

Amazing Grace

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[0 : 00] Well, if you said amen to that prayer, congratulations. I know what I said, but I'm not sure most of you did. I'm sorry about the microphone coming on at the end there.

Let's open our Bibles to Genesis chapter 11. And I wonder if you do that, if you'd keep one portion of your anatomy in 11 and turn over to Galatians chapter 3 as well, which is right near the back on page 178.

We're going to flick there very quickly near the beginning of the sermon. Those of you who've memorised the Bible, you don't need to open it at all. So, it's fine. I must tell you, I can never get used to opening the newspaper in Vancouver and reading about an earthquake warning. It's one of the most worrying things about being an immigrant to Canada, living on the west coast here, that you get these constant reminders that soon we're going to have the big one. And yesterday in the Vancouver sun, it happened again. And you know that in the Short family, it took a number of years for us to be convinced of the reality of this. And we were terribly hard-hearted.

[1 : 11] But now we have a fully equipped earthquake kit, complete with first aid kit and canned goods and water and all those things.

Most importantly of all, in our earthquake kit, we have two weeks' supply of Vegemite. And I know it's a risk mentioning it publicly, but there you are.

And the reminder in the paper, I don't know, but what it does for me is it says the ground that you're walking on is being shaped by invisible forces that we really don't know when they're going to break out on us and they can be life-changing.

And Genesis 12, 1 to 3, those three little verses are like an earthquake in the Scriptures. And they send out three shockwaves that affect every book, every event, and every person until Christ comes again.

This is one of those huge monumental passages. You know, we come to the end of chapter 11, we've reached halfway point in the Bible. More than half of history has happened before Genesis 12 begins.

[2 : 30] If you think we've taken a bit long, we've been a bit slow, that's one of the reasons. And I hope you realise too that Genesis 1 to 11 does not finish on a happy note.

Remember this dream of a united humanity slathering over its technology, worshipping itself, trying to make a name, ends in confusion and division and a kind of hopelessness.

That everything God has done from the creation is to bring blessing and goodness into his world.

And everything that humanity has, well, almost everything humanity has done, leaves a curse and a mutiny.

What began with a bang has now ended with a whimper. And as we have read those words at the end of chapter 11, we follow the very unpromising line of Shem, far away from the Garden of Eden. 11.27 we meet Terah, or as his parents called him, Terah, with his sons. But I think we're meant to get the idea this is a dead end.

[3 : 37] Terah and his family are moon worshippers. He's named after a moon god. He names his kids after moon gods. They live in the centre of moon god worshipping territory.

And every month, when they saw the crescent go across the sky, they thought, it's the canoe, it's God's canoe, and he's going away from us, and we pray to him, and we sacrifice to him, and we bury people alive to him, and we find security and meaning in our moon god worship.

It's a very unpromising place. And even after God calls Abram over there in Ur of the Chaldees, he's very slow to respond. They get up and they go, and they stop in Haran. They settle down there.

They're very slow to obey. And I think that is the point. If you look back at 11 verse 30, that is the point of verse 30. There's a double full stop in verse 30. Now Sarah was barren. She had no children. They cannot create a future for themselves. There's no life. There's no potential.

[4 : 45] All the family processes and all of human history has come to this sterile, futile, powerless, hopeless barrenness. It's a dead end for humanity.

And I think if we have been reading attentively the Bible until now, we have to agree with what Dan said. What we need is a new creation. We need a new humanity. We need something that will go back to God's original intention of blessing for creation.

If you think about God, God could not have chosen a better couple, could he? He couldn't have chosen a couple way past childbearing age. Sarah, who's barren, has no children, worshipping the moon, no spiritual power and blessing.

And then the earthquake happens in chapter 12. Just, it completely lifts the land up and flips it over. Everything that's normal, everything that's expected, gets turned upside down, but not bringing destruction, but bringing blessing.

And not just confined to the coast of one continent, but for all the families of the earth. You know, these three verses in the Bible are called God's covenant with Abraham.

[5 : 56] It's deeply personal. Five times, you notice, God says, I will, I will, I will, I will, I will. And I think this is the gospel.

If you manage to find Galatians, just turn over to Galatians 3, verse 8, for a second, please. This is an amazing verse.

Galatians 3, 8, page 178. And the scripture, says the apostle Paul, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, and then he quotes Genesis 12, 3, in you shall all the nations be blessed.

See? If you are a New Testament Christian, as we look at Genesis 12, we are reading the gospel. God calls a moon worshipper and makes a massive worldwide promise with us in mind.

And every single Christian believer must come to hear this call of God for yourself and must come to trust this promise of God for yourself.

[7 : 13] That's what it is to be a Christian. It's to hear this promise. This is the gospel right here. To come to trust it and to see it's more important than life itself.

The true Christian is someone whose life is constantly shaped and shattered by hope and trust in this great promise. Someone who hears God calling them by name.

Someone who bases their life on this rock. And it's a huge shift, you see. For the first 11 chapters, God has dealt with the whole earth.

He's been facing the whole earth. But now he chooses to work differently. He now chooses to make covenant with one man, one woman. And in verses 1 to 3 of Genesis 12, the you, which is used 11 times, is singular.

I will make you a great nation. God is still concerned for the whole earth. But instead of dealing with the whole earth in a mass, he now promises to bring blessing to the whole earth through one man.

[8 : 21] It's a different way of working and it points, of course, to Jesus Christ. God's desire hasn't changed. His purpose of blessing hasn't changed since he made the world. But now he's going to do it in a different way.

He's going to create a new humanity inside, within the old humanity. And it's a trailer for the rest of the Bible. Here is a people inside humanity who bear the blessing of God and the hope of God.

God will bring salvation. He's still a missionary God. But do you see what the role and vocation of the people changes to bear blessing to the world? We're going to spend a few weeks with Abraham.

And I hope one of the wonderful things about it is it's so truthful and realistic. You know, Abraham believes and then he stops believing.

He acts in faith and then he acts in terrible, selfish, unfaith. You know, he has no children, he has no wife, he has no future.

[9 : 26] And he starts to believe and then he fails in faith. We'll have a look at one little failure at the end of the sermon today. And then the promise of God is repeated and he comes back again. It's just like all of us. It's wonderful. But I think for these three verses I just want us to take three things about the promise of God this morning and the most important is the second.

But let me deal with the first before I say that. The first is very important too. It's this. The promise, God's promise is very demanding. 12.1 The Lord said to Abram, the Lord had said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

As Dan said, the same voice that spun the world into existence now creates Israel. But the first word of God puts Abram in an agonizing position.

He says, Go, leave, abandon everything you've known, everything you're secure and everything that makes you comfortable. And the terrible thing is God does not tell him where he is going to go. God doesn't fill out you're going to travel this many kilometers, you're going to take this many camels, the weather system is like this, you're going to need to take some sweaters. He says, Leave your country, big picture, leave your kindred, your extended family, leave your father's house, your nuclear family.

[10:57] It's absolutely audacious. God says, All those things that are your closest commitments will now come second to this promise.

And of course, we know this is the way of faith, isn't it? God takes all the things that we find familiar and give us security and he says, Here is something infinitely more important, infinitely more worthwhile.

And if you follow me, you must renounce everything, for I will be your security. And so long as we keep trying to gain security in things here and now, God takes them away from us so that we find our security in him.

There's no real Christian faith without cost. A faith that costs nothing is worth nothing. This is what Jesus said. Listen, he says, He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And she who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And the one who does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. The one who finds their life will lose it.

[12:10] And the one who loses their life for my sake will find it. It's amazing. I mean, here we are at the beginning of Abraham's walk of faith and God calls on him to abandon his past.

And do you know the last event in Abraham's life? God calls on him to sacrifice his child. So his walk of faith begins by God calling him to abandon his past and it finishes with God calling on him to abandon his future.

So important is it to God that we trust him above all, in the face of all, through all. So that we begin the Christian faith by abandoning what is in the past.

And as we mature and grow in the Christian faith, God brings us to the place where he calls upon us to abandon our future as well. That's why the Christian faith is pictured as a pilgrimage.

You see verse 4, so Abram went. He's 75. He's 10 years past retirement.

[13:24] He takes a group of people from Chaldea who've begun to believe the promise and Lot, miserable Lot. And you know, we heard the story as he goes through the land, comes to Canaan, he travels to the key religious centres, doesn't worship man in the moon, but he builds altars and he calls upon the name of the land.

And he's consecrating the land because he believes the promise. Listen to the book of Hebrews. Christian life is a pilgrimage. By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance and he went out not knowing where he was to go.

By faith he sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign land. That's how we live, in a foreign land. Living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs to the same promise, for he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

The Christian life is not a static and stagnant reality. We keep looking for the heavenly city and I feel this temptation to settle down, to put our roots down, to buy the RRSPs, to protect ourselves, to be safe.

And the promise of God keeps calling us forward and saying to us, don't set your mind on things here below, set your mind on things above. You can tell a Christian who's been on the pilgrimage for a long time, they have this kind of godly detachment.

[15:01] They put their roots down somewhere else. And that is why the promise of God is so demanding and that's the first point. The second is this, God's promise is impossibly difficult, I'm sorry, impossibly good.

Well, let me tell you, I struggle with this heading. I have written here strangely, counter-intuitively and I only came up with impossibly during the children's focus.

So, let me start again. God's promise is impossibly good. You see verse 2? I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and I'll make your name great so that you'll be a blessing. It's wonderful. But all the things that the people who are building the Tower of Babel really wanted, meaning and a name and security, God says, I'm personally obligating myself to give them to you. He takes this moon worshipper and his barren wife and he gives them the powerful life, the enhancement of life, the increase of life.

[16:09] Brilliant. It's absolutely beyond Abraham, just like being a new human being is beyond you and me. And God chooses to make this impossible promise because of one reason and one reason alone it is his goodness and his grace.

There's nothing in Abraham that makes him a better risk than anyone else in Caldea. God doesn't look down at all the moon worshippers and go, ah, there's a really good couple. Maybe Abraham will have more chance of believing in me than any other moon worshipper.

It doesn't do that at all. And I think it is this part of the Christian gospel that is the hardest and most difficult for us to believe.

That is, that it's all of grace. It's not something in me that makes me deserve or not deserve it.

If there's any part of the sermon you need to focus on it's this, I think. See, the way God's promise and his grace works is that it is completely and utterly free and comes out of his heart of love to us and it doesn't have to do with anything in us that deserves it.

[17:31] That all the goodness and the things that we most deeply yearn for are in God's hand and he gives them to us out of his grace and out of his free promise.

See, what makes the promise so difficult is not that it begins in a demanding way. I think we like demands because then we can do something. The difficulty is that it's entirely free.

You see, to believe that God could give these things just because he loves it, just because of his grace, completely independent of us, it's the hardest part but it's the most precious part of being a Christian.

If you're not a Christian yet, you want to know what makes Christians tick, this is it. And it's difficult because most of the other areas in our life you work for, you earn, you know, good grades, good retirement, respect of others.

But when a gift of love comes to you, what we need is to believe the person's gift of love and to receive it. And I'll tell you a secret, not because I'm particularly sinful, but when I receive a gift of love, what generally happens is I go into calculation mode.

[18:45] I don't really deserve this. What could I do to make myself more worthy? I'm now in this other person's debt. Oh no. You know how it works.

All of it misses the point and it ruins the gift of love. The hardest point, the hardest part of understanding the death of Jesus on the cross is the sheer unrelieved goodness and freeness of it for us.

That God, without even consulting us, should offer us forgiveness of sins and everything good and life and eternity and his love and fellowship with him and blessing.

We don't deserve those things any more than Abraham deserved to have children. But the more I hold on to my debt scale, the less I grasp the promise from God.

That's the difference between moon religion and true religion. You see, moon religion works by achieving things before God and true religion works by receiving his goodness.

[19:49] That's why moon religion can't really change any of us because it never really challenges my self-absorption when the promise of God comes to us.

when you hear the voice of God offering you life and fellowship and blessing, suddenly your agenda goes out the window. Suddenly you fit your life around God's agenda rather than fitting God around your agenda.

I think last week we learned, didn't we, that we cannot achieve meaning and significance in these things by ourselves. They are God's to give and he gives them to us. He offers them to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

This is the gospel. That's why we receive it by faith and by faith alone. So while his promise is demanding, it is also impossibly good.

And thirdly, and quickly, God's promise affects others. Verse 3, I will bless those who bless you.

[20:52] Him who curses you I will curse. And by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed, should read. It's part of the very promise of God that those who are close to us and around us will

be affected both by our belief and by our unbelief.

It's the way blessing works. It doesn't really matter whether you choose that or not. That's the way it works. So that's why there's this little group of ex-moonies who come with Abram and Sarah into the land you see.

And that's why Lot comes with them. They're already participating in the blessing. And you know the story from verse 10 down to the end of the chapter which was read for us.

And if you were here a few weeks ago it was very memorably and alarmingly acted out by Irena Tippett. From verse 10 everything goes south.

And Abraham journeys through the land and he comes to the end of the land and a famine breaks out. Do you remember? And he thinks oh no I've staked everything on this and God has not come through for me.

[22 : 06] Sarah is barren the land is barren and for the first time his faith is really tested. Because you know it's one thing to build happy altars when circumstances are good. It's another thing to face a famine with only the promise of God in your hand.

And I need to say this even though we know this the promise of God is not there to make life easier necessarily. In fact I probably shouldn't say this but if you're considering Christianity it'll likely make your life more complicated.

There is a gospel out there it's a very North American gospel it's called the prosperity gospel and it says that God is there to make you healthy and wealthy in this life and all you need to do is name it and claim it and so the Bible turns into a sort of a self-help wealth seminar.

But it's Christianity without suffering. It is Christ without the cross. It's a moon religion. And we need to hear this morning that the promise of God is greater than our needs brothers and sisters.

It's greater than our needs. but it always puts us in a place where we have to make difficult choices. And Abraham here lets the side down.

[23 : 22] He makes shabby choices and you know what happens. He abandons the promise. He goes to Egypt. He lies about Sarah because she's such a hottie. He says Pharaoh will want you and so and Pharaoh quickly finds out that Sarah is Abraham's wife.

God sends there's this lovely little word plagues there. They're likely sexually transmitted diseases. And Pharaoh who doesn't have any time for the Lord calls Abraham and says what have you done and sends him on his way.

I just want you to notice that everybody around Pharaoh is affected either for good or for ill by what he does. He's the soul bearer of this great blessing.

He's the one through whom God has made this massive promise. And when he unbelieves when he acts out of disbelief he brings hurt and harm to those around him.

And I'm sorry about this in a way for you. I'm not in another way. But it's completely unavoidable. If you have begun to walk under the promise of God you will either bring blessing or cursing to those around you.

[24 : 38] It's terribly important for you to know this. Your faith is very, very crucial especially to those around you who do not yet believe. We'll take that up in a few more weeks' time.

But here is the great earthquake. This is it. Genesis 12. And it continues to shape everything in the scriptures and it continues to shape the world and the fault lines of blessing continue to move out all the way around the world for all the families of the earth.

The rest of the Old Testament testifies to this. And of course when we open the New Testament we read about the one who comes who's the son of Abraham.

Who is the human embodiment of all the promises of God. Who comes as the bread of life and the water of life and the resurrection and the life.

Who comes to give us life eternal beyond the grave and life here now with God. Who's greater than Abraham. The one before whom every knee shall bow.

[25 : 47] The one who is the rock on whom God is building everything so that when we stand on the rock every burden is borne by him and not us. And he calls all of us to follow him.

And he says to follow him. That is true blessing. You will be blessed. You will receive the blessing. He says, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. We will be satisfied. And his life and his death and his resurrection reveal that he is the beginning and he is the end and he is the middle of all the promises of God.

And that life and grace and the impossible goodness of God come through faith in him. All the treasures of God and all the promises of God are in him.
And all who place their faith in him are children of God. Amen. Amen. So let's kneel and pray.
Amen.