

God promises new beginnings

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as always, there should be a sermon outline available to you. I assume that it's also downloadable on the website if you haven't gotten it yet.

But even more importantly, just make sure that your Bible is open in front of you to Genesis 12 so that you can follow the story easily and see what I'm saying comes from the Bible as well. And just a quick note, I think many of us are familiar with the story of Abraham.

So we know that his name only gets changed from Abram to Abraham, only kind of a few chapters into the story. But for the purposes of my sermon, I'm just going to mainly say Abraham.

So if you hear Abram or Abraham, just think of them as interchangeable, right? So don't get distracted if I say Abraham, even if it's Abram, strictly speaking, in this story. Let's pray.

Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight. Oh Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

[1 : 0 3] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Nobody likes to be caught up in a cycle of failure. When I was young, my parents, like all good Asian parents, signed me up for a number of activities so that I could be a well-rounded person.

And so when my school started a band club when I was primary five, now we didn't have a rich history unlike St. Joseph or St. Teresa, so a band is all quite new to us. Well, against my better judgment, I agreed to join it.

But I was pretty hopeless. They tried to get me blowing a trumpet, but week after week, I just couldn't get my technique right. In fact, it was a bit humiliating. I was miserable, as was my instructor.

Try as I might, I just couldn't get it right. It was a dead end. I was caught in this cycle of repeated failure, one I felt powerless to rectify.

And no one likes to be caught in a cycle of failure. And yet we see all these kinds of cycles around us, don't we? Over the past few years, I've been trying to help this person, but it's been really tough to know how to.

[2 : 1 3] He's caught in a cycle of debt and unemployment, which means he's always falling behind on rent and always being threatened by the landlords to be kicked out.

And often monetary help only brings temporary relief. But he's also caught in a cycle of half-truths and broken promises, as I find that he's not always telling me the full story of what he's up to.

And he's always saying that he wants to turn over a new leaf without showing much evidence of that happening. And so the cycle remains unbroken to this day.

We see these cycles on a macro level, as we're currently stuck in a perpetual loop of watching cases rise, getting locked down, restrictions eventually getting eased, and then all sorts of factors from personal irresponsibility to negligent governance, leading to a rise of cases once again.

And so as we look at these cycles of repeated failures, we might be wondering, why? Why is that the case? Why is the world like this? And how can we escape this cycle of perpetual failure?

[3 : 24] Well, this morning we're going to be looking at a passage that answers that very question, Genesis chapter 12. In fact, today's passage is one of the most important passages in the entire Bible.

It constitutes a major turning point, a new beginning, a beginning that will only find its conclusion at the end of the Bible, in Revelation chapter 21 and 22.

It sets before us a different future, a future initiated and determined by God alone. But first, we need to set the stage.

Why do we even need a new beginning? Well, to find out, let's begin at the original beginning. And right at the beginning, God speaks. And by the word of the Lord, the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth, as the psalmist puts it.

As God speaks, he creates. And as he creates, he blesses. We see this over and over again. Look at Genesis 1 verse 22. Right after God made the sea creatures and the birds by speaking, we read, God blessed them and said, be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas and let the birds increase on the earth.

[4 : 49] And so God creates to bless. And that blessing is associated with fullness, with fruitfulness, with life giving itself. The same pattern is found in the creation of human beings.

In Genesis 1 verse 27, God creates us. And in 1 verse 28, he blesses us. And let's get the definition of blessing right. To be blessed is to experience the fullness of life in line with God's core, in accordance with his good design.

To be blessed is to live at rest, in fellowship with God. Blessing is God-centered, not man-centered. And that's what Genesis 1 to 2 communicates to us.

That's why God blesses the seventh day. Because it's the day when everything is complete and all humanity can bask in the rest of God and enjoy his creation.

But Genesis 3 to 11 reveals to us that this life of blessing is now lost. Instead, again and again, all we see is humanity locked in a cycle of failure.

[6 : 02] From the moment humanity decided not to live in line with God's core, they began to endure the reversal of blessing. After all, how can there be fullness of life now that humanity is banished from the source of life and blessing in Genesis 3?

How can there be fullness of life when brother kills brother in Genesis 4? How can there be fullness of life when in Noah's time, God sees the world and can no longer call it good, but corrupt?

Again and again, whether it's Adam and Eve, or Cain and Abel, or Noah and the world, or the Tower of Babel, Genesis 3 to 11 constantly reinforces to us that we're all trapped in this cycle of sin and death and judgment.

A life of blessing is no longer ours. A life of curse is all we have instead. And so when we get to Genesis 11 verse 27 to 32, right before our passage today, we need to recognize that what we have is no mere genealogy.

Rather, this mundane-looking report actually shows us humanity's downward trajectory. You see, what we have here is the family line of Terah. And so, of course, we're given a whole host of names.

[7 : 29] Nahor, Haran, Abram, and so on. But notice the one name that's missing. God. This genealogy and the one immediately preceding it in verses 10 to 26 are the only sections in the whole of Genesis 1 to 11 where God is not mentioned.

He's not in the picture. Joshua 24 verse 2 will tell us why. There we read that Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshipped other gods.

This family is far from the one true God. And so, all the markers of blessing are removed. Verse 28 tells us Haran, one of Terah's children, suffers an early death.

Verse 30 tells us Sarai, Abram's wife, is barren. There is no fruitfulness, no multiplication, no life. It is a hopeless picture.

As one commentator eloquently puts it, the text tells us there is no foreseeable future. There is no human power to invent a future.

[8 : 50] The human race and human history have just hit a dead end. It's over. Verse 31 captures that dead end for us poignantly.

Terah's family looks to migrate to Canaan, presumably for a better life, but they never reach it. They settle instead in Haran.

And that's where humanity is by the end of chapter 11. Stuck in a blessing-free life. Resigned to a life of perpetual failure.

No way out of this endless cycle of sin and judgment. And thousands of years later, plenty of people still find themselves stuck in this same cycle.

Unless God intervenes. Unless God does it all over again. Unless God creates a new beginning.

[9 : 57] And that's where Genesis 12 comes in. Here's the good news of Genesis 12. We're given the promise of a new beginning. That's my first point for today.

The promise of a new beginning. You see, there's no way that human beings can escape the stranglehold that sin has on us. We are all enslaved to the forces of this fallen world.

We are all completely helpless. We're all like the 10-year-old me, unable to blow a trumpet no matter how hard we try. We're not in control as this pandemic has shown us.

We need someone more powerful, more able, more authoritative to step in. And so the beginning of Genesis 12 verse 1 comes as a blessed relief.

The Lord said, My friends, you need to hear this as good news. For the last time God spoke in Genesis, He was speaking a word of judgment at the Tower of Babel, resulting in the scattering of nations.

[11 : 14] And that could have been it. God could have chosen never to speak again. But now, He speaks a word of redemption, a promise that will result in all the nations receiving blessing.

Five times in these three verses, blessing is spoken of. In Genesis 3 to 11, the word curse is also found five times.

And so this five-fold repetition of blessing language in Genesis 12 is God's way of saying, I intend to reverse the curse of sin in full.

I intend to break the cycle. I intend my original purposes for this world to be fulfilled. I intend to see all this come to pass.

And so five times in 12 verse 1 to 3, He says, I will. I will make you a great nation. I will bless you. I will make your name great.

[12 : 20] I will, I will, I will. God steps in. For my friends, who is this God?

Well, Genesis has already shown us he's God the creator. He's the God who, when he speaks, is able to call forth creation.

He's the God who brings something out of nothing, who brings life out of emptiness. This is the kind of God he is.

And he's the God who steps in. You see, it's possible to think of God simply in the past tense. It's possible to think, oh yeah, God exists and he created the world and that's it.

He's no longer involved. Creating is something he did, not something he does. It's possible to think that once God is finished with the creation of this world in Genesis 1 and 2 and expels us for our sin in Genesis 3, he steps out.

[13 : 34] He leaves us trapped in our cycle. But my friends, Genesis 12 shows us something different. Genesis 12 shows us that we shouldn't think of God the creator merely in the past tense.

God isn't just the originator of this universe who then leaves his finished project on the shelf, forgotten and collecting dust.

No, Genesis 12 shows us that God is still in the business of creation. God the creator is acting again in the present tense.

For just as the word of God came in Genesis 1 to create life and blessing, the word of God now comes in Genesis 12 to once again create life and blessing.

He's involved in the work of re-creation and it all begins with Abraham. God will start all over again with one man who will also be fruitful and multiply.

[14 : 49] God wants to create a new humanity made up of the offspring of Abraham who will bring blessing to the entire world.

My friends, do you see that our new beginning starts here? It starts with faith in a God whose word can be taken seriously.

It starts with faith in a God who is able to speak life into being, who doesn't just create, but recreates. It starts with faith in a God who is not just capable of doing so, but willing to do so.

For if God is not like this, then why should we bother paying attention to his promise? After all, not the creator, he can recreate.

If he can't recreate, he can't make new creations. If he can't make new creations, he can redeem. His promise is of no use.

[15 : 55] His plan will not bear fruit. Humanity will still be stuck in a dead end. And we will have no hope. But we can have hope.

for as Paul puts it in Romans 4 verse 17, the God of Abraham is the God who gives life to the dead and cause into being things that were not.

And so we can be confident that his promise of a new beginning is no empty promise. And that means we can also be confident that similarly in the New Testament, his promise of a new beginning is no empty promise either.

And so we can read words like those found in Ephesians 2 verse 4 to 5 on the screen. But God being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

By grace you have been saved. Well we can read those words and know that those words are not empty words. For that's how God works to bring about redemption by speaking his word which he causes to trust in, to live by, to hang on to.

[17 : 20] And so what is this word he speaks in Genesis 12? What is it about? We've already seen that it's ultimately to do with restoring blessing to the entire world.

Verse 3. And so it's not a narrow promise relevant only to one individual. No, this promise is ultimately relevant to all of us.

It extends to us. Now on the surface it might not seem so. In verses 1 and 2, God promises to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation and to lead him to a land he has promised.

But what has that got to do with us? Well, to understand its relevance, we need to understand what God is really promising. He's promising Abraham that he will one day have a people dwelling in his place and enjoying his presence once again.

Just like how it was in Eden. God is promising that blessing will come once again as people are brought back into relationship with their faithful and good creator and in harmony with the world around them.

[18 : 45] In other words, God is promising a new beginning for all humanity. He's promising Abraham what he will eventually accomplish through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For when Jesus, the offspring of Abraham comes, what does he do? He disrupts the cycle of sin and failure and judgment that humanity is trapped in.

He takes the curse of sin upon himself, breaks his very power and grants us every spiritual blessing as we are redeemed and adopted and brought back into relationship with God.

And that's true for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike. That's why in Galatians 3, verse 8, Paul can quote the promises of Genesis 12 and call it the gospel in advance.

That's why Galatians 3, verse 14, we are told that Jesus redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles, that is, the nations, through Christ Jesus so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

[20 : 02] New beginnings ultimately flow through Jesus. But who can receive the promise of a new beginning? Well, notice who receives this promise in Genesis 12.

What's so special about the person that God is speaking to? The answer of course is nothing. Now, sometimes we might get an idealized picture of Abraham as this perfect Christian man.

But of course, as we just saw earlier, his family, including him, were idol worshippers. There's nothing remarkable about him. There's nothing to suggest that he had some special quality to elevate him above others.

In fact, there's nothing to even suggest he was even seeking God. And in this sense, Abraham is a picture of us, isn't he? There's nothing special about us.

There's nothing in us that's inherently praiseworthy. There's nothing in us that would cause us to seek God on our own. And yet, God reached out to us.

[21 : 10] That's what grace is. You see, the moment we think we deserve a new beginning, the moment we think we are entitled to a revelation from God, the moment we think that it's unfair that we're experiencing this pandemic, we show that we haven't understood grace yet.

For grace is always God's initiative to the undeserving. The only reason we even have a promise of a new beginning is because God stepped in and called you and me to come to him.

And the great hope we have is that he did. That should give us great assurance today. My friends, the very fact that God has made himself known to you and me at all, and the very fact that he made these very promises to us should fill us with great wonder.

Perhaps today, you're faced with very difficult circumstances of some sort, one that looks impossible to reverse. But if God is willing still in Genesis 12 to promise the reversal of curse, even after a long string of failures on humanity's part, and if God has already performed the greatest reversal of all, by bringing you out of death and into life through Christ Jesus, if he has kept that promise, then you can be sure he will do what is right and good by you, even in a pandemic.

You can have great assurance. And so Genesis 12 shows us the promise of a new beginning. But it also shows us what the response to a new beginning should be.

[23 : 13] And that's my second point today, the response to a new beginning. Genesis 12 verse 1 to 3 is not just made up of promises. In fact, notice the very first word God says to Abraham in verse 1.

Go. Go from your country, your people, and your father's household. God gives a command. And look at what God caused Abraham to leave.

There is his country, a source of familiarity, a place of permanency. His civilization, his customs, his culture, are all to be left behind.

If you've ever had to live in a foreign country for any amount of time, you know how daunting that can be. And then there's his people, his clan. These are the very people he can call upon for help.

In modern day terms, these are the people you turn to if you're in need of a job, or a favour, or even some protection. And now he's to leave them.

[24 : 19] And then that's his household. He's probably being asked here to give up his right to inheritance in his extended family. He's giving up some financial guarantees. And so God is calling Abraham to give up the things that give him his very identity, his very security.

And for what? To the land I will show you. God doesn't even tell him where he's going. You know, if I'm in Abraham's shoes, I'll be asking, God, can you at least show me a bit more before I decide?

At least show me a few photos? But that's how God works in redemption, doesn't he? When he calls us, he calls us out of the world unto himself.

He calls us out of the things that used to give us our identity, the things we cling to for security. Family ties, financial security, friendship networks, familiar traditions.

He calls us to turn from things we put our ultimate confidence in to himself. And that's what he's calling Abraham to do. It's really a picture of repentance.

[25 : 40] For in repentance, we are called to leave idols for God. We are asked to do a complete turnaround. We are asked to leave certain things behind at the same time we take up a new journey to follow him.

And repentance, one theologian says, looks ahead in hope and anticipation, whereas regret or remorse only looks backwards in shame.

We don't quite know the precise details of our new journey as we walk with God. We don't even know what's going to happen next week. And all we have are the promises that he will lead us to our new home as we leave our old one.

But we have the choice to look ahead in hope. Will we? Abraham does. In understated fashion, verse 4 tells us, notice how much the Bible leaves out.

This is a major decision, but the Bible doesn't give us a single detail about the precise route or the various weather conditions encountered. No, the emphasis is not on the journey itself, but the fact that Abraham obeyed.

[27 : 06] He responded in faith. And once again, this illustrates the response of every Christian, does it not? As those who are called the spiritual children of Abraham, as those who have received the promises of Abraham through Christ, our response is to be one of repentance and faith.

You see, this is what the scriptures tell us. Faith in itself does not give us a new beginning. It cannot do that. It is God himself, through his promises, who grants us a new beginning.

And so faith in itself does not redeem us. Only God does. But although faith in itself does not redeem us, it is still necessary.

For faith is the instrument through which we grab hold of God's redemptive promises. Jesus. If Abraham does not go, there will be no salvation for humanity.

There will be no blessing for the nations. There will be no new beginning. And we will all still be lost in our sin. And if we do not respond in repentance and faith to the word of the gospel, we will still be lost in our sin.

[28 : 29] We will not have our new beginning. And it has to be a personal response. Abraham comes from the line of Eve.

And this is the line through whom God promises to crush the serpent all the way back in Genesis 3 verse 15. But Abraham still has to encounter God for himself even though he's from this line.

As do we all. You see, it's not enough to be part of the Christian culture. It's not enough to surround yourself with Christians. It's not enough to tune into a church's live stream. The question is, have you met God personally yourself?

Have you heard God's claim on your life for yourself? And have you responded by turning around, leaving your old life behind, and following him?

Is your faith your own? And Abraham's response is no one-off. love. In 12 verse 4 to 9, we glimpse a life of ongoing trust and repentance.

[29 : 37] It's not as if he decides to go and then stops halfway through. If we were to compare Tara's journey to Canaan in Genesis 11, verses 31 to 32, and Abraham's journey to Canaan in Genesis 12 verse 4 to 5, we notice something interesting.

In both cases, they took their household. In both cases, they set out to Canaan. But only in Abraham's case did he actually arrive there.

It's as if God is saying, this new beginning is the real deal. It's not a false dawn. And notice verse 6 that as Abraham journeys through this land, he encounters an obstacle.

They are Canaanites living in this land. They are people who wouldn't want him to be coming. But in verse 7, God reiterates the promises to him.

The Lord appeared to Abraham and said, to your offspring, I will give this land. And how does Abraham respond to the repetition of God's promises?

[30 : 48] He builds an altar. He worships. Everywhere he goes, verse 8, even to the east, he worships. He calls on the name of the Lord.

And that is significant because that is the first time we hear of anyone calling on the name of the Lord since Genesis 4. There's an interruption to this cycle of turning away from the Lord.

For now, Abraham adopts the life of a pilgrim, a wanderer. But that does not stop him from continuing on in faith and repentance and worship.

And actually, you know, when we come to the end of Abraham's story in Genesis 25, he is still journeying. He never actually quite arrives in the sense that he doesn't possess the land in his lifetime.

And that is a representation of our life too, isn't it? We are surgeons here on earth for our entire lifetime until Jesus comes back.

[31 : 57] We probably won't see the full realisation of God's promises, of God's people being in God's place and enjoying his blessing in our 70, 80, 90 years here on earth.

We have to wait until we're in the new creation. But while we journey here, we exercise faith. We offer our lives in worship, even when there are Canaanites or coronaviruses around.

And as we do, we have the potential to leave a mark. The way Abraham left behind visible markers through his building of altars.

But perhaps what we've said so far brings about a heightened sense of self-awareness. For you and I know that on this journey, we have our fair share of stumbles.

We're not quite immune to that cycle of sin and failure just yet. And so what happens when that happens? Does that mean our promise of a new beginning comes under threat?

[33 : 03] Well, that brings me to my final point for this morning, the certainty of a new beginning. The certainty of a new beginning. In Genesis 12 10-20, what we discover is that faith is often followed by famine.

As we seek to follow God, it's just as common for things to go wrong as they are to go right. And that can throw us off track.

And as a famine descends, Abraham definitely goes off track. Have a look at what he does. In verse 10, he goes down to Egypt.

Is that a good idea? Well, the text doesn't quite tell us directly, but there are a few hints it isn't. For one thing, as we'll see, everything goes wrong for him there.

But for another, Psalm 33 verses 18 to 20 gives us another clue. the psalmist says, verse 18, but the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.

[34 : 18] We wait in hope for the Lord. He is our help and our shield. And that is a word that Abraham doesn't seem to believe in.

And given the strong allusions to the land promise in the preceding verses, to leave the land of promise seems to show a lack of faith, not a response of faith.

But even if Abraham's departure for Egypt is not wrong in itself, his subsequent actions certainly are. He devises a plan, one filled with deception and preoccupied with self-preservation.

In verses 11 to 13, he tells his wife Sarah to say she's his sister. You see, if he says he's her husband and Pharaoh takes a fancy to his wife, Pharaoh can just kill him, simple as that.

But if Pharaoh thinks he's her brother, then according to the cultural norms of that time, they would likely negotiate with him for Sarah's hand in marriage.

[35 : 26] Now at this point, Abraham's faith in God's promises has clearly faltered. In Genesis 12 verse 1 to 9, God is the reason for everything Abraham does.

God speaks, he goes. But in 12 verses 10 to 20, Abraham leaves God out of the picture completely. He takes matters into his own hands. He decides on his own.

Either he thinks that God is not powerful enough to do what he does, or he will not be willing to do so. And notice that as a husband, Abraham by right should provide, he should protect.

But instead, Abraham uses Sarah as his protection. And in verse 16, he gets rich of this scheme. It's almost as if Sarah is providing for him. The whole thing just stinks.

And what's so amazing is that if we keep reading Genesis, this isn't even the last time this kind of deception happens. We'll see it again later in the Abraham story, and we'll see it in his son Isaac.

[36 : 36] And so here's the question. Will this cycle of repeated failure overwhelm God's promises? After all, Abraham's not in the land. His wife is now in Pharaoh's harem.

The offspring promise is now threatened. And there is clearly no blessing to the nations. Instead, verse 17 tells us, Pharaoh is afflicted with serious diseases.

And actually, the word is literally plagues. And when Pharaoh summons Abraham and says, verse 18, what have you done?

We're meant to get a sense of déjà vu. You see, that's exactly what God said to Adam and Eve after they sin. That's exactly what God said to Cain after he murdered Abel.

And now, it is being said to Abraham via the mouth of a pagan king. He's repeating the cycle of sin.

[37 : 41] You see, this episode teaches us that obstacles to God's promises aren't just external. It isn't just the Canaanites or the Egyptians. More often, the obstacles to God's promises are internal.

They come from our own sinful folly. They're often driven by fear. And Abraham's foolishness and fear look like it would derail God's purposes. He devises his own plan and even looks like he will succeed for a second.

He gets rich, verse 16. But God says, you can't make a new beginning based on your own ways. And so once again, he steps in.

He makes sure that Abraham doesn't stay in Egypt. For Pharaoh now says, go, just like God did at the beginning of this chapter.

And so Abraham is sent packing back in the direction he came from. And so despite Abraham's lack of faith here, God gets him back on track.

[38 : 43] Even Abraham's sin is not enough to deter God's promises. For this is how God often works. I wonder as you read Genesis 12, verse 10 to 20, whether you got another sense of déjà vu.

For later on in the Old Testament, a famine will also lead Abraham's descendants into Egypt. And just like here, the promises of land and blessing are threatened. And just like here, God sends plagues on Pharaoh so that his people can be set free to journey to the promised land.

What we have here is the establishment of a pattern. This is our God. He makes sure that even amidst our own foolishness and sin, that his promise of a new beginning will come to pass.

And that is the pattern we see in the gospel, is it not? For unlike Abraham, who only looked out for his own interests, Jesus came and gave himself up for a sinful and foolish people.

He deliberately went to the cross so that once and for all, the cycle of sinful failure can be broken forever. You see, here's what we can take away today.

[40 : 05] We never have to worry whether God will be faithful. God always comes through. Even when there are external threats, even when our own sinful folly threatens to trip us up.

There was a video from the comedian Douglas Lim that went viral this week. And at the end of the video, the question was posed whether our masa depan is gelap, whether our future is bleak.

And Genesis 12 tells us the answer loud and clear. The future is never bleak in Jesus. Our plans fail, but God's plan never fails.

But Genesis 12 also asks us this question. Will you then trust him? Will you admit your own helplessness, raise the bandera putih and be ready to receive what we do not deserve?

Will you leave what is not of him and take hold of his promises of a new beginning? Will you call on the name of the Lord?

[41 : 30] Well, let me invite you to call on him now as I close in prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the truths of Genesis 12.

We thank you that this passage is in the Bible. We thank you that when you could have chosen not to speak again, or when you could have left us with the word of judgment as the final word, and yet you chose to come and speak that word of redemption as you made those promises promises to Abraham, those promises that reverberate throughout the rest of scripture.

scripture. Thank you so much that in Christ we can be certain that we are now part of your new people who will one day live in your place and enjoy your presence fully even as we enjoy your presence in part now.

Thank you, Lord, that you are a gracious and compassionate God. And so, Father, will you help us to respond in obedience, help us to respond in faith, help us to have the eyes of faith, not the eyes of fear, even as we look at what's going on around us at the moment in our country.

We pray, Lord, that you would still help us not to be gripped by a sense of hopelessness, but help us instead to be gripped by a sense of you, that you are the one who is into great reversals.

[42 : 59] So, please help us to keep trusting you as we journey on. Please help us to keep living a life of worship all this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.