

The Promise

When I was just starting to drive—I grew up on a farm in South Dakota, so I think I was about 6. Actually, 14. We lived on the same farm as my grandparents and we had a 500-gallon elevated gas tank on the farm. It was on a stand about 6-feet off the ground. And it had a hose and nozzle—just like at a gas station—that hung below it.

I don't remember where I was going—probably to pick up girls in my grandparents' 1978 Chevy pickup. On the front of the truck was a grill guard [grill guard pic] like this, only not nearly as cool. I didn't catch a lot of girls with the truck, but my grandma used to use it to nudge the cows when she was getting them out from the pasture.

Well, I filled up with gas and when I was done, I hung the nozzle up, got in the truck, threw it in reverse and gunned it. The tires spit gravel everywhere, but more importantly, the grill guard got hooked on the hose and ripped it right off the tank. Gas, started shooting of the gas tank onto the ground.

I ran as fast as I could to get my dad, who stuck his hand over the hole to slow the gas. Gas was spraying all over his face, stinging his eyes before he was able to control it. I could tell he was in a lot of pain. He told me to get my grandpa, who got a big cork from the machine shed—I don't know why he had a big cork, but he came over with it and a hammer and plugged the hole.

Of course, I felt terrible about it, especially since it hurt my dad so much, so I went over and sat on my grandparent's stairs. I just knew I was in big trouble. I was careless and knew I deserved whatever punishment I got.

I braced myself for the worst as my dad walked toward me. But instead of yelling at me and telling me how irresponsible I was, he sat down beside me and told me the story of a 14-year-old boy who was gassing up a tractor only to get the hose caught on the tractor and ripped the hose off the tank, spilling gas all over the ground. That 14-year-old was him. I took a deep breath and let out a sigh of relief.

I was careless and I deserved punishment. But I didn't receive any. Instead, what I received was my dad's *presence*. That *showed me everything I need to know, not just about him, but about my standing with him*.

Why do I tell that story? I tell it because it's a good analogy of God's solution to our sin problem. You see, while the Bible does reveal a God who isn't afraid to punish, today we're going to look at a story that tells us that ultimately, God's solution to our sin problem is not punishment, but his presence.

We are four messages into this series we're calling God's Big Story, where we're walking through the big story of the Bible. Each week, we'll take a portion of Scripture and talk about how it fits into the larger story of Scripture.

Naturally, we started with creation—God created the world and saw that it was good. We also saw that unlike the pagan origin myths, God created humans intentionally in his own image—to represent him to the world and order the world toward flourishing.

But the story of Adam and Eve shows us how we all fail in that responsibility. Rather than living for God’s *purpose* and according to God’s *wisdom*, we declare independence from God and live according to our own wisdom.

The result of demanding our independence from God is broken relationship with God and strained relationships with each other. When we reject God’s wisdom, we turn in on ourselves. We want power, recognition, and comfort. And if my primary aim is to please myself, I will use the people around me to achieve that.

Genesis chapters 3-11, describes some examples of how this plays out. Cain kills his brother Abel out of jealousy. The story of the tower of Babel is an example of people using a new technology to “make a name for themselves, by reaching God through their own power. This tendency to want independence from God is what we call sin. We all have a sin problem. So the question becomes, “what will God do about the sin problem?”

We pick up the story today in Genesis, chapter 12. The world is in bad shape, but rather than judging the world like he did in the flood, God’s solution started by offering grace through a relationship with a man named Abram.

Abram lived in what is now Iraq. Abram wasn't seeking God, but God came to him and said, **"Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you."** (Gen 12:1)

Basically, God goes to him and tells him, "I want you to move." Now some of you have moved dozens of times, so you're used to it. It's a pain for us, but for Abram, it would have been a crazy request because he was leaving so much.

First, he would have to leave the protection of his family. Today, while the decision to move might be hard, ultimately, we're willing move to pursue a new job opportunity. The reason is that the world is a safe place because we have a government that protects us. Even if we're moving to a place where we don't know people, we can usually count on our neighbors being hospitable—or at least we're not afraid they're going to kill us.

Abram's world was different. There were no central governments to keep the peace. So, your immediate family would be a part of a larger clan. If you wanted, you could form a covenant that brought clans together into a city or at least relied on each other for protection. Abram's family had been connected to that land for generations, so if he moved, he would lose that protection and his family would be out on their own.

Second, Abram would give up his financial security of his land. Abram's life wasn't just tied to family, it was also tied to the land. There were no bankers or web developers or hairstylists. Everything was tied to the land.

Abram's land was a known commodity. He knew it could sustain his livestock and feed his family. So, he had to trust that the land God was moving him to was good enough to sustain him. And maybe even better than to make the risk worthwhile.

Finally, *God was asking Abram to leave his god.* If the company you work for transfers you to Tuscaloosa, you have to give up a few things—moving away from family and friends and a familiar city with amazing winters. But while you would be leaving your church here, it wouldn't even cross your mind that you would have to leave behind your god. You'd think God will be waiting for you in Tuscaloosa, because we believe in a God who is everywhere...except maybe Green Bay—we're still not sure about that.

Abram was a product of his society, so he would have worshipped territorial or family gods, and wouldn't have known anything about the God of the Bible. People then worshipped the god who controlled the territory they lived in. And believed that god would protect them from other gods or natural disasters or other threats. So, if Abram moved from his land, he would lose the presence of his family's god. That was a huge risk.

Abram lived about as secure a life as possible. He was wealthy, lived in a good location and had a stable family system and a family god. So, if moving meant forfeiting all those things, why would he consider it? Well, despite everything he *had*, Abram was missing the critical piece of the good life in those days—children.

In Abram's day, children were your identity, your legacy and, in a way, your salvation. Most likely, Abram didn't believe in anything like heaven. So, if you wanted to

live on, you needed children. Maybe *you* wouldn't live on, but your "*seed*" would. And since Abram was old and still didn't have any children, believing this strange God would have been a high-risk, high reward promise.

So, what does this God promise Abram in return for leaving his family, land and god? Verse 2, **"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 the peoples of earth will be blessed through you."** God makes two sets of promises. The first set is for Abram, the second set is for the world.

Here are the promises to Abram, First, **"I will make you into a great nation..."** To Abram, a nation meant *people* and *land*. God's promise is that he and his descendants will have both. So, risking his own security and prosperity will mean greater security and prosperity for his descendants.

The second promise was that God would bless Abram. This doesn't mean that God would just say nice things about Abram, but what Abram gave up in his old life, God would restore in his new life. To Abram, blessing meant good health, long life, large herds and family harmony. God would bless Abram himself.

And third, God says, **"I will make your name great..."** Now, this wasn't just an ego thing. It was an offer of salvation. But Abram's name wouldn't become great by making it happen on his own. It came by trusting God. This is the opposite of Genesis 11, where the people of Babel build the tower to make a name for themselves. Instead, it's God who

makes Abram's name great in response to his faith. He wanted to have a great legacy—but unlike Adam and Eve or the people of Babel, he did it the right way by trusting God.

The second set of promises start at the end of verse two and these promises aren't directly about Abram, but about his impact on the world. It starts with a general summary, "**You will be a blessing...**" then he gets more specific.

He says, "**I will bless those who bless you...**" In other words, God would treat people according to how they treat Abram and his family.

Now, this is where some people have an issue with the story because God takes it even further in verse 3. He says, "I will bless those who bless you, **and whoever curses you I will curse...**" God seems to be playing favorites, but we like to think that God loves everyone equally? Why would he choose Abram and not everyone else? Why would God curse people just because they didn't like Abram? This doesn't seem very fair. In fact, this seems like the recipe for creating a monster?

Think about it. Let's say you're in elementary school and everyone in the class knows Sally is the teacher's favorite. How does everyone else feel about Sally? They hate her, but Sally doesn't care because she has special status. She knows the teacher will always stand up for her so she flaunts it. She might even taunt the other kids because she knows she can get away with it.

This is the image we see when we think about God choosing one person and not others. But let's take a closer look at *why* Abram is chosen. Verse 2, "I will make your

name great, ***and you will be a blessing...***” and end of verse 3, “...*whoever curses you I will curse...“and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*”

You see, God chose Abram and his descendants—not so they would be saved and everyone else lost, but they would be the means by which God would bless the world. They weren’t just chosen for *privilege*, but *responsibility*. Just like humans were created in the image of God to exploit, but to serve and care for creation.

Now, don’t misunderstand. It wasn’t Abram’s job to save the world. God did the blessing. Abram’s job was to be faithful and God would do the rest. //

Well, Abram, decided it was worth the risk, so he moved. Then we read three stories that test Abram’s faith. The first is at the end of chapter 12. Abram gets to the land, but instead of abundance, he finds a famine. So, he takes things into his own hands and goes down to Egypt. But while he’s in Egypt, he fears Pharaoh will want his beautiful wife Sarai. He’s afraid they will kill him take her, and marry her.

So, Abram does what any reasonable man would do, he tells Pharaoh Sarai is his sister. Sure enough, Pharaoh sees her and likes what he sees, so he takes her. But God isn’t happy about this because it threatens his promise. So, he sends plagues on Pharaoh’s household. And Pharaoh calls Abram and says, “What the heck, Abram? That’s not your sister!” and he throws them out of Egypt. This story shows us that even when Abram fails, God is faithful to his promise.

The second story is in chapter 13. Abram and Lot head toward Canaan, but their hired men start fighting because together they have so much livestock, the land couldn't sustain them. So, they decide it would be smart to separate. Abram let Lot choose the land he wanted to live and he chooses the good land near Sodom.

That leaves Abram with land near the city of Hebron. Hebron was within the boundaries of the land God promised. Sodom was not. So, Abram didn't seize the land for himself, he allowed God to direct him. So, the second story is told to show that God is true to his promise to give him the land and to bless everything he does.

In the third story is in chapter 14. Some local kings join together to attack the cities around where Abram's nephew, Lot had settled. Lot gets caught in the crossfire and taken away by the kings. When word gets to Abram, he gathers his fighting men and goes on a reconnaissance mission to get him back. He's defeats the kings and brings back Lot, his family and all the possessions stolen in the first battle. Then, even though he has a right to the spoils, he returns it all back to where it came from.

Now, the kings he defeated owned the land, so when Abram defeated them, he could have rightfully taken the land for himself. But this third story shows us Abram's faith because he allowed God to give him the land in his time, rather than taking a short-cut and grabbing it himself.

That brings us to chapter 15. The three stories showed us how chaotic Abram's world was. Even though Abram had just won a battle, word would get around and

someone stronger would eventually come challenge him. If you didn't have alliances you could trust, you were vulnerable to powerful clans or cities. That was Abram's reality.

So, you can imagine Abram feeling a bit vulnerable and wondering, *"Did I do the right thing moving here away from my ancestral lands, people and god?"* So, in a touching moment chapter 15:1, God came to Abram in a vision and said, **"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."** His shield is his protection. His "very great reward" means he will meet Abram's needs. He *reassures* Abram of his original promise. But he also allows Abram to express some doubts.

Verse 2, **"Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."**

In verse 4, God promises him that his heir will be his own child. He said, look at the stars in the sky. That's how many your offspring will be. Abram was satisfied with that answer for the time being. We see the famous line in verse 6, **"Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness."** In other words, Abram takes God at his word without any further proof needed.

But the conversation continues. God says, not only will I give you an heir, I'm also going to give you this land you're on right now. But again, in a moment of vulnerability and doubt, Abram asks in verse 8, **"How can I know that I will gain possession of it?"**

Now, why did Abram believe God when he promised an heir, but not for the land? Well, the promise of an heir would be fulfilled in his lifetime. So, Abram would know when this happened. But the promise of land would happen long after he was gone. You see, Abram wanted assurance that God would take care of his descendants the way he took care of him. He wasn't thinking just of himself, he wanted his descendants to have a better life.

And God responds exactly the way we expect him to. He says, "Bring me a cow!" Look in verse 9. **"So, the Lord said to him, 'Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.'"** I know! We think this is a strange answer, but not to Abram because he knows what's happening.

God is about to take Abram through a covenant ceremony. A covenant ceremony was a binding ceremony between two people in the ancient world. We don't really have anything like it other than a wedding ceremony. And even today, a wedding ceremony isn't a perfect analogy because for many people, marriage isn't the binding covenant it was. This kind of covenant was an unbreakable covenant between two people who wanted to tie their fates to each other forever.

The covenant ceremony worked this way. They would cut the animals in half and splay them out on the ground. Then each party would walk through the pieces of the animals, take an oath and call curses on themselves saying, *"If I break the terms of this treaty, may I be torn apart in the same way these animals have been torn apart."*

So, after Abram prepared the animals, night came and he fell asleep. Here's verse 17, **"When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land...'"** The smoking firepot and blazing torch are the symbols of God's presence. But here's the interesting thing about this covenant ceremony. Usually, both parties would walk through the pieces, but in this case, only God does. What this means is that God alone is taking responsibility for this happening. All Abram has to do is trust and God will be faithful to do the rest.

One other interesting thing about the covenant ceremony—and then we'll land the plane. Fast forward to chapter 17, God does something else remarkable. After God tells Abram and Sarai that she is pregnant, Abram responds in worship. And it's at that point that God renames Abram, Abraham. He does this by taking the "H" from his name, Yahweh and placing it in the middle of Abram. He does the same with Sarai. She will now be called Sarah. What's happening is that like a wedding ceremony, they're taking each other's name. If you read on in the Old Testament, from that point on, God introduces himself to people as "the God of Abraham" or "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Now, this series is about how all the pieces fit together to tell the God's Big Story. Ultimately, God's promise of an heir did come true when Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah. Isaac became the father of Jacob and God changed Jacob's name to Israel. The

fulfilment of God's promise that Abraham would be the father of a great nation came true in the people of Israel.

God's blessing came to the world through Israel in two main ways. First, God revealed him through *Israel's Law*. We often think of the Law as a bad thing, but Israel never saw it that way. That's why the Psalmist can write, **"Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands are always with me and make me wiser than my enemies. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes."** (Psalm 119:97-99)

But also, you have to remember that the Law isn't just the individual laws about what to do and what not to do. It's the whole story of God's history with Israel. The blessing is God revealing himself so we don't have to wonder anymore what God is like.

Second, God used Israel to bless the world through Jesus. You see, when God said "all the nations of the earth will be blessed through you..." he was extending God's blessing out beyond the people of Israel to you and me. Through Jesus, we are the beneficiaries of God's promise to Abraham.

Here's how the Apostle Paul says it, **"So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."**

[worship team] At the beginning of this series we said that the Bible is not about you. The Bible is about God—it's his story. But you have a place in God's story. And your place in the story of Abraham is this...that like Abraham, God wants you to trust him. He wants you to trust that God will protect and provide, that he will give wisdom in his time. And while you might not see it for a while. And though it might sometimes seem like God will not come through, in time, God will always prove himself faithful.

Maybe you feel like God is asking for you to exercise faith and do something you're not so sure about.

Or maybe you believe that God wants to bless you, but you've been waiting a long time for that blessing and you're beginning to wonder whether it will come. I don't know what God's blessing looks like for you, but I do believe is that God will prove himself faithful in the end.

But when he does, the blessing he gives is not just for us to hold onto. He has blessed us to be a blessing to others. It's not our job to save the world, but it is our job to be faithful, to hold loosely to what we have and allow God to use us to bless others.