

Abraham: A New Beginning

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[0:00] Now, it's Genesis chapter 12, verse 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.

And I will make 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 families of the earth will be blessed. So Abram went as the Lord had told him and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran.

And Abram took Sarai, his wife, and Lot, his brother's son, and all the 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.

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.

[1:11] Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, To your offspring, I will give this land. 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 I on the east. And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord.

And Abram journeyed on, still going towards the Negev. Amen. Now, I can't remember if I heard him say it or read it in one of his books, but Alec Mateer, whose name some of you will know, he was born in Dublin, I think, but he spent most of his time in England.

He's a great Old Testament evangelical scholar. Many of his books are worth reading. But I remember him once describing the Bible as a book of two halves.

And he wasn't thinking as we're all thinking about the Old Testament and the New Testament. His two halves were much more nuanced.

[2:31] The first half of the Bible, according to Alec Mateer, is Genesis 1 to 11. And the second half is Genesis 12, right through to Revelation 22.

And if you think about it, his suggestion has got some legs to it. For one thing, Genesis 1 to 11 and Genesis 12 to Revelation 22, they stand in parallel to each other.

Both begin with God speaking and things happening. In Genesis 1, God spoke into the nothingness and called the universe into existence.

And everything in all its stunning beauty and complex variety appeared. And in Genesis 12, God spoke and called Abraham out of nowhere.

And Abraham went. However, really Genesis 1 to 11 and 12, Genesis 12 to Revelation 22, they actually stand in contrast to each other.

[3:42] While there's places where God's grace shines out, the main emphasis in Genesis 1 to 11 is on God's judgment. If you think of the three big stories that dominate the storyline of Genesis 1 to 11, there's the fall with its catastrophic consequences.

That's Genesis 3 to 5. There's the flood with its universal destruction, Genesis 6 to 9. And then there's the Tower of Babel with the worldwide scattering of humanity, Genesis 11, 1 to 9.

In contrast, from Genesis 12 onwards to the end of the Bible, the main emphasis is on God's grace. Yes, there are big chunks of the second half of the Bible when the dark thunderclouds of God's judgment come rolling in.

However, the spiritual weather of Genesis 12 to Revelation 22 is dominated by the glorious sunshine of God's grace, culminating in the appearance of Jesus, the Son of Righteousness.

So I think that Alec Mateer seems to have hit the nail with his head when he suggests that Genesis 12 is the starting point of the second half of the Bible.

[5:02] It marks a definitive new beginning for humanity. And this beginning begins with God's gracious call to Abraham.

It's recorded for us in Genesis 12, 1 to 9. And we're going to look at these verses tonight to think about this new beginning where God in his grace calls to Abraham.

So as he calls Abraham, God, as it were, sets out a stall to tell us how he's going to treat humanity from now on.

After his judgment, the fall, the flood, and the Tower of Babel, God says, from now on, I'm going to treat humanity on the basis of my grace.

And as we track our way through Genesis 12, 1 to 9, I want us to focus on how Abraham's call tells us about God's grace. And the first matter that Abraham's call tells us about God's grace is that it is sovereign grace.

[6:13] It's sovereign grace. When Abraham gathered all his possessions together and organized his entourage and punched the coordinates of Canaan into a sat-nav and headed south out of Haran, Genesis 12, 4 and 5, it was not because he was having some sort of a senior life crisis.

He didn't up sticks and hit the road because he was bored with life and was looking for a little bit more excitement in his life. This new phase of his life was not something that he initiated.

He left Haran and set out for the land of Canaan only because, verse 4, the Lord had told him. God made the first move.

God had come to Abraham and spoken to him. Abraham had not asked God what God wanted him to do. God told him what he wanted Abraham to do.

And the opening words of this new beginning in the Bible storyline are, the Lord said to Abraham, Genesis 12, verse 1. Abraham's call reminds us that God's grace is sovereign grace.

[7:35] And if you think about it, the same sovereign grace is seen in operating in our lives today. We've experienced that. If we're Christians, we've experienced that.

The only reason we are Christians is because God, in his sovereign grace, called us. We love him because he first loved us.

And that principle that was there at the start of our Christian lives, it continues throughout the whole of our Christian lives, that God operates in our lives sovereignly.

He calls us sovereignly. Now, in the psalm we sang just before the sermon, Psalm 32, in verse 9, there's a really strange-sounding instruction where God tells us not to be like the horse or the mule, which must be controlled by a bit and a bridle.

Now, I'm not a horsey person, but I do know what horses and mules sort of stand for in the Bible. The mule, we're not to be like the mule. The mule is stubborn.

[8:41] It resists going where its rider wants it to go. And there are times when God, by his Spirit, through his Word, takes the initiative in our lives, and he nudges us out of our comfort zone, or sometimes he just grabs us out of the rut that we've got ourselves into as Christians, and he wants to move us forward.

And God says to us, we're not to be like a mule, resisting God's sovereign grace as he takes the initiative to move us on in our Christian lives.

But he also tells us we're not to be like a horse either, charging forward, restlessly, always wanting to run ahead of its rider.

You see, the Christian life is not a life of hyperactivity in which, you know, if you're spiritually on the ball, you're expected to do something new and exciting every moment of every day.

You know, three exciting things before breakfast. There's some people say that that's what the Christian life is like, but it's not like that at all. There are some times God wants us to slow down and consolidate our Christian lives.

[10:01] And we are not to resist his sovereign grace as he takes the initiative to slow us down in order to deepen our Christian lives by keeping us where we are and stopping us jumping from the next new fad to the next new fad to the next new fad.

This is God's sovereign grace, how it operates in our lives. And then the second place, Abram's call points out that God's grace is unexpected grace.

The opening words of Genesis 12, verse 1, please take my word for it. The words then, God said to Abram, they're amongst the most unexpected words in the Bible.

Why should God say anything to Abraham? Why should God even take notice of Abraham at all?

Now, I know that there's election in God's eternal plan of salvation, and I haven't stopped believing in that. You know, don't light the fire outside in the corridor to burn me as a heretic.

[11:15] I still believe in that. But from a human point of view, those six words, then the Lord said to Abraham, they're totally unexpected. I wonder what your mental image of Abraham is.

Here's mine. He's a decent bloke. He's a regular nice guy. I'm showing my age, but for those of you who are vintage, of my vintage, you know what I'm thinking about when I say Abraham would have been at home in the Waltons.

You know, to me, he was a combination of Atticus Finch, you know, Gregory Peckin, To Kill a Mockingbird, and George Bailey, James Stewart, and It's a Wonderful Life.

He's a combination of the both of them. You know, you would always look up to him and respect him. And maybe your mental image of Abraham is something similar.

But actually, the Bible has a completely different take on Abraham that explodes, if you like, our feel-good image of him. Abraham's hometown was Ur of the Chaldeans, Genesis 11, 28.

[12:32] And that was a hot bed of pagan worship. And Joshua tells us in Joshua 23, verse 3, that Abraham was steeped in Ur's paganism.

So far from being squeaky clean, he was a card-carrying idolater. And yet, it was this pagan idol worshiper whom God called.

Did you see that coming? Well, neither did I. God's totally unexpected grace. And the same is true if you, if you're a Christian on the receiving end of God's sovereign grace, the question that we're constantly asking ourselves is, Lord, why me?

You know, when you think about how you're a Christian now and you're still not wallowing around in your sin and hurtling further and faster and faster and further and further down the broad road that leads to destruction, you say, why me, Lord?

Joan always quotes this. She says, very often we, when bad things happen to us, we say, why me, Lord? But really, when we think about how God has been gracious to us, we're going to say, why me, Lord?

[14:10] God's grace in our lives is totally unexpected. When we think about God's grace, we sing, God of grace, amazing wonder, irresistible and free. Oh, the miracle of mercy, Jesus reaches down to me.

We sing, oh, how the grace of God amazes me, amazes me. God's grace is unexpected. You can't explain why God should show grace to anyone at all, never mind to you in particular.

So, it's sovereign grace. It's unexpected grace. In the third place, Abraham's call informs us that God's grace is uncompromising grace.

It's uncompromising grace. Do you see in verse one, when he spoke to Abraham, God didn't mess around. He said, leave your country, your people, your father's household and go to the land.

I will show you. Oh, that was sore. That was sore. Can you not see Abraham wincing as God's clear, stark, direct command begins to sink in?

[15:29] Abraham was to leave certain things behind for good. Now, commentators point out that the things Abraham was to leave behind are listed in descending order of size from the largest to the smallest, you know, country, community and immediate family.

And while that's certainly true, I think they're also listed in ascending order of emotional difficulty from the hard to the hardest.

It might be hard to leave Scotland behind. It might be harder to move permanently from where you are, where all your friends are. However, to say goodbye for good to your immediate family would be the hardest ask of all.

But that's exactly what God's uncompromising grace called Abraham to do. It was a really tough thing to leave his family behind.

He had a father. He was the only son still alive as far as we know in the Bible. His dad, if you look at the genealogy in chapters 11, his dad was 70 when Abraham was born and Abraham was 75 when God called him to go into Canaan.

[16:57] So his dad was 145. And it tells us at the end of verse chapter 11 that Terah lived for 205 years.

So he left his father, his elderly father for 60 years. He never saw him again as far as we know. That was a hard ask.

That was a hard ask. And Abraham too was called to a life of hardship. He seems to have done well in Haran where they where they'd settled for a number of years.

He was probably involved in the family business. But God calls him to give up all these plans. He might have had to settle down and retire comfortably and grow the family business.

Instead, God called him to be a nomad with no settled roots in any one place. Abraham was called to a life of uncertainty as he's not told exactly where he's to go.

[18:16] He's told to go to the land of Canaan, but that was a big area. He was called to live well outside his comfort zone in a hostile environment that didn't share his values, his ethnicity and his faith.

This was a huge ask that God was demanding from Abraham. It was totally uncompromising. God didn't ask Abraham if he would like to do it.

He told him to do it. He was to leave everything about his old way of life behind and put God and God alone first in his life.

This God whose uncompromising call he had heard was to be supreme, exclusively supreme in Abraham's heart.

And folks, this is the same God whom we worship today. We did sing about it. We praise the God of Abraham.

[19:34] He's our God. And his uncompromising grace calls on us today. Jesus announces in Mark 8, 34, if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Can you think of anything in our culture more uncompromising than telling us to deny ourselves? We live in a culture which tells us we've got to always be expressing ourselves, pandering to ourselves, doing what ourselves wants, and Jesus calls us deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me.

And Jesus doesn't call us to a pain-free, suffering-free, struggle-free life. Anyone who says that Jesus does, and sadly there are plenty of spiritual hucksters followers who do or give the impression that if you follow Jesus everything will be wonderful and fine and smooth and no problems.

But these people are lying. Jesus doesn't say that to us. His followers will face suffering and hardship and opposition and hatred in this world.

And why is that? It's because that's what Jesus himself experienced. so that's what we his followers will experience too.

[21:16] God's uncompromising call comes to us in the summons that Jesus gives to us that he and he alone is to be supreme in our heart.

If anyone comes after me, Jesus would say in Luke 14 26, and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

Oh, ouch. There's very little that's more uncompromising than that.

But that's what God's grace is like. You can't dumb it down. You can't soft peddle it. Again, he doesn't ask you, what do you think about it?

Do you fancy doing it? He just tells you what to do. Make me supreme in your life because of who I am.

[22:32] God's grace is God's grace is grace is uncompromising grace. Now, and especially in the light of that last stuff about uncompromising grace, Abraham calls us that most of all, God's grace is extravagant grace.

It's extravagant grace. Now, the core of what God said to Abraham is not Genesis 12 verse 1 with the demands of his uncompromising grace, but it is Genesis 12 verses 2 and 3 with the promised blessings of his extravagant grace.

Five times God uses the term from the blessing family of words. Five times God says I will, I will, I will, I will, I will.

Abraham would discover that while God's grace might be uncompromising, demanding that he made God supreme in his life, it would be more than offset by God's extravagant grace which would see him experiencing blessings beyond his wildest dreams.

Now, these are really important verses, Genesis 12, 2 and 3 on them. They're really important verses and some of you know the name Dale Ralph Davis.

[24:04] He's an American minister, he's retired, he's a theologian who specializes in the Old Testament. If you've never read any of his books, do read them, especially if you want to find out, I was going to say more about baseball and the American Civil War, but you'll find out much more about God.

Dale Ralph Davis calls these four blessings, promises that God makes to Abraham in these verses, he calls them the quad promise, the quad promise.

And let me point them out to you. Do we have, there they are there. There's first of all the promise of people. Verse 2, I will make you into a great nation.

And the phrase to your offspring, your seed, your descendants in verse 7. Abraham, who at this point had no children because Sarah could not have any children, is going to have children by Sarah.

Then there's the promise of a place. He says, verse 1, he said, go to the land, I will show you. And when he arrives in Canaan, verse 7, God says to Abraham, to your offspring, I will give this land.

[25:26] God is concerned that Abraham and his descendants will have a place that they can call home. Thirdly, there's the promise of protection.

I will bless those who bless you. And this is the NIV. Whoever curses you, I will curse. Verse 3. God watches over his people.

He protects his people. We love the psalm. I to the hills will lift mine eyes. God is the keeper of his people.

He watches over his people. He protects his people. Sometimes this protection promise comes in terms of his presence or his peace, if you like.

It's because God is with us that he keeps us for his protection and his presence. They're surgically attached. You can go for protection. You can go for presence.

[26:29] It's the same difference. And finally, there's the promise. I've got here the promise of a person. Dale Ralph Davis calls it the promise of a program. But I'm going to be a bit more touchy-feely and go for the promise of a person.

All peoples on earth will be blessed through you. Verse 3, through one of Abraham's descendants, God's blessing will come to the whole world.

Now, Abraham received them here. The rest of his story is about how they worked themselves out and how he came to understand what they were.

But these are extravagant blessings that God made to Abraham. And the promises that God made of his extravagant grace would more than compensate what God had demanded from him.

He might have to leave his country, but Paul tells us in Romans 4, 13, that God promised he would be heir of the world. He might have to relinquish his place in the wider pecking order of his tribe, but Genesis 12, verse 2, he would become a great nation.

[27:47] He might never see his immediate family again, but if you read on to Genesis 13, verse 16, he would become the father of a new family so numerous that it couldn't be counted.

And the way that Abraham, that God dealt with Abraham in the Bible is a template for how God deals with his people down through the years, how God deals with us, how God will deal with future generations of his people.

This promise of we'll be on the receiving end of God's extravagant grace. Now, the difference between us and Abraham is that because we live in the 21st century, we can look back with 20-20 vision and we can see that these four promises are all fulfilled in Jesus.

God's promise of a people was not just a physical people. Paul will argue in Romans 9-11 that Abraham's descendants that are talked about here, the people.

They're his spiritual descendants, people who may not necessarily share Abraham's DNA, but we share Abraham's faith in Jesus.

[29:14] There are people who know God. God's promise was that there would be a people who would know God, but over the years, Israel deserted God.

God. The nation turned away from God and the people who knew God became less and less and less until they were really down to one and that was Jesus himself.

When Jesus said, I am the true vine, John 15-1, he's saying that he's the true Israelite, the only person who embodied all that God wanted his people to be.

God's promise is the true God. And if you place your trust in Jesus, then you benefit from this first clause of the quad promise in this way.

You see, by faith, we're united to him. And in union with Jesus, Paul tells us in Ephesians 1, verse 3, that we're blessed with every spiritual blessing.

[30:14] Nothing that we need to help us experience God's salvation, to live for Jesus in the world, and to make sure that we arrive safely in heaven has been withheld from us.

We have every spiritual blessing. That's the, Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise of people. He's the fulfillment of the promise of a place, a place where people would find true rest.

We talk about the promised land. We talk about the exodus. We talk about how Joshua conquered the promised land. But the writer to the Hebrews said that even though Joshua conquered the land, he still couldn't give the people rest.

There still was someone to come. And along comes Jesus, Joshua, the great Joshua.

And what does Jesus say? Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. See, the land that's promised is not a bit of real estate at the eastern end of the Mediterranean.

[31:24] The rest that God promises, the land that God promises, is Jesus, the new heavens and the new earth, where we will find perfect rest. The place that God has prepared for us from before the foundation of the world.

God's promise of protection finds its fulfillment in Jesus, who says, I will be with you always to the end of the age.

And what did he do when he said that? He went back into heaven because he was going to send the Holy Spirit who would be with God's people all the time, everywhere. prayer. And by his spirit, Jesus walks beside us every step of our journey through life.

We will experience difficulties, challenging circumstances, pain, suffering, troubles, but Jesus' presence will protect us for no one can snatch us out of his hands.

And even though we have to travel through dark places, we'll discover that Jesus, the good shepherd is with us. So there's no need to be afraid. And God's promise of a person or a program, a savior who would be a descendant of Abraham, as we know, finds his focus in Jesus.

[32:45] He's the one in whom all peoples on earth will be blessed. Like Abraham, we've been called out of our paganism and idolatry to experience the salvation God secured by Jesus, the ultimate son of Abraham through his death on the cross.

Folks, what amazing grace God lavishes on us. Again, I'm showing my age, but one of my heroes was Jim Elliot, an American missionary who was killed in January 1956, trying to evangelize the Oca people in Ecuador.

And in his journal, Jim Elliot wrote these words, He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

He's no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. God's grace is uncompromising.

It calls on you to give up everything to follow Jesus. But you'll never be a loser by following Jesus.

[34:06] You will gain God's extravagant grace which you cannot lose because God won't allow you to lose it. So, if you're holding back in your discipleship, if God is telling you to do something, and you're hesitant to obey what God is wanting you to do, maybe he's calling you in some sort of Christian service, you guys as you're thinking about what you're going to do with your life, some of you are panicking in your third year at uni, and you're, what am I going to do at the end of next year?

if you're praying about it, if you feel God is calling you to do something, and maybe some of you guys who are middle-aged, remember Abraham was 75 when God called him, and you're hesitant about it, then let the pool of God's extravagant grace in Jesus move you into obedience to God's word, and a deeper commitment to Jesus.

If you're reluctant to sign up to the demands of God's uncompromising grace, and make Jesus supreme in your heart, you need to listen very, very carefully, and to act upon Jesus' extravagant promise in Mark 10, 29 and 30.

He says, I tell you the truth, no one, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and for the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age and in the age to come.

Abraham discovered that Jesus is as good as his promise. I hope that you discover that too as well. I know that I discovered it.

[36 : 19] my dad was a minister and when I told him I felt I was called to be a minister, I was in my second, nearly at the end of my second year at uni and you only did three years in Northern Ireland so you had to wonder what on earth am I going to do with it?

And I felt through one of my dad's sermons, God calling me into the ministry and my dad said to me, Roger, you're not going to be rich being a minister but you will make people rich and he was so right, he was so right and God's extravagant grace means for everything and there are many of us here who know that's true.

God's call is uncompromising but his grace is extravagant. So we've got sovereign grace, unexpected grace, uncompromising grace, extravagant grace and finally I think I can use this term, conditional grace.

I get a bit jittery when I hear people talk about unconditional grace. It's kind of people who talk about or saying I just want God to leave me alone and just love me the way I am even if I don't want to change.

We come to Jesus just as we are but Jesus doesn't leave us just as we are. God's grace is totally undeserved.

[37 : 47] It's totally undeserved but to experience it it's conditional. Abraham's call highlights that. Abraham experiences God's extravagant grace the quad promise as he obeys God's word.

The Lord had said to Abraham leave verse 1 so verse 4 Abraham left as the Lord told him.

Experiencing God's grace was not unconditional it was conditional.

It was his obedience that opened up the door for Abraham experiencing all God's blessings. It wasn't that his obedience earned God's grace.

God's grace had already come to him before that but his obedience enabled him to access God's extravagant grace. All we're told is that Abraham heard God speaking to him and he did what God said.

And commenting on this Martin Luther writes Abraham followed the naked voice of God he left all and followed the almighty preferring the word of God to everything else and loving it above all things.

[38 : 59] Obedience to God's word. And he also experiences God's extravagant grace as he believes God's promise. Without going into all the ins and outs today because I want to deal about it next time.

All the altar building stuff that Abraham did in verses 8 and 9 was an outward sign that Abraham believed God's promise. He not actually received any of the promised blessings but he believed that God would deliver them.

And that's why he went. And as he lived in this gap between the already and the not yet, Abraham experienced God's extravagant grace on the condition that he obeyed God's word and believed God's promise.

And that's how we experience God's grace as we live in the already but not yet. The gap between Jesus' first coming and the second coming. We too discover that God calls on us to obey his word. We do what God says in his word and our obedience if you like is the key that opens up the door to God's blessings. The Bible's order is always obey or obedience followed by blessing.

[40 : 19] It's always obedience followed by blessing but do you know what we want? We want to change the order. we say to God God you bless me and I'll obey you.

But God says no no no no no no no no you've got it the wrong way around. God says you obey me and I will bless you.

don't cut yourself off from God's blessing by trying to reverse God's order. Not a clever thing to do. And God tells us to believe.

God calls on us to believe his promises. We're to live by faith believing that God's promises in his word will happen even at the present time when there appears no chance of it happening.

God's grace is his conditions of obedience and belief in the promises. So here we have a new beginning for Abraham.

[41 : 24] God spoke to him and Abraham obeyed leaving the earthly city of Ur and Haran and heading off to a heavenly city with foundations whose architecture and builder is God.

Hebrews 11 verse 10. God made promises to him and Abraham believed them for it was by faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country living in tents.

Hebrews 11 verse 9. And today can be a new beginning for you. God is speaking to you through his word.

He's calling some of you and speaking to some of you who are not Christians but have maybe known that you should follow Jesus for a long long time. He's saying today is the day.

Today is the day. New beginning. Maybe he's calling some of us older people for a new beginning, a new sphere of service.

[42 : 33] Some of you younger guys, a new sphere, a new beginning. the day when you say, Lord, use me, use even me, just as you will and where and when, until your gracious face I see, your joy share.

This can be a new beginning for you. God is speaking to you. He's calling you to experience his extravagant grace. Are you going to obey his word and believe his promises and so have a new beginning in your life?

Let's pray for a moment. God, if uncompromising and extravagant grace, by your spirit and through your word you've come and you have invaded what we thought was our own personal space. You demand that we make you supreme in our hearts by denying ourselves and taking up our cross and following Jesus. However, you also promise us all these high tariff blessings of your salvation. We would be fools not to give up what we cannot keep in order to gain what we cannot lose. So help us to obey your word and believe your promises so that we might receive your grace and experience your blessings.

[43 : 49] And we ask this all in the name of the one who is the fulfillment, climax, and terminal point of all your covenant promises, even Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

Amen. Amen.