

## 09/10/2018 - Genesis 12

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, good evening. I keep wanting to say good morning. It's very confusing and disorienting. I am glad to be here with you tonight. I've worshipped with North Shore a couple of times over the years and since we've been in town.
- But it's really a delight to be here tonight. As Chris said, I'm planting a new church or part of a group of people planting a new church. Hopefully we're going to call it Grace and Peace Church.
- It is in the northeast suburbs of our city. I like to say it's to the mall and beyond, you know. Out through Collegedale and Oodawa and those parts of our city that are growing pretty tremendously.
- There's new businesses. There are new people all over the place. Volkswagen is one of the big employers out there. And it seems to be that this part of our city is an area where people are transplants from all over the country and even all over the globe.
- A couple of weeks ago we had a dinner party at our house and I stood up at one point and looked around this table on our porch. And there were Germans and Bulgarians and a Slovakian woman and a Canadian man.
- [ 1 : 1 2 ] And people from outside of the southeast. And there were southern suburbanites as well. There was even one woman who was a self-proclaimed redneck. And it was incredible. It felt like the world had come to Chattanooga.
- The nations have come to Oodawa. Who would have thought? But that is what is the reality in the area of town where we're living. And it's really exciting work. But if I'm honest with you, I really didn't think that this is what I would be doing.
- You know, I kind of thought, Lord, surely you could find somebody else who could do this job a lot better than me. And it's frankly a long way from home. My wife and I both grew up in Dallas.
- We have been ministering in Austin and San Antonio the last number of years. Our children were raised there. And so this is a bit of a ways. A way.
- Now there's more to the story there to explain some of that. But it is a long way. And I think that... And so I was surprised that God's mission included me coming to Chattanooga to plant a church.
- [ 2 : 2 4 ] That was a surprise to me as much as anybody. And I think whenever you begin to talk about the mission of God, what is God at work doing? I think most of us have that kind of inclination to say, what is God really doing?
- And what role do I have to play in that? It's a little bit scary. It's a little bit terrifying. And it's a little bit confusing. And that's why I love the passage that we're looking at tonight.
- Because if you will listen to what God is saying in this passage in Genesis 12, if you'll hear Him, what you're going to hear is God's heart for His mission in the world.
- And you're going to hear the role that you have to play in it. And I can't tell if it's just rubbing against my beard. Yeah? Okay. These little guys are tricky. Here we go.

Leave it right there. And move it like that. Okay. Now I will not move my head at all. I'm going to just read again this part from Genesis 12.

[ 3 : 33 ] You've got your bulletins. I want you to hear God's heart in this. Now Yahweh said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I'll show you.

And I will make of you a great nation. 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 the families of the earth shall be blessed. So Abram went as Yahweh had told him. The passage is really straightforward.

It's fairly simple actually. There's three basic parts to it. Abram, go. I'm going to bless you. You will be a blessing.

It sounds simple enough. And if we just took it at its face value, I think we could come up with a lot of ways to talk about that. But the reality is, is the order in which God says this actually conceals something of the gospel logic that is at work in the rest of the entire scriptures.

[ 4 : 36 ] Because typically in the scriptures, they don't typically say, go, I'll bless you and you will be a blessing. Typically what happens is God says first, I will bless you.

So that you will be a blessing. And now on the basis of that, I want you to go. And so that's actually the way that I want to take this passage. It's to reorient the logic a little bit, the order of things.

And we're going to get to why that is in a minute. But at the fundamental level, what should be clear is that the going and the doing that we do for God is always based upon the blessing that God has given us, first and foremost.

And the blessing He's working through us. So, let's just look at it very simply. God starts, I will bless you. That's the idea at the beginning of this passage.

And there's a couple of parts to that blessing. He says, I will make you a great nation. God's calling Abram to leave, right? He's supposed to go leave his land.

[ 5 : 43 ] He's living in a place called Ur of the Chaldees. And God is calling him to go to a place that he doesn't even know yet. He's losing everything. He's losing his homeland. He's losing his family.

He's losing everything that felt safe and comfortable. And what God is saying is, I'm going to make a new nation out of you. Everything that you are losing, your physical land, this place that has been home for you, I'm going to make a new home for you.

There's something really encouraging about the fact that what God is saying to Abram is, I'm going to give you a new home, a God-given home. A new place to call what is good and right and home.

Then he says, I'll make you a great nation. And then he says, I'll make your name great. Abram's going to leave his father's house. Presumably, that means he's leaving his father's inheritance.

He's leaving the part of his world that felt safe and secure. His entire identity to that point was being uprooted. God was calling him to uproot his identity.

[ 6 : 53 ] That's a huge challenge. And yet, what he says is, I'll make your name great. What we find out in a few chapters is that God renames Abram to Abraham.

Why does he rename him? Well, whenever there's naming in the scriptures, that's a significant deal, right? And we actually have that in our own culture.

We reveal new baby names on Facebook. Why do we do that? Because the name that is given to something talks about its significance. Its identity.

That this child is now going to take on what this name is. And what God is saying is, look, Abram, I'm uprooting you from this place of your identity and I'm going to give you a God-given identity.

A God-given sense of belonging to a new family. A God-made family. I'll make you a great nation. I'll make your name great.

[ 7 : 50 ] And then he says, I'll bless those who bless you. Him who dishonors you, I will curse. I think what God is saying is, look, Abram, I'm calling you to do this incredible thing, but what you need to know is, I'm going to defend you.

I'm going to guard you. I'm going to guide you in this place that I'm sending you. In this world that is going to be filled with enemies and is going to be filled with trouble and uncertainty, I am promising to be with you.

I'm going to be with you. I'm going to be your protection. I'm going to be your stability. What does that mean about God's blessing?

God's blessing is not a hashtag. Hashtag blessed. God's blessing is not some sort of sappy southern sentimentality that we use to talk about the fact that we had a windfall of money.

You are not blessed because you get on the front row at the Avett Brothers concert, which I'm going to be going to in a little while. You are not blessed because things are going great in your life.

[ 8 : 54 ] That's not what the biblical idea of blessing is. In the Bible, what blessing is, is it is God's favor resting upon a person. It is His love and His grace and His mercy being known to that person.

It is that person knowing who God is and what God is like and His favor resting upon them. It means for Abram to be blessed by God means that Abram would know that God Almighty, the God of the universe, has reached down from heaven to earth and grabbed Abram out of this entire unbelieving society and has said, I am going to set my love upon you.

That's what it means to be blessed. And the reality is, is that most Christians sit in their pew and they have no idea that God has blessed them in such a way that He has set His magnificent love upon them.

I'd be willing to say that most Christians don't believe that they are blessed in that kind of way. They might say, hashtag blessed, but it's for some totally other reason.

And what God is saying here is, Abram, I'm going to bless you. My favor will rest upon you. Okay, so, I will bless you.

[ 10 : 24 ] Why? So that you will be a blessing. God's blessing is so that Abram would be a blessing. Did you catch to whom Abram is to be a blessing?

Verse 3, And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. How many families of the earth shall be blessed?

All the families of the earth shall be blessed in Abram. Okay, this passage gets to the incredibly cosmic dimension of God's blessing.

God's blessing is intended to go to His people and through His people to the entire world, to every person, of every type, in every place.

They are all to know the blessing of God in Christ through His people. That is huge. But you realize that's not the first time that God has said that that's the design of His blessing.

[ 11 : 26 ] Think back to the very beginning. Adam and Eve. God took Adam and Eve and He put them in the midst of this garden. He created this beautiful place. Everything was right with the world.

They were right with God. They were right with one another. They were blessed. And God said to them, you remember what God told them? Be fruitful. That's a sign of God's blessing.

Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. Subdue it. Keep this land. Guard this land. What we could summarize what God was telling Adam and Eve is, in this land of blessing, you are now called to help every creature in this world know that they are blessed by God, that they are His creatures, His children.

They should know the blessing of God through your care for the created world. Jesus talks this way, too. We read from Luke chapter 4.

Jesus' first act of His public ministry, He stood up at a church, like this, or synagogue, and He took the scroll of Isaiah. And what did Jesus read?

[ 12 : 38 ] That good news was going to be proclaimed to the poor. That liberty was going to be proclaimed to the captives. That sight was going to be given to the blind. That those who were oppressed were going to find freedom.

And Jesus summarized it, and He said that every person should know that this is the year of the Lord's favor. What is the Lord's favor? It is His blessing being called down upon them.

Jesus' entire ministry was focused on helping people see who God was and see the blessing of God that He has given to them. What John talks about, he says about Jesus, when you see Jesus, you see the Father.

What Jesus was doing was doing the kinds of works, both in word and in deed, to show forth God's blessings so that every person that Jesus came into contact with would see what God is like.

They'd see who God is, and they would see the kinds of things that God does. What are the kinds of things that God does? He heals blind people. And He values the oppressed.

[ 13 : 53 ] And He loves the people who are weak. And He proclaims forgiveness and grace and mercy.

And He deals harshly with religious hypocrites. That's the kind of thing that God does. And we know that because we see that in Jesus.

Everything about Jesus' ministry was to show forth God so that we would know what God's blessing looked like. Leslie Newbigin is a theologian. He spends all of his time, well, he's dead now, but he used to spend all of his time talking about who God was and what God was like.

And one of the things he described the work of theology as, he said, theology is for the mending of the world. The reason that we study who God is is so that we can see God's blessing known in this world to all the world so that the brokenness of this world can be put back together.

That's what Paul is talking about in Colossians 1 that we just read at the end. That in Christ Jesus, that all things are, He is reconciling to Himself all things, things in heaven, things on earth, making peace by His own blood.

[ 15 : 12 ] Jesus has come so that the blessing of God would be known by people in this world, by all people in this world. That the broken parts of this world would be put back together.

That in Jesus, the enemies of God and the enemies of God's people would be defeated. That in Jesus, injustice and violence and materialism and unchecked power and the pride of mankind would all be rejected.

In Jesus, we might know the blessing of God. Why don't you take a minute? Imagine, actually look at this person's face. Imagine a person in your life that has no idea of the magnitude of the blessing of God that comes to us in Christ.

Maybe it's a neighbor across the street or a co-worker or a family member or a friend. See, what God is saying to Abram here is that living as a person who has been blessed by God, the entire thrust of Abram's discipleship is towards other people knowing the blessing of God.

We can extrapolate that for ourselves and say, your entire goal as a disciple of Jesus is so that all people in this world would know the blessing of God.

[ 16 : 48 ] That person that you're thinking of, that they might know the blessing of God. So, I will bless you so you will be a blessing.

Now go. Now go. See, when you reorient the order of the passage, the logic of the passage to be what fits with the rest of Scripture, you get, you get what God is doing here.

You know, Abraham was not blessed because he went. There's a lot of preachers who have preached that. You know, go, I'll bless you. If you go, then I'll bless you. But that's really not what God is doing here.

God is saying, I am blessing you so that you'll be a blessing. Now I want you to go. And the reason we know that is because Jesus talks this same way in other places. Do you remember the Great Commission?

You know, that great, that great message of Jesus where he gathers his eleven remaining disciples. He's about to ascend to God and he gathers them together and he says, go.

[ 17 : 55 ] Make disciples, baptizing them in my name and teaching them to do all that I commanded. And I will be with you to the very end of the age. He begins with go. It sounds like the same idea.

But do you remember what chapter this comes in in the book of Matthew? It's chapter 28. Do you know what comes after this in the book of Matthew? Nothing.

These are the last four verses of the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus has spent 33 years, his entire life and ministry pouring into his disciples, teaching them, showing them, training them, equipping them so that they would know the blessing of God that rests upon them in the work of Christ and the blessing that they are to be.

And now at the very end, Jesus says, now, now go. Now go and do this. A preacher that I really love, a guy named Jeff Vandersvelt, he says it this way, the love of God given to us, God's love displayed in us, will accomplish God's love through us.

Don't you see the logic of what God is doing here? The blessing of God in us will be the blessing of God through us. And that's the call that we have. And so we can only discover our mission in God's mission as we know the blessing of God.

[ 19 : 22 ] As we understand His blessing to us, that will shape the way that we go. I said earlier that Natalie and I, we came quite a ways to move to Chattanooga. But there's actually more to the story.

In 1995, one of my friends said, hey, you need to meet, you need to have lunch with this guy who is going to be coming to your campus. I was a sophomore at SMU in Dallas at the time.

And so I went and met this man named Dick O'Farrell for lunch. Now Dick at the time owned a camp for boys, a summer camp for boys down on Lookout Mountain, not 30 miles from here.

And sitting down with him, he offered me a job. He invited me to come and work there for a summer. And so I said yes. And I returned to Lookout Mountain dozens of times over the last 20 some odd years since then.

And what happened at that place was that God blessed me in a profound way. He gave me spiritual fathers that I desperately needed. He gave me spiritual brothers that I never really knew that I could have.

- [ 20 : 33 ] And in that place, there was a significant amount of blessing of God in my life. And so when I got a call that they needed a church to be planted in Chattanooga, my first thought was, in the place of God's blessing, because I know God's blessing in this place, that shapes the way that I think about His calling for me to go.

Chattanooga wasn't a random place that I threw a dart onto a map. It was the result and the part, it was intimately related to God's blessing in my life that shaped my going.

Because that's how God works. It is what God has done in your life that is going to call you to where He wants you to go. And that's part of what was happening with Abraham.

God was calling Abram to leave his land and his family and his comfort and his security and his expertise in the world to leave his inheritance, to leave everything that made Abram successful in life, that made life make sense for him.

He was being called away from. And he was called to go to something that he didn't know exactly what would happen. And that's the call that God has for each one of us to join His mission in something that we can't control.

- [ 22 : 01 ] And that's terrifying. I think that's part of the reason that we get uncomfortable whenever we talk about God's mission is because we don't know what the end is going to look like.

You know, this passage exposes something deep within all of us. It shows us that we desire to stay put in our own territory.

It shows us how deeply we desire to be comfortable and secure. To avoid those awkward conversations.

To avoid dangerous situations. to keep a safe distance from people who are, frankly, difficult to deal with. The reality is most, most of you want control and clarity and safety more than you want God's mission.

And see, we could say that that's actually exactly what sin really is. Isn't it? It's to take the blessing of God that we have received and refuse to be a blessing to others.

- [ 23 : 16 ] It's kind of what Adam and Eve did, isn't it? God said, I'm blessing you, I'm putting you in this place to be a blessing and instead of being a blessing, what did Adam and Eve do?

They took that blessing and they pulled back, they hoarded, they were fearful, they wanted to use it for their own selfish ambition. salvation. The nature of sin is to say I'm going to recognize God's blessings and yet not live in light of them.

So I think one thing that this passage is doing is it's asking us to examine our fear of where God might call us. It's, I think actually if you ask the question why does some of this make me so anxious and fearful, you might discover areas of your life that you want to see God's blessing be something that is just simply for you and your safe people which it was never meant to be.

Some self-examination. Now, I also realize that very few of us are called to go across the country or across the globe. That's not really the point but all of us are called to something as a part of God's mission.

Perhaps what it is that you're called to is just simply walk across the street to someone that is unfamiliar and difficult for you. Perhaps you are called to cross some sort of socioeconomic or racial divide.

- [ 24 : 51 ] Perhaps you are just simply called to cross a line that your mama always warned you never to cross. Maybe you are called to go across the office or maybe you are called to walk across the bedroom to that other person that needs to know the blessing of God in their life.

You are called to go from the place of God's blessing to the people who need to know it. God how do we wrap this up?

I think that what we need to say is that that's the fundamental idea is that the going is always going to be built on the blessing and we have a greater sense of blessing than even Abram had.

God spoke to Abram and that was pretty great. But what Jesus says is that we actually have something that the prophets of old longed to see. We have the full story of Christ.

Christ is the greater Abraham. Christ Jesus left his heavenly father. Jesus left his land his kindred his tribe he left the wealth and the honor and the glory that was rightfully his as the son of God and he went in order to show forth the blessings of God for all people.

[ 26 : 17 ] Jesus has done that and in his life and in his death and in his resurrection what we have is the certainty of God's blessing resting upon us in a more profound way even than Abram had.

I actually think one of the coolest parts of this passage is verse 4 at the very end. So Abram went as Yahweh had told him.

He didn't experience the fullness of God's blessing quite yet. He hadn't had all of the promises revealed but yet out of the blessing that he had received he went.

How did he do that? How did he have the courage to move forward? The Apostle Paul reflecting on Abram's life picks up a quote from a couple of chapters after Genesis 12 and this quote is this that Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

What did Abraham believe about God that was credited to him as righteousness? Maybe that God was true, that he was really there, that he was good, that he keeps his promises.

[ 27 : 37 ] All of those things could be part of what Paul is talking about. But at some sort of fundamental level, Abraham believed that the blessing of God had fallen upon him.

He believed that God's goodness was his, that the favor of God rested upon him, and that enabled his going. You see, as you think about what is God's mission in the world, and where do I fit in God's mission in the world, that is the fundamental thing for you.

You are called not first and foremost to go. That's not your calling. Your first calling is to believe the blessing of God, to believe in faith, to see what God has done in Christ Jesus, and to live in the fullness of that.

Because, here's what is true. If you begin to allow the blessing of God to be the most fundamental thing about your life, it is going to change you.

It is going to empower you in ways that you did not anticipate, and you are going to find yourself going with joy to places you never really thought you'd go. Here's the deal. If you don't want to go, don't believe in the blessing of Jesus.

[ 28 : 55 ] But if you start to take the gospel on, this message that the almighty God has reached down and has poured out his love upon you and forgiven you and reclaimed you and is remaking you and is using you to transform others in this world, it will energize you.

Church, what would it be like if we were the kinds of people who so lived in the blessing and the confidence of living in the blessing of God that it began to change our lives?

How would the world view the church if the church was more interested in showing forth the blessing of God to the world than anything else?

Than any sort of self-protection? Than any sort of fear and anxiety and pulling back if our inclination was in Christ to go, what would that be like?

How transformative would that be? There's a reason that Abram is called the father of our faith. It's because he was the father of faith.

[ 30 : 22 ] In faith, he was enabled to go. Faith in God's blessing. God's mission for the world and that's God's mission in us.

And I hope that we, you know, in the northern hinterlands of our city, I hope that's the kind of thing that we are taking on.

So, we should stop there. Let me pray. Our heavenly father, we praise you for your grace and your mercy to us in Christ. We praise you for the blessing of God that we can see in the scriptures that we can know.

And we pray, Lord, that you would give us faith to see it and then to be called to go. We pray it in Christ's name. Amen.