looking at Genesis chapter 12, because this is the place where God first makes this promise of a family.

And right away, we begin learning something about what it means to be God's family in the world. And we learn a couple of things from these three verses. We learn this, that as God's family, we are guided by God's purpose.

[ 5 : 29 ] And then second, we learn that we are empowered by God's blessing. So guided by God's purpose and empowered by his blessing. As we dive into this passage, let's pray for God to guide us.

Lord, you do promise many things, but one of the great promises you make is that you speak to us, that we can open this book and read these words. And through the words of your apostles and your prophets and your servants over the centuries, that you're able to make these words come alive and speak to us here and now as we sit here.

And Lord, we know that we cannot do this in our own strength, that it must come from you through your spirit. And so we pray that these spoken words would be faithful to your written word and that your written word would reveal to us the living word of Jesus Christ.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So the first thing that we see in Genesis 12 about God's family in the world is this, that God's family is guided by God's purpose.

We, as a part of this, are called to be guided by God's purpose. Just to summarize the first 11 chapters of Genesis, God creates the world. He creates a good and beautiful and perfect world and us, and he calls it very good.

[ 6 : 48 ] And then human beings stage a rebellion because they desire to call the shots of their lives to be gods rather than to worship God.

And so because of that, things begin to fall apart. And really from chapter 3 to chapter 11, you just see things go from bad to worse. And chapter 11, this kind of culminates with the Tower of Babel where human beings say, let's cast off God altogether, let's make a great name for ourselves in the world.

And so at this point, it looks almost hopeless. And at the very end, you learn about this kind of family, Abraham's family, and it's no different than any other family.

They're pagan moon worshipers. And yet, in chapter 12, God comes to this man named Abram. And God comes to this man.

Why he picked Abram, we will never know. But he comes to Abram, and he essentially lays out his plan to save and to restore the world, to reverse the brokenness.

[ 7 : 55 ] And here's the plan. Here's the big plan. It's not, I'm going to appear in the sky and everybody's going to see me, and there's going to be flames and lights and thunder, and tell everybody to stop doing bad stuff.

And it's not sending legions of angels to sort of quell the rebellion. It's not taking control of human beings' hearts and minds and turning them into automatons to do God's will.

It's none of these things. In fact, it's not a power play at all. He says, here's my big plan, Abram. I'm going to build a family. I'm going to make a family in the world.

He says, I'm going to use your descendants to establish a family. And this family, if you can imagine it, Abram, he says in chapter 15, go outside, look at the stars. This family is going to be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

It's going to be that big, that vast. And through this family, I'm going to one day bless all of the families of the earth. And if you know the whole story, you know that Jesus' coming and his death and his resurrection and his establishing of the church is the fulfillment or the beginning of the fulfillment of this promise.

[ 9 : 06 ] So we're a part of this. You know, Abram never could have imagined the church. He never could have dreamed what God would do, establishing an international church spread to the four corners of the globe.

But in order for all this to happen, Abram has to do something. And you know the story. He has to leave.

He has to leave his family. He has to leave his land. He has to leave his inheritance. In other words, he has to forsake all of his possessions.

He has to forsake and let go of all of his security. He has to let go of his kinship relationships. He needs to let go of his inheritance. And really, if you know anything about ancient Near Eastern culture, he's really having to say goodbye to his entire identity.

He's having to, in Paul's language, put off the old self. And follow God. And so we see this.

[ 10 : 06 ] We see what God asks of Abram. And we realize that in this moment, Abram has two possible lives laid out before him. Two ways that he can go. And you know, verse 1, it says, God said to Abraham.

The Hebrew actually says, the Lord had said to Abram. Which conveys not that Abram heard this once from God and said, absolutely, I'll pack my stuff.

But rather, God had been saying this. And we don't know how much time had passed, but it's very likely that Abram had been wrestling with this. What do I do? The first possibility is this.

Ignore God. Minimize. Explain away. Rationalize. Intellectualize. You know, it's been stressful lately, and I just feel maybe I'm just imagining this.

You know? Hunker down. Put it out of his mind. And hold on to the life he has. He's got a good life. He's got a good family. He's got good connections. Good inheritance coming. Good prospects.

[ 11 : 06 ] Good land. Why screw that up? That's the first possibility. The second possibility is this. Obey God. Listen to God. But do so knowing that it's going to cost you everything.

I mean, that's a heck of a choice. And he doesn't have any idea where he's going. Hebrews 11 talks about Abram. And it says he followed God and obeyed God, not having any idea where God was taking him.

It's not like God showed him, you know, like a blueprint. Like, here's where you're going. You're going to love it. He says, no, leave, and I'll show you where you're going to go. You'll find out. So I believe this is the same choice that we are each called to make individually in our lives.

And I believe it's the kind of choice that we're called to make as a church. Because this is what faith means. You know, we in our society, we think of faith as an intellectual thing. We think of it as something that we, you know, I read the arguments.

And I kind of think about the evidence. And I weigh all of that. And I decide to believe in God. And it's an intellectual choice. And it's an, it's a scent. Okay, I scent to the claims of Christianity. I can say the Nicene Creed.

[ 12 : 11 ] And I don't cross my fingers behind my back. That's faith. When we look at this picture of faith, it's very different. It's looking at these two possible lives and choosing the life that says I'm going to follow God regardless of what it costs me.

Faith is actually in the doing. Not simply in the thinking. And this is what faith means. God has a purpose that he's enacting in the world.

And we're all a part of that unfolding purpose. And while I don't, I don't think that this, you know, the wooden application would be, therefore we all need to leave our families and homelands and go somewhere else.

And that's not what this is saying. But I do think there's an element in this that does apply to all of us. That we're called as people who follow Christ.

For those of you who are Christians, that we're called to put God's purposes before our preferences. That God's purposes come before our preferences. And that's really hard.

[ 13 : 13 ] And it goes against the wisdom of the world. Most commencement speeches kind of say the same thing. Follow your heart. Follow your passion.

Be true to yourself. I read commencement speeches. I just like to see what's being said. Right? And a lot of them say that. It's a few stories and jokes that are different.

Context is different. Follow your heart. Follow your passions. Be true to yourself. As David Brooks once wrote, this, meaning this way of thinking, is a vision of life that begins with self and ends with self.

It's bankrupt. See, as God's family, we see through that. We see it for the kind of ephemeral emptiness that it is. And we see through that. And we realize that we want to build our lives on something solid, on something real, which is God's purposes.

So what does this look like? Well, it looks like this. When we think about our vocation, when you think about what do I want to do with my life, what do I want to give myself to? It means we don't just think about our preferences.

[14:17] We don't just think about what will give us job security. We don't just think about what will give us money to live the way we want to live. We don't just think about what will give us the kind of status. You know, because in a place like D.C., people will work for 15 grand a year if it gives them status.

Right? I think that's maybe well above money in terms of our priorities here in this city. But we don't just think about those things. As a part of God's family, we ask that deeper question of how has God wired me?

And what needs am I created to address? Right now, it could be the need of a company for leadership. It could be the need on a team for administration.

It could be the need in a home to take the lead in raising children. It could be any number of needs. But the question is, what is the thing, how am I wired and built to love and to serve God's world?

So we ask that deeper question about purpose. Or when we think about the person that we want to marry. You know, if you're a part of God's family and you're putting God's purposes even before your own preferences, you don't just marry somebody because you're in love with them.

[15:29] You don't just marry somebody because they might be your last chance. You don't just marry somebody because you've been dating so long it would be so awkward not to.

Right? You don't just marry somebody because that's the path of least resistance. When we're thinking about this, we think that deeper question of purpose. Who can I marry who will help me make this hard daily choice of putting God's purpose ahead of my preferences?

Who gets that and is on board with that? Who's going to encourage me in that and who's going to be willing to do that in their life? Who's going to look at me on a regular basis and say, are we making this life that we're building together about what God wants or about what we want?

How are we choosing? Who's going to be your ally in that? That's how we think if we're a part of God's family. When we think about where we want to live, where we choose to settle down, we don't just think about living where life's easy, where there's ample parking.

Right? Where there's no crime in great schools. We don't just think about that. Those are important things, but that's not all we think about. When we think about where we want to live, we ask, where would God have us go?

[16:48] You know, where's the kind of place where our household can have an impact on the surrounding community? Now, that might be in the city. It might be in the suburbs. It might be in a really hard part of town.

It might be in a really great part of town. But the difference is, you choose to be there because you believe, and your family, if you have a family, or your roommates, or your household, or whoever you share life with, whoever's sharing that home, you believe that God wants you there.

So this is the difference. We put God's purposes before our preferences. This is the choice that Abram was called to make. So one aspect of being God's family is this, that we're guided primarily by God's purposes in our lives.

And listen, if you're prone to feel guilty during sermons, nobody does this perfectly. Okay? We fall short in this all the time. Abram, if you know anything about his life, does not do this perfectly.

I mean, in just the next chapter, we see a major failure of faith in Abram's life. So nobody does this perfectly. The only person who ever did this perfectly is Jesus. And that's why, as Christians, we know that our hope is not in our ability to have perfect faith, but in Jesus' perfect faithfulness.

[18:01] He's the one who said, not my will, but thy will be done, and meant it. And it's because of that that we have hope. But that doesn't mean that we're not called to have this kind of faith. We are.

So that's the first thing. The second thing we see when we're looking at what it means to be God's family in the world is this. That as God's family, we're actually empowered by God's blessing. We're empowered by his choice to bless us. In exchange for Abram leaving everything behind, God promises what you might call a threefold blessing. Okay?

He says, I want you to leave your family and your kindred and your house and your inheritance. I want you to leave all that behind. I want you to go to a land that I'm going to show you. But then he says this. God says he's going to bless him.

Then God says that he, Abraham, is going to be a blessing. And then he says that through Abram's family, God's going to bless all the families of the earth.

[19:02] So the concept of blessing is very central to God's promise. And if you're anything like me, you hear a word like blessing, and it's meaningless. You know, we use it all the time.

Like we sign emails. You know, if you're, those of you who are Christians, you know, blessings, Tommy, you know. And, you know, it's not as overtly Christian as in Christ, you know. But it's not as pagan as just sincerely. It's like blessings, you know, no matter what you believe, that's nice, right. What does it actually mean? If we're going to throw it around, we need to know what it means.

And in this context, it means a couple of things. To bless someone means this. To bless someone means they come under your care. You provide for them. It means they come under your protection.

You defend them. And then it means that you give them your favor. They come under your care. They come under your protection. And they come into your favor. So let's just retranslate this promise in light of what we now know about what blessing means.

[20:09] God says, first, Abram, I'm going to take you under my care. I'm going to provide for you. I'm going to give you my protection. I'm going to be your defender.

And I'm going to choose to bestow my favor upon you. You know, this is the entire difference of Christianity. It's not, we, Abram doesn't earn God's favor. God says, I'm going to choose to give you my favor.

I'm going to make you my favored one, my chosen one. Why? Because I'm God and it's my prerogative to do that. So he says, I'm going to bless you in this way, Abram.

And because I do this, this is the cool part. This is where it begins to touch ground with us. You, Abram, and your family and the community that you build up, you're going to do the same thing. As you encounter people, as you're traveling and as you're growing and as time passes, as people cross your path, and we see this happen all throughout Israel's history. We'll talk about it more in the weeks to come. He says, Abram, you're going to take people into your house.

[21:07] You're going to take them under your protection. And you're going to provide for them and care for them. And you're going to give your favor to them even if they don't deserve it. Right?

Lot's a great example of that that comes up in a little while. So you're going to bless people in this way. And then the clincher is this, that through your family one day, all of the families of the earth are going to know God's favor.

They're going to know God's protection. And they're going to know God's provision. So this is a huge promise. And again, I think that we see this fulfilled through Jesus and the church.

Because what all this points to is the ultimate blessing of Jesus, right? In Jesus Christ, those of us who know and follow Jesus, he is the ultimate blessing. Why? Because we know that in Jesus, God has provided, given us everything we need.

As Ephesians 1 says, every spiritual blessing. It's yours. In Jesus, we know that we come under his protection. We come under his provision.

[22:07] Jesus makes it clear that even if you die, you're never lost to God. He says that at the tomb of Lazarus, after Lazarus has died. And Mary and Martha say, well, if you had only been here, this wouldn't have happened.

And he says, don't you have any idea who I am? Don't you know that if you belong to me, you're never lost, even if you die? Even if you die a physical death? That's just a temporary state. Death is just a temporary state.

Death is just a temporary state. So there's protection, there's provision, and then lastly, in Jesus Christ, you have God's eternal favor. And you can do nothing to screw that up.

Because you didn't earn it to begin with. So as the church, we have the ultimate blessing of Jesus. And we see this promise fulfilled that God blesses us.

And that because of that, it makes us the kind of community. Because I know I have those things, and I have nothing really to lose, it makes me the kind of person, and it can make us as a community, people who are primarily concerned not with getting blessed, but with being a blessing. [ 23 : 11 ] But with being a blessing, God blesses us so that we can bless others, and through that, others come to know the ultimate blessing of Jesus Christ. So this is how it works.

Right? So why should we care about refugees? Why should that matter to us? You know, why should we care about the vulnerable and the homeless? Why should we care about these things? It's not just because we want to be good people.

It's because this is the entire reason God establishes his family in the earth. It's to bless and to bring people to the ultimate blessing of Jesus. To find vulnerable people and say, we will protect you. To find people who need provision, who don't have what they need, and say, we will provide for you. And to do it in a way that says, regardless of whether you think you deserve it, regardless of whether I think you deserve it.

We choose to give you our favor. We choose to favor you. We choose to bless you. We choose to love you. It's our choice to make. It means we do that with one another. That our love for one another is not based on earning and deserving.

[ 24 : 16 ] It's based on a choice to bless. So why do we do these things? It's because that's what the family of God exists for.

We're meant to be channels and conduits of God's blessing. So I want to say again, at this point, if those of you are sitting here and you're hearing this and you're thinking, oh, there's so much that I need to be doing, you know, I need to be doing so much more than I'm doing, that's not necessarily the point we're trying to make.

It doesn't necessarily mean that you should feel guilty and start doing more. This is much more a point about understanding the purpose of the good gifts that God has already given you and why he gave them to you.

So obviously, if you have financial resources or high level of education or connections and networks or expertise, you know, these are things that can be used to bless people, obviously.

But if you're blessed with good friendships, you know, if you're the kind of person that you know how to have friends and you know how to be a good friend, that's a gift and a blessing that God has given you.

[ 25 : 27 ] And not everybody has that. In fact, I would say the majority of people I know don't have that, especially in a place like D.C. And it may not work out for you and I to be friends, but maybe I need to see what a good friendship looks like.

And maybe the simple fact that you have good friendships and can model that, maybe that'll encourage me. Or maybe you're open and willing to try and be my friend because I don't have any friends.

You see, you can bless, you can bless simply through that, the invitation of friendship or modeling friendship. If you're blessed with a home, however humble that home is, however humble and, you know, however basic your little studio might be, right, the willingness to simply open your home on occasion and give somebody the experience of being welcomed in and being treated with dignity and love.

That can change lives. You have no idea. Blessed to be a blessing, right? If you're blessed with a spouse, you know, simply the act of cultivating a healthy marriage, of raising your kids well, simply that can be enormously beneficial to the community that you're a part of.

You know, observing Sabbath or cultivating a way of life that stands against the kind of incredible insanity of the hectic lifestyle and pace of D.C., if you're able to cultivate a Sabbath practice, an ability to live at a different pace, you have no idea what a blessing that is to the people around you to see, oh, there is an alternative.

[ 27 : 19 ] I don't have to be going a thousand miles an hour because here's this person doing it and it makes it plausible, right? So it's not necessarily about doing more. It's about understanding that the good things that you're blessed with in your life, that they have a function, and that is you're meant to be a conduit of blessing into other people's lives, and everybody has ways that they are equipped and gifted to be a blessing, right, in ways that point people to the ultimate blessing of Jesus Christ.

In a few weeks, I'll just let you know this. In a few weeks, we're going to be beginning to collect information from people who want to give it from the congregation, and the question will basically be this.

Do you have a gift that you would like to give somebody in the community? A way that you can be a blessing and give a gift to somebody. It may be that you're good with tax preparation.

You know, it may be that you're good with coaching people on how to do job interviews. It may be a network that you're connected to. It may be that you've been a parent for decades instead of days like most of us, and you can offer good, solid parenting advice.

You know, it may be marriage. It may be something as simple as you can help with renovations, or that you're willing to do some yard work or babysit. The idea being that we all have gifts in ways that God has blessed and provided for us, and we all have needs.

[ 28 : 42 ] And I believe that for every need, there is a gift. And so we want to be able to collect this information to some extent in this church so that we can connect gifts to needs.

So just stay tuned for that. It's going to be happening over the next few weeks. But as we continue exploring this over the next few weeks, I think my hope and my prayer is that we would gain a greater vision of what our life here in the city might look like, and that we'd be excited about it, and that it would fill us with passion.

Really, that our imaginations would expand. That when we think of what does it mean to be a church, that it would go beyond all those things that we said in the beginning, that we would really begin to understand that we're actually called to be a family in the truest sense of the word.

Because the fact is, whether or not you have a nuclear family, all of us need a family like this. You know, not only if you're unmarried or divorced or don't have a nuclear family, but even if you do, even if you have those things, marriage cannot survive and thrive in a vacuum.

Your marriage needs a greater community. Your family needs a greater family. And this is the family that the church is called to be. You know, Psalm 68.6 says this.

[ 29 : 55 ] It says, God sets the lonely in a family. And I believe the church is called to be that family. The family that welcomes the lonely of the world and says, you have a home.

Let's pray. Lord, it's almost inconceivable to think that a conversation that happened between you and this humble man thousands of years ago would have any bearing on our life.

And yet we know this exhilarating truth that somehow we, as we sit here as a part of this community, we're a small part of this great reality called the church, which is the fulfillment of those promises you made so long ago.

Lord, help us to see with new eyes the potential, the potential here of what we can be and what we're called to be, Lord. I pray that you would give us together collectively as a community a clear-sighted vision of what it might look like to be a family for all those without families, to bless those in our very midst, even as we've been blessed by you, to earnestly seek and passionately desire that one day all the families of the earth would know the blessing of your son, Jesus Christ. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. Amen.