

God's promises

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Preacher: Chris Lowe

[0 : 00] I want to talk this morning about hope. Hope is the promise of good things to come in the future.

! Something better to look forward to and hope for and wait for. I wonder right now in January 2022, as you look around the world, as you walk around this community, as you think of your own life, I wonder whether you feel hopeful.

There are good things to come. Let's go. Or on the other hand, maybe you feel more hopeless. Things are never going to get better.

This morning, as I've said, we're starting a chunk of Sundays in Genesis, in the ancient first book of the Bible. And we're going to read over this next couple of months about the life of a man called Abram or Abraham.

And at the start of our reading, 11 verse 27 onwards, as Abram comes onto the scene, it feels as though things couldn't be more hopeless in God's world.

[1 : 09] Right back at the beginning, Genesis 1 and 2 tell the story of creation. And it's wonderful. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. He really did.

Everything out there and around us, this whole world is his design and creation. He spoke and it came to be light and sky, sea and land, flowers and fruit, birds and fish and livestock, a fruitful, teeming world, blessed and stable and full of life and all of it good.

As it is today. On Friday morning, golden sunlight streamed through our first floor window as I walked upstairs. On the kitchen table sat a jug of yellow tulips, just gorgeous, intricate.

Sitting in my study on my second floor against a blue sky backdrop, a handful of tiny birds shot past the window. And into this good world that God has created, he placed us humans.

He created us in his image to know him and love him and walk with him. Be fruitful and increase in number, he said, and fill the earth and subdue it. Fast forward to today.

[2 : 26] I love seeing the 10 to 9 in the morning streams of parents on their way to school here. With children hopping along or dragging their heels and rushing ahead and the shouting and laughing and, well, Thomas, stop as he gets, Thomas Meek gets to a road.

I love listening to that out of my window. Creatures of God in this world made to know him, blessed. But that's not all that life is like.

Because in Genesis chapter 3 onwards comes the fall. Adam and Eve turn away from God and push him aside.

They refuse to trust him and obey him. They sin and they lie and they know guilt and shame in their lives. And under God's curse, they are thrust out of the Garden of Eden into life and death as we know it today.

In the story of Genesis, brother kills brother. Lamech takes revenge and people die. They die. The human heart is shot through with evil, really.

[3 : 40] Violence spirals out of control. And at the Tower of Babel in chapter 11, human pride rears up, defying God. And then God scatters the nations over the face of the earth.

It's not make-believe what the Bible talks about there. It is how things are in 2022. Our hearts bent away from our Creator.

We tell lies. We feel shame. Last week, a man called Samuel Campbell from Sunderland was jailed for 21 years for murdering his brother with a knife.

In the UK, over the past two years, domestic abuse incidents have risen and risen. Taking revenge in the playground in a small way or online or down Orchard Park back alleys or in far-flung countries is rife.

And proudly doing away with God, we die. We die. As the scattered nations of the world ready themselves, maybe in 2022, for confrontation with each other.

[4 : 50] Back in Genesis 11, there seems so little hope for the world under God's blanket curse of death.

And when 11 verse 27 takes us down into the life of one family, the family of Terah, things look a little better. For sure, Terah fathers three boys.

Did you notice? Abraham and Nahor and Haran. That's blessing. And yet in verse 28, do you see, while his father Terah was still alive, Haran died.

That's a bitter blow to see one of your children die before you do. In verse 29, Abraham and Nahor both marry. Wonderful.

But, verse 30, Abraham's wife Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive. The pain of barrenness.

[5 : 50] For the family of Terah, hidden away domestic tragedies and grief. Matching stories we could tell too.

I don't know whether in January 2022, you feel hopeful. There's good things to come, let's go. Or whether instead you share a so common feeling of hopelessness. Like in Genesis chapter 11. We'll come this morning now to chapter 12 and verse 1.

Because it is at this moment in the history of humanity, maybe 2,000 years before the birth of Jesus, that hope springs up.

In God's good created world, Genesis 1 and 2, marred by sin and envy and pride and death, Genesis 3 to 11. And now hope springs up.

[6 : 58] I don't know whether you've read these words before, Genesis 12. I'm not sure I can overstate how important for the history of our world this chapter is. Because what takes place right here at the start of chapter 12, 4,000 years ago, is the beginnings of good news.

News. News of a solid, God-given hope for all of humanity. The promise of good things to come. That stretches forward through time to you and me personally, to our community around us, and to all peoples on earth today.

That's a long introduction. Let's walk through verses 1 and 3 together. I want you to notice a few things with me as we look at these verses.

Firstly, would you see that the Lord stoops and speaks? That is, here with Abram, the eternal creator God, who sits enthroned above and beyond his creation, breaks into his world, comes down and speaks.

[8 : 09] Let me read from verse 1. Follow along with me. The Lord had said to Abram, Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

So Abram went as the Lord had told him. I wonder if you can imagine being in Abram's shoes as he hears his maker's voice.

Notice, he's a God who speaks personally. Verse 1 starts off, That's not a distant formal title, the Lord, like the headmaster or the prime minister.

The Lord here translates God's personal name, Yahweh. His name which he shares with his friends as he comes down and reveals himself and enters into relationship with his creatures.

[9 : 19] The Lord speaks personally. Abram, I will do this for you. Next, he speaks plainly.

This isn't a hazy, mystical, mountaintop experience. A vague sense of God that you can't quite put your finger on. I used to have a thing for Muhammad Ali, heavyweight boxer, read his books.

He didn't write very much, so I got through it quite quickly. Quote, God doesn't speak to me in a voice. It's more like a feeling, a sense of what I have to do. Whatever that is, I'm in tune with it.

There's nothing as vague as that here. Rather, a clear and plain command and clear and plain promises from God.

Which is why in verse 4, Abram went as the Lord had told him. Our God speaks personally. He speaks plainly.

[10 : 20] And he speaks full of grace-ly. If I can put it like that. I mean, our world, when someone offends you or says something bad about you or is nasty to you, a normal reaction is, I cut you off.

I won't speak to you. I'm giving you the silent treatment. Think of nations cutting off diplomatic ties. We're not speaking. Or at school.

He did that to me a couple of years ago. I don't speak to him anymore. When I occasionally take funerals and I hear about a family's history and who might come to the funeral, it so often comes tumbling out.

Oh yeah, Bob and Janice haven't spoken for 40 years. At this point in Genesis, the human race has turned against God, refusing to listen to him, trust him, worship him.

We've trampled all over his commands and defied him. And he has every right to cut us off forever. And yet he comes down and speaks.

[11 : 29] He speaks to Abraham, who isn't a super special holy man. It says later in the Bible in Joshua 24, the verses on the sheet, that back in Ur, his family's homeland, they worshipped other gods.

Full of grace to creatures who've defied him, the Lord stoops and speaks. That might sound really basic to us this morning.

But it is everything, isn't it? That he speaks. I was listening to a one-off podcast last week called Adults Almost. Some teenagers from a youth theatre in London making a time capsule of their lives during lockdown.

And they just recorded stuff on their phones, conversations and reflective moments. And it was tough for them. Stuck at home, missing exams and school leaving parties.

Just conversation about haircuts and making your own pot noodles and trying to work out who you are and kind of waiting. But no real hope, really.

[12 : 39] No mention of God. Nothing like that. Just trying to cope. Left to themselves. Floundering around in pandemic Britain.

Genesis 12 verse 1 and the Bible as a whole says to us, we're not left to ourselves.

We're not left floundering around by ourselves in our mess. The Lord has come down and spoken. Personally, plainly, full of gracefully.

Further on in the Bible, he comes down in the person of his son. And his words recorded here in Genesis 12 are for Abraham and they're for us.

But what does he say? See, next. The Lord, graciously, plainly, wonderfully, stoops and speaks.

[13 : 36] He commands Abraham to go. And he promises to bless Abraham. Verses 1 to 3 again.

The Lord had said to Abraham, go from your country, your people and your father's household.

Leave everything you know behind you and go to the land I will show you. And now the promises.

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you.

And whoever curses you, I will curse. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. Did you see the repeated words there in the text?

Promises, I will, I will, I will, says God. And they are promises to bless. I will bless you.

[14 : 36] You will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you. And bless you these days is either what we say when someone sneezes.

Or sometimes I think it can be quite kind of wet, Christian sounding nice thing. Oh bless you, you're so nice. This is God speaking here.

In Genesis 1, God blessed animals and humans. Be fruitful in increasing number. He blessed the seventh day. When God says, I will bless you, he is saying my favour will be on you.

A life that is fruitful. Prospering life. Peaceful life. In close relationship with your God.

I will do good to you. I will bless you. Life as it was designed to be in the Garden of Eden. Life under God's curse is life outside the garden, away from him, where we're fruitless and wither and die.

[15 : 54] Now the Lord promises Abraham, I will bless you. Verse 2, I will make you into a great nation. That is, you'll become a large population in a large territory.

Your family, your descendants, a safe and secure nation and blessed by God. It's almost laughable to imagine that. Because Abraham's married to Sarai, who is childless and unable to conceive.

They're a barren couple. But God promises, I'll make you fruitful. You'll prosper, you'll have a land and I will make your name great.

These promises to Abraham are so big. The curse of life in a fallen world will be overturned.

This land you will go to will be like the Garden of Eden for you, but so much bigger. My creation purposes, life as it's meant to be, restored as I bless you.

And Abraham's descendants, the nation of Israel, they rise and they fall. And when will it be that through a descendant of Abraham, all peoples on earth are blessed?

Until the first verse of the New Testament, Matthew 1 verse 1, when we meet Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham, who lives and dies and rises from the dead.

And as the channel of God's blessing gathers to himself, not just Jewish believers, but people from all nations on earth who come to him and put their faith in him, Jesus, the son of Abraham.

This is the good news of the gospel for you and me, for our community and our world. In Galatians 3 verses 8 and 9 it says, Scripture foresaw that God would justify the nations by faith and announce the gospel in advance to Abraham.

[23 : 41] All nations will be blessed through you. So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. When you hear the gospel message, when you put your faith in Jesus Christ today, the blessings promised to Abraham are yours.

They're yours. And more than that, the day will come in the future when Jesus comes again and we will join those from every nation who belong to him in a new and restored creation.

And there and then there will no longer be any curse, but only blessing from our God forever. Are we without hope?

We are not. We're not. The Lord stoops and speaks, promising to bless Abraham and all peoples on earth through him, through his descendant, the Lord Jesus Christ.

So what do you do then? Last thing to say this morning. When you read of and hear of God's grace-filled promises to bless you, when he says, trust me, follow me and do what I say, what do you do?

[25 : 16] What must you do? The response of Abraham to God right here is faith. Total, whole life, trust and obedience.

The Lord said to him, go and I will bless you. Let me just read from verse four. So Abraham went, as the Lord had told him.

And Lot went with him. Abraham was 75 years old when he set out from Haran. And he took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they'd accumulated and the people they'd acquired in Haran.

And they set out for the land of Canaan. And they arrived there. Full-throated faith and obedience.

Abraham travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Morah at Shechem.

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

[26 : 22] I worship you. From there he went on towards the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and I on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.

You hear God's promises to bless you boldly and openly. I will trust your promises. I will obey your commands.

I will live for you. I will worship you. And I will call on your name, my God, you who blesses me. And let me lead us in a prayer together.

Let's pray. I will bless you. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

Our Lord and our God, we praise you that you have not left us alone in our mess. You have spoken. You spoke so clearly and plainly so many years ago.

[27 : 35] You promised to bless Abraham, his offspring, and all peoples on earth through him. In your faithfulness, you sent your son, the son of Abraham, to be our saviour, to win your blessings that we might enjoy blessing with you forever.

In our world today, make us those, we pray, who trust your promises, who follow Jesus Christ, and so fill us with real hope from you as we live for you today and wait for the day when you will restore all things.

Make us bold and brave to faithfully follow you, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.