

Blessing and Gathering

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[0:00] Well, these days we're given all sorts of promises to make life better, from politicians to products. So on the next slide, here is a classic example recently, Mr Trump with his big campaign promise to America to make America great again.

He won the election on that promise. I'll take the next slide, the Walmart superstore. They promise, save money, live better. That's their slogan. They say that you'll shop here, you'll save money, which leads to a better life.

Although that assumes that their products don't break and you don't have to buy two of them, and that money actually brings happiness. But my favourite one that I found actually is a, well I'm actually going to play the TV commercial and just have a look at this.

Let's see how it goes. I was your classic busy mum. Get back here! Husband and I both worked. Babysitter bailed. Three kids. Oh, careful.

You know, busy. But it was the little things that really drove me to the edge. Laundry that piled up. Garbage not getting taken out.

[1:10] Just push it back. And apparently everyone in my family thought that light bulbs just changed themselves. Anyway, one day I was making BLTs for lunch when I said, honey, can you change the light bulb?

The next day I was making bacon for the salad and I said, can you set the tape? It was like, oh.

Change your life with bacon. Honey, could you mow the... Eat their bacon and their promise, life will get better.

It's amazing. I love it. There are all sorts of promises out there, as I said, from politician to products and they promise to make our lives better. But that means, by the way, that everyone knows that life is not as good as it could be.

That it could be better. Something has happened. And as we've seen over the past few weeks, Genesis 1 to 11 has happened. And today we come to some other promises, this time from God, which seek to address what has happened in Genesis 1 to 11 and truly do make life better.

[2:31] In fact, these promises set God's agenda for the rest of the Old Testament and the New Testament, even beyond to us here today, as we look forward to a life made better and perfect in heaven.

So our passage today is a significant turning point in the book of Genesis. And not just Genesis, but the Old Testament, in fact, the whole Bible. You could even say that today's passage is like the theological halfway point of the Bible, because even though we've got that much more to go, all of that is about unpacking these promises today.

But to see their significance, we need to first remember their context, you know, the story so far, which is point one in your outline. What's more, this is our last talk in Genesis for this year, which for some of you may be a relief since it's been hard work.

It actually gets easier after chapter 12. But because it's our last one, we're going to recap as well. And so today's talk will be a bit longer, but I will work hard to keep you with me along the way.

So let's get started with the recaps. On the next slide, we started with the account of the creation of heavens and earth. Remember, the writer uses that phrase, this is the account of dot, dot, dot to break up his book.

[3 : 46] And here we saw that everything that God made was very good. We had God's people, Adam and Eve, living in God's place, the garden, under God's loving rule, his word, and enjoying God's blessings of life and relationship with God.

It was heaven on earth. But then came the serpent who tempted them and Adam and Eve who sinned. So blessing turned to curse, life turned to death, good turned to bad.

And yet we remember that chapter 3, verse 15, God promised that an offspring of Eve, a child, a seed of Eve, would crush the serpent's head. And in so doing, this offspring would deal with sin and death and bring blessing instead of cursing.

Of course, in chapter 4, the first offspring of Eve was Cain. And yet he did not crush the serpent's head or rule over sin and death, did he? Do you remember? Instead, he was ruled by sin and then caused death, the death of his brother, Abel.

And so there was more cursing in chapter 4. And yet at the end of this account, it ended with grace, Seth, whose name means granted. God granted graciously another offspring of Eve.

[4 : 58] And then on the bottom of the slide there, the next account was the account of Adam's line. And again, it started off good. There was the family line grew. There was long lifespans.

And there was the birth of many sons and daughters, it said. And yet there was also, it also went bad because there was this refrain that occurred all the way through the chapter 5.

Do you remember the refrain? And he died. It would almost be comical if it were not so sad.

And this death was a result of sin which had run rampant. And so in the first part of chapter 6, God saw how great humanity's weakness was. And so decided he needed to, or had to, judge.

And so more death came. Lifespans were shortened. And God decided to flood the world. And yet again, this section ended with grace. So Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.

[5 : 56] And on the next slide, we have the next section which is the account of Noah. God used Noah to save humanity and the animals. While God washed away the wickedness of humanity in the flood.

And so there was this fresh start with a fresh blessing from God. And yet this too went bad. It ended with Noah getting drunk and his son Canaan behaving badly and being cursed.

And so blessing again turned to cursing. And yet there was some grace at the end because Shem was praised or blessed, if you like.

And then last week at the bottom of the slide there, we had the account of Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. And it looked like things were back on track. It was off to a good start.

People were scattering and filling the earth, it seemed. And yet we found out it was only because they had rebelled against God. The scattering was a result of sin where people no longer wanted to live with God and make God's name great.

[7:00] Instead, people wanted to live without God and make their own name great. And so they were divided by language and forced to scatter over the earth.

So we're left with a pretty depressing account of the world's beginning. There is no united people of God who live in the perfect place of God under the loving rule of God.

And so enjoying all the blessings of God. Instead, we are left with what sounds like our world today. We are left with a divided people of the world who live in a cursed world where there is disease and decay and death.

Under their own rule, which does evil as well as good. Do you remember what I said last week? Humanity can do good, yes, but because of our hearts, we also do evil. We invent the 3D printer to print a human heart to save life.

And at the same time, we can print a gun to take life. And so people don't enjoy all the blessings of God in this world. Now, I don't know about you, but if I was God at this point, I'd be pretty tempted to give up.

[8:05] I mean, time and time again, good goes bad. Time and time again, God offers grace and then humanity messes up. Time and time again, the promise of an offspring or seed who would crush the serpent's head, deal with sin and death, bring blessing.

Well, that one ends up being mastered by sin or succumbing to death or bringing cursing. I remember once trying to ice skate in my teenage years, and I started off quite well at the time.

But it wasn't long before I ended up on my backside. And time and time again, that would happen. And so after repeatedly wetting my pants from the ice, to be clear, I decided that ice skating was just not for me.

I just had enough. I gave it up. But God does not give up. He's determined to bless. That's the type of God we have. And so as we come to the next section, chapter 11, verse 10, the passage just before ours today, the writer hones in on Shem's line and signals hope.

Just have a look at chapter 11, verse 10 for a moment. So page 10, chapter 11, verse 10. This is the account of Shem's family line. Two years after the flood, when Shem was 100 years old, he became the father of Arthur Axe.

[9:25] I don't even know how to pronounce that, actually. And after that came the father of him, Shem lived 500 years and had other sons and daughters. He's going through the genealogy, which sounds a lot like chapter 5, doesn't it?

Now, the writer has already mentioned Shem's sons before in chapter 10, verse 21. Do you see there? Chapter 10, verse 21. He's already told us who most of his sons were. So why does the writer list Shem's descendants again?

It seems he wants us to now focus on Shem out of the three brothers or out of the three sons of Noah, because he knows it is from Shem's line that the promised offspring, the promised seed of Eve would come.

And as you just skim over those verses, chapter 11, verse 10 to verse 26, just that account of Shem's line, if you just skim over them with your eyes, you notice that it, again, sounds very much like the genealogy of Adam's line.

Except there are a couple of differences. First, people are generally declining in age. Their lifespans are getting shorter, just as God said they would in chapter 6. And second, do you notice the refrain that is missing?

[10:40] Do you notice the refrain that is missing? There's no, and he died, is there? Now, it's assumed that they don't live forever, but the writer seems to deliberately leave out the phrase this time to signal hope.

Hope is on the horizon. And as we trace Shem's genealogy, it ends on the 10th generation with Abram, Nahor and Haran. And so could hope and the promised seed come through one of these three sons of Noah?

It's as though the writer is building the anticipation, you see. It's like being at the cricket where the crowd starts off that slow clap, you know, that slow clap, and then they kind of get faster and faster and faster and faster.

As the writer starts to pick up pace, he opens the next section in chapter 11, verse 27, with some background about the three sons of terror, Abram, Nahor and Haran.

But by verse 31, the pace of the clapping has increased as the focus narrows to Abram until chapter 12, where God announces to Abram, After 11 depressing chapters of cursing, Here is the breakthrough bowl with blessing.

[12:17] Here is the watershed moment. Here is the hope for humanity. Here is God's gracious and divine intervention. This is what Shem's account and Terah's account were both leading up to.

God's promises to Abram. Now, I was trying to work out how to help us feel the bigness of this moment.

And so I thought, oh, well, let me go for a song where it kind of, it lulls along, and then it just booms out. And the only song I could think of, Don't Laugh, was this next one. So let's have a play. Goes along.

It's building. And there's a pause. Okay. There's just me.

We can stop it now. I didn't use it this morning for the holidays. It's the 1812 overture with the cannons and so on. But it's meant to be like that.

[13:20] This is a huge moment. A huge moment. These are big promises. And so what are the content of these promises? Well, point to in your outlines and we'll look at chapter 12, verse 1 in your Bibles.

The Lord had said to Abram, go from your own country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. Here's the first promise.

A land that God will show him. And in verse 7, if you just scan down the page to verse 7, God makes it even more explicit. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, to your offspring, I will give this land.

Here's the first promise. A land that he will give Abram's descendants to enjoy. And God reiterates this promise in chapter 13 and 15 and 17. Here is God's promising another place for his people to dwell.

A place like Eden, you see. The second promise is a promise of a people or an offspring. So verse 2 says, I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you.

[14:25] Here the blessing is fruitfulness. God is going to make Abram into a great nation. And again, this promise is repeated in chapter 13, 15 and 17. In fact, in chapter 17, God will change his name from Abram, which means father, to Abraham, which means father of many nations.

That's how many offspring are going to come from him. A third, the third promise is to make Abram's name great. Unlike the people of Babel who tried to make their own name great, God will make Abram's name great.

And fourthly, God promised that Abram would be a blessing to others. So those who bless Abram, that is to those who align themselves with Abram, will be blessed.

And in fact, verse 3, all people of the earth, including us, will be blessed through Abram. You see, these promises were meant to reverse the effects of the four.

For God is promising to create another people of God, to live in the perfect place of God, under the loving rule of God, and so enjoy all the blessings of God, just like the Garden of Eden.

[15:33] But these blessings would also flow from this nation of Abram, this new people of God, out to all the nations, all the peoples of the world.

And are these not the type of promises that we actually need for a better life? Are these not the promises that humanity actually longs for? I mean, think about it.

Do not people long to be long to a family, to be part of a people, to belong to a community, who will care about them and whom they can care for in return? I mean, why is it that solitary confinement is actually used as a punishment?

Is it not because we are wired for relationship with others? Is it not because we are built to belong to a family, to a people, to a community? And this is what God is promising.

Or does not humanity also long for a place to call home? I mean, whenever you go away on holidays, and you come back home for the first time, don't you kind of just, ah, home.

[16:37] You know, you kind of smell the home air, and you relax, you immediately relax. Has that ever happened to you? Until you realize, of course, there's all this washing from your holiday that you need to do. Actually, who am I kidding?

Michelle does all our washing. But I feel for her, you know. I get in trouble for that one. The point is, we're wired also for a place to call home, a land to rest in.

In the words of Dorothy from Wizard of Oz, there's no place like home. And does not humanity long also for blessing rather than cursing? A life where there's always, it goes well?

A life that prospers and is not, you know, caused, there's no pain caused by selfishness? There's no issue caused by disease and death?

Do we not long for a life of blessing? You see, God's promises here are promises that will restore Eden, yes. But they are also the promises, the very ones that humanity actually longs for, to have a better life.

[17:41] In fact, they are the type of promises that people of Babel tried to accomplish for themselves, but could not last week. And here is God graciously giving these promises to Abram.

And notice, God alone will accomplish them. It doesn't depend on Abram, really. It depends on God. See the repetition of the word, I will? Four times, I will, I will, I will do this, says God.

And to emphasize the point, God chooses a man, one man, to do it all through. And unlike Noah, this one man, Abram, didn't even worship God. Abram was off worshiping other gods when God called him.

And his wife, Sarai, we're told in chapter 11, verse 30, is barren. She cannot have children. And yet, what is the one thing you need to become a great nation? Children, or at least one child.

Yet God chooses Abram and Sarai to show that what will come through them can only be from him. In fact, we'll hear in a moment that the land God promises to give is already occupied.

[18:48] In other words, God makes promises that seem impossible to us to accomplish. Well, that's the very point. They seem impossible to us so that we'll know it's all from him.

Well, how will Abram respond? Point three. Verse four. So Abram went as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he went out from Haran.

He took his wife, Sarai, his nephew, Lot, and all the possessions they had accumulated, and the people they had acquired in Haran. And they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. Abram traveled through the land as far as the side of the great tree of Morah at Shechem.

At that time, the Canaanites were in the land. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, To your offspring I will give this land. So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.

What does Abram do? He believes, doesn't he? God's promises. So much so that he obeys. And when his father dies at the end of chapter 11, he doesn't go back to his homeland and his extended family.

[19:52] No, he presses on to a place that he knows nothing about. It's extraordinary. He's never been there. But he just travels on until God says, Stop. This is the place.

I mean, if you go on holidays to a new place, we research first, don't we? We work out how much it's going to cost, what the location's like. Does it have a kids' program?

That's really important. How many stars is it rated? How much more would you check it out if you're going to live there permanently? And yet, Abram doesn't ask for the brochures or the pamphlets.

He simply just trusts God and goes. And he keeps going until verse 7. God says, Stop. I'm going to give this place to your offspring.

And notice verse 6. The land is already occupied by the Canaanites. Again, if that was me, I'd be thinking, I'm not so sure about this, God. We passed a really nice and empty place back there.

[20:51] Why don't we go back to that one? But Abraham does none of that. Instead, he trusts God's promise so much so that he builds an altar to God in worship of God.

It's as though he says, Thanks so much, God. My descendants are going to love this place. And from there, he continues to travel around the land as though he is staking it out. Such is his trust in God's promise.

You see verse 8? From there, he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord, another one, and called on the name of the Lord.

And then Abram set out and continued towards the Negev. When you go out shopping and you're going to have lunch out in one of those food courts, you often get your shopping and put it on a table to claim your table, don't you?

It seems here by building another altar, you know, altars around the land, it's almost as though Abram is claiming the land for God. In other words, he's trusting God's promise so much so that he's claiming it as as good as done.

[21:53] Yeah, this is God's gift to my descendants. It's almost the reverse of Babel here. Last week, we saw people disobey God when it came to filling the earth. Instead, they grouped together and built a tower to make their name great.

But here's Abram who obeys God and moves throughout the land, you know, kind of symbolically filling it, if you like, and then builds not a tower for his name, but two altars to God's name and calls on the name of the Lord.

The point is, Abram trusts God's promises. He trusts in them so much so that he obeys God's word, even though he had no children. How am I going to be a great nation? I'll keep going.

And even though there's already people in the land, he trusts God and worships God. A while ago, I promised my kids that they could have some lollies if they clean their rooms. And one of them responded by saying, well, show us you've got the lollies first.

I didn't believe, the little rodger, my promise. But Abram has promised something much, much bigger here, isn't he? Which required to leave his country, his people, his father's household, first one.

[23 : 06] And he does it. He trusts. When one of my kids responded to my promise like that, I was tempted to eat all the lollies myself in front of them. Although one other child did say, oh, dad always keeps his promises, which I thought was nice.

So I gave him all the lollies. But God also keeps all his promises too, which brings us to point four. God does make Abram's name great. I mean, did you realize that over 50% of the world's population claim some link to Abraham?

So as of 2002, the most recent stats I could get, 2.2 billion Christians. We're still the largest religion in the world, but the news doesn't tell you that. 1.6 billion Muslims.

They have a connection to Abraham. And 13.5 million Jews, of course. That's over 50% of the world's population know Abraham and his name as someone significant.

Now that's making someone's name great, isn't it? God has kept his promise, you see. That promise to Abraham to make his name great, I think, was to him alone. The other three promises, though, of a place, a people, and a blessing, are traced throughout the Bible and can come down to us.

[24 : 20] Or if you're into acronyms and tennis shots, you know, the shot, the lob, land, L, offspring, O, blessing. They're the three promises that are traced throughout the rest of the Bible.

And they are firstly fulfilled in Israel. So God does give Abraham's descendants the land of Israel, which the Bible, funnily enough, calls the promised land because of this promise here.

And the Bible also calls it a land flowing with milk and honey, a land of rest. In other words, it was a land or a place like Eden. A good land for people to enjoy.

A land they could call home. And under David and Solomon, there was great rest and prosperity in the land. Offspring? Well, again, God fulfilled it firstly in Israel, who grew into a large nation.

In fact, under King David and Solomon, it was the greatest nation on earth. And blessing? Well, again, it's firstly fulfilled in Israel, where they enjoyed peace and prosperity under the reign of King David and Solomon.

[25 : 21] There was spiritual blessing as people enjoyed right relationship with God. And there was even physical blessing. So on the next slide, check this out. During Solomon's time, the king made silver as common as stones in Jerusalem.

How rich must a city have to be that silver is just like, oh, yeah, there's more silver. Yeah, there's more silver. You know, so much of it around. It's huge. It's prosperous, isn't it?

And what's more, they become a blessing to the nations as people from the nations come to Israel and join in and receive their blessings. And so it's kind of like this pictorially on the next slide. God starts with Abram, one man, and he makes promises.

And the next slide, Abram grows into Israel and then continues on the next slide to grow. And under King David and King Solomon, we reach the pinnacle.

They enjoyed being God's people in God's place and enjoying God's blessings. And then on the next slide, people from the nations, that's the black dots, come in and join Israel and share in those blessings.

[26 : 26] And yet, even that good went bad. Israel sinned and rebelled against God again and again and again. And in so doing, brought cursing upon themselves.

And so faithful Israel on the next slide is reduced right down to a small remnant or group. And yet, God is still determined to bless his creation.

And so there is another gracious divine intervention. This time, God the Son comes to earth, born in the line of Abram. In other words, Jesus is the seed of Eve, of Shem, of Abram, who inherits the promises.

So if you click next, we see this from Galatians chapter 3. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say, and to seeds, meaning many people, but to your seed, meaning one person who is Christ.

You see. Jesus is the seed of Abram, who inherits the promises. So if we click next, it all starts with Abram, goes out to Israel, comes back down, and finds its final fulfillment in Jesus.

[27 : 38] And so as we heard in our second reading on the next slide, understand then that those who have faith are children of Abraham. In other words, if we trust in Jesus, we are united to him and we become children of Abraham.

As scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles, that's us, by faith, and announce the gospel in advance to Abraham, All nations will be blessed through you. So those who rely on faith are blessed, along with Abraham.

Or take the next slide, Galatians 3 continues, saying Christ redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to us, Gentiles, through Christ Jesus.

And so in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith. And if you belong to Christ, then you are also Abraham's seed, his offspring.

And so we too can inherit the promises made to him. Again, to put it in pictorial form on the next slide, comes down to Jesus. And so as we trust in Jesus, we are united to him.

[28 : 42] So next, we are joined to Christ, in Christ. And so just as the promises are fulfilled in Christ, because we are joined to him, we get to share them as well, you see.

See, Christ, the fulfillment of the promises finally come to Christ, but he doesn't keep them for himself. Rather, Christ dies on the cross, pays for our sin, and invites everyone to join him so that we too can receive the promises of God.

And we do that by faith, by believing in him. What's more, because they're all fulfilled in Christ, and they don't depend on us, they depend on Christ.

We just receive them by faith. Someone once said, we just ride on Jesus' coattails, if you like. They're guaranteed in Christ. Trust. That means belonging to a people with every spiritual blessing now, with a place of heaven in the world to come, with every physical blessing later.

It's ours, if we trust in Christ. And so the first question for us this morning is, have we put our trust in Christ? Have we trusted in Jesus to become part of Abram's family and receive those promises?

[29 : 58] As I said before, these are the types of promises that humanity longs for. It's why we work hard in the fields of science and technology and medicine to make life better. Don't we?

It's why we have organizations like the UN and Make Poverty History, as I said last week, to make life better. It's what stands behind our songs, like John Lennon's, Imagine All the People Living Life in Peace, or Queen's song, This Could Be Heaven for Everyone.

And yet it isn't. And no matter how hard humanity tries, sin means our world will always look alarmingly like Genesis 3 to 11.

But in Christ, God can give us these promises. We can be part of God's people now, part of a community who cares for one another, with every spiritual blessing, like forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, a Heavenly Father who will never leave us nor forsake us, but who will give us help in our time of need.

And what's more, we can have a place to call home in heaven later, with every physical blessing, like no more decay or death or disease, just prosperity, health and life. We can have these promises if we trust in Christ, so do you.

[31:12] And for us who do, then, firstly, do we thank God for His gracious and divine intervention in Christ? Do we thank God that He's determined to bless us? It's incredible.

And finally, do we continue to trust, keep trusting in Christ and God's promises? That is, we ought to be like Abram, who trusted God's promises and worshipped God, even when he could not see where he was going, even when he lived in the land occupied by others, even when he wasn't sure what God was doing.

He had to wait 25 years for a son. And during that time, he wondered what God was doing, but he continued to trust. So too are we. I mean, we live in a land that is occupied by others who are not God's people, and there will be times in life when we're not sure what God is doing either.

I'm sure you've had those times. But we had to trust in God's promises. Let me finish with a story about a lady from an old church. So on the last slide, meet June Perry.

And she was a lady who used to play the organ at church, and she loved playing it. But she never had much. And she never had a husband, even though she would have loved to have been married.

[32:26] She didn't have many clothes. In fact, that blue parka, I saw her in it every Sunday, and every time I saw her at her house. And when I came to her house, it wasn't a very fancy house.

It was a very old one, a very small one, like a unit. And it still had the toilet out the back, you know, the out house kind of thing. It still had that, which I know for us in today, you know, can't imagine it.

And then she also got arthritis, which stopped her from playing the organ. And when I visited her, she was telling me about her life. And she said, Andrew, I know some people think I don't have much, but they keep forgetting that I have a fancy home in heaven and hopefully an organ too.

You see, she trusted in God's promises, despite her hardship, and she lived in light of it. It gave her perspective. It gave her contentment. It helped her to keep persevering.

May we do the same. Let's pray. Our gracious father, we do thank you for this reminder this morning of your big promises to Abram, which we can share in if we trust in Christ.

[33:35] And so, Father, we pray that you would help us to remember what you have promised us and what you have not, and help us to keep trusting in the things you have promised us, that we may keep living for you, keep trusting in you, keep worshipping you, until we all reach our heavenly home.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.