

The Blessing of Blessing the Blessing

Genesis 11-12

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Last time we ended with the idea that the Kingdom of Heaven is a party. Today is Father's Day, and I could use a break from preaching, and I have been blessed with a brand new beach ball. So let's bat this thing around and have some fun. I'll toss this out and get the party started.

[The band begins to play "Get the Party Started" by Pink, as the congregation bats the ball around.]

Duncan grabs the ball and shouts, "I got it! I won! It's mine! The blessing is mine!"

Peter says, "Hey, the ball isn't the blessing. The blessing is passing it around."

Duncan insists, "No, the blessing is mine!"

"Well, then the fun is over and I'll have to preach," Peter says.

This is the story of Abraham and the blessing. In these verses, we transition from the primeval history of man, to the history of the chosen nation, named by God: Israel. Last time we talked about the two divided lines of Eber (great-great grandson of Noah). In Genesis 11, the line of Joktan concludes with the story of men who try to make a name for themselves by building a city and the Tower of Babel. The line of Peleg (which means "divided") concludes with the story of a fellow named Abram, who was blessed by God with a name. Abram married a woman named Sarai, then in verse 30, we read, "*Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.*" It's hard to emphasize how huge that is, for we've been following the lineage of the promised seed, and if Abram has no sons, whatever name he has, he can't pass on. Which, by the way, is how we normally get our names. We don't "make them for ourselves" (unless you're Madonna or Prince). We "inherit them from our Father," which can be a problem. Abram's father Terah worshiped idols and it appears Abram did too (Joshua 24:2). Fathers in this world don't always leave us a good name.

Genesis 11:31-12:2 "*Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran. Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great."*

That chunk of Scripture is like the Roswell, New Mexico of global theology. It's surrounded by weirdness. But way more than weirdness – violence. The children of Adam are so desperate for a blessing and a name, that most of the people on this planet claim to be a part of Abram's nation. And they fight about it: the Holocaust, 9-11, wars in the Middle East, and many wars throughout the world can all be traced back to interpretations of Genesis 2:12.

The three great mono-theistic religions all trace their ancestry to Abram, and divide over just who exactly is The Great Nation. Most Jews claim that this nation is Israel, and that the true children of Abraham are the descendants of Isaac through Sarai. Most Muslims claim that this nation is the nation of Islam, and that the true children of Abraham are the descendants of Ishmael through Hagar. Two thousand years

after the time of Abraham in the Koran, Mohamed claims to have received a revelation that Abraham and Ishmael established a Holy House, the haaba in Mecca, and founded true Islam. Well, most Christians claim that their nation is the true church – the Holy Nation. Scripture says, *“It is those of faith, who are the sons of Abram.”* (Gal. 3:17) And just before He was crucified, Jesus walked into Jerusalem, prophesied its destruction and said to the religious leaders, *“Therefore, I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation (ethnos) bearing the fruit of it.”* Christians have understood that nation to be made of all races, having been grafted into the ancient root, not replacing Israel, but joining the true Israel (The Israel of God).

Four and a half years ago, I preached a couple of sermons on those verses. It was like I dropped a bomb. One man of Hebrew decent from a nearby church got so angry that He wrote to the anti-defamation league and pastors throughout the city and the nation about me. He said I had the “blood of the Jews on my head.” I don’t think I’ve ever encountered such anger. He was furious that I claimed the blessings of Abraham for myself. I think he thought that by claiming those blessings, I was necessarily taking them from someone else... like there was only so much blessing to go around. Just like there’s a limited amount of land in Old Israel. Just like there’s a limited amount of room in Old Jerusalem. And he had historical reasons to think that way.

A thousand years ago, the Pope sent Crusaders to Old Israel to reclaim it from the Moslems. In the process, they slaughtered thousands of Moslems, Jews, and Arabic Christians. The Pope forgot that a real Crusader conquers by being crucified, rather than crucifying others. He forgot that His Father’s mercies (His blessings) never come to an end. We all do.

A few years ago, many of us went to Israel and Jerusalem. It was incredible, but never in my life have I been to a place with such an extensive history of violence.

[A photo is shown] That is the wall dividing the land and the city of peace – Jerusalem. This is the Israeli side, and this is the Palestinian side, at the Bethlehem Crossing. A flood of violence, and dividing walls of hostility.

And no wonder! I mean, what was God thinking? Giving such outrageous blessing to just one kid? Every father knows the worst fights break out when you give good, but uneven blessings. Dads, you know this: the worst fights are on Christmas morning. You give the very best gifts so they fit the uniqueness of each child. Yet each gift made every child nervous, for they each wonder, “Who’s most loved? ...Most blessed?”

Well, at least you try to make it equal. God seems to just choose one. What was He thinking? Why?

Genesis 12:2-3a *“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you (Get ready... this is why: So that you) will be a blessing. (So that you will be a blessing. “Blessed to be a blessing.” But to whom?) I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse.”*

And as you know, in the Old Testament, a whole bunch of nations that dishonored the nation of Israel were in fact cursed and destroyed. But... what if Israel dishonors Israel? (The prophets say they do – Ezekiel 22:7, Isaiah 8:1, 23:9. The prophets use the same Hebrew word.) So if Israel dishonors Israel, will God destroy Israel? Listen to God in Jeremiah 15:7: *“I have destroyed my people.”* Crazy.

Genesis 12:3 *"I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

"...all the families of the earth..." Again.

"...all the families of the earth..." Wow.

So just because a nation or family is cursed and destroyed, it doesn't mean they still won't be blessed. Israel gets destroyed, but they still are blessed forever.

Ezekiel 37 *"The dry bones will live and inherit the land."* They're blessed. Blessed: that all the families of the earth would be likewise blessed.

"Abram, you are blessed to be a blessing to all the families of the earth."

"Abram, I choose you to help me hand out the gifts on Christmas morning."

"Abram, you're blessed to be a blessing to all the families of the earth."

If Jews believed that, they'd be all about blessing Moslems and Christians.

If Moslems believed that, they'd be all about blessing Christians and Jews.

If Christians believe that, they'd be all about blessing Jews and Moslems.

And yes: Blessing terrorists is very dangerous. In fact, it can get you crucified... just ask Jesus.

Well, anyway... Why was Abram blessed? If we knew why he was chosen to be blessed, then we might know how to get chosen and who we had to choose to bless. Well, Genesis doesn't say why Abram was blessed.

So a thousand years later, Jewish rabbis started writing stories of Abram's youth, before he was chosen. In these stories, Abram has great wisdom, righteousness and sanctity. As a young man, he reasoned that if the sun set, it couldn't be God, and if the moon set, it couldn't be God. If his father's idols couldn't eat the offering, they couldn't be God, so he set them all on fire. In other words: he figures it out, and so makes a good choice, and therefore is chosen to be blessed.

In the Koran, Mohammed recounts some of these very same stories, and adds a few more, so it seems Abram is chosen because he's worthy to be chosen.

That's what many Jews, Moslems and even Christians believe. And yet, that's definitely not what the Scripture says. In the next 5 verses, Abram goes to Canaan and there God says, *"To your seed, I will give this land."* But in verse 10, there's a famine in Canaan, so Abram goes down into Egypt. In order to save himself (out of fear, not faith), Abram tells Pharaoh that his beautiful bride Sarai is actually his sister. So Pharaoh takes her into his house, and plagues befall the Egyptians (This should all sound familiar). Except Pharaoh is honorable and sends Sarai back to dishonorable Abram. Do you understand? Abram pimps his bride to save his tail.

I feel sorry for Sunday School teachers who try to make these guys good examples to emulate. I mean, what are they supposed to say to the children? "Ok, kids, everyone look here at the flannel graph. See Noah? See Noah plant a vineyard, get drunk, get naked and pass out?" (Little naked flannel graph Noah.) "See Noah wake up and curse his son, Cain?" "See Abram? See Sarai? She's totally hot. See Pharaoh

lusting after Sarai? See Abram lie to Pharaoh so Pharaoh can have sex with his wife without disliking Abram"... Let's sing. "Father Abraham, he pimped his wife. Pimped his wife, that's Father Abraham. And she was so hot, and he was so scared. All he did was go like, 'Yo dog, check out my sister.'"

Now I don't want to dishonor Abram, for we're all like Abram. But really, what's a Sunday School teacher supposed to say? If you read your Bible, you realize no one is good, no one is a hero... Until you get to a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Scripture calls him "the seed."

So God chose Abram, when Abram was a Babylonian pagan with a barren wife. Then, even after God speaks his word, Abram's faith is only the size of a seed – a "mustard seed." You know God likes to speak His Word into the void. God speaks seed into the empty womb of our faithlessness, disobedience and shame. And that's what it means to be chosen – it means Grace.

Romans 9:11 The patriarchs were chosen when: *"They were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad in order that God's purpose of election might continue not because of works, but because of his call."* Not because of works. The point of election is that the elect in no way deserve to be elect.

Romans 9:16 *"So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy."* The point is God's mercy.

We Christians sometimes act like the point of being chosen is that others aren't chosen, and we deserve to be chosen. You should be pleased to be chosen, but if you're proud to be chosen, perhaps you're not chosen.

I Corinthians 1:27 *"Consider your calling, brothers. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"*

Got it? "You've been graced to be graceful... not to be arrogant." God didn't say, "I challenge you, that you would be a challenge." Or "I threaten you, that you would be a threat." Or even, "I fix you, so that you would fix others."

But "I bless you, so that you would be a blessing." Blessing incarnate. "I elect you, that you would be an agent of my election." "I bless you and I haven't blessed them, so that I might bless them through you. For in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Wow. So what's in the blessing?

1. Clearly, it involves some land in the Middle East.
But not all the families of the earth would fit in the land as it is now. So it may be the start of the blessing, but definitely not the end. Yet God tells us He'll make a new Heaven and a new land. And Jesus says, *"The meek shall inherit the land."* And that's why they're "blessed." The meek.
2. The blessing is a land, and a city.

But it's not a city we build; it's a city God builds out of us. *"By its light, the nations walk, and the kings of the earth bring their glory into it."*

3. It's a land, a city and a name.

But we don't make the name for ourselves. Our Father gives us His name, like a birthright. He names Abram Abraham. God has a unique name for you, and a family name we all share. You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. That you might declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. You've been blessed to be a blessing.

4. Land, city, name and seed.

Although Sarai's womb is barren, Abram will be blessed with seed. Jesus taught that God's word is seed. John wrote that God's word is Jesus. And in Galatians 3, Paul tells us that the Gospel (God's good word) was preached to Abraham.

Then in verse 16 we read: (Galatians 3:16)

"Now to Abraham and his seed, were the promises made. He does not say 'And to seeds' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your seed' who is Christ."

And in verse 29:

"And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise."

God gives Abraham biological seed and eternal seed – Jesus. It's like Abraham was formless and void, and God spoke His word, His seed, His blessing... God spoke Christ into Abraham's heart.

Galatians 4:6 *"God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts crying Abba, Father!"* That's faith.

"Christ dwells in our hearts through faith," writes Paul.

So listen, all you fatherless on Father's Day. When you have faith, and when you cry "Abba, Father!" it isn't you. It's the eternal and imperishable seed. It's the Spirit of Jesus, the first-born son. He's giving you His faith in His Father, as your own Father. He is your *"wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption."* He will live out His faith from within you, as you are transformed into the image of God, like Christ is the image of God. Your life is the story of grace: grace incarnate, like Abraham was blessing incarnate. You yourself contain the blessing and become the blessing. You are the Body of Christ, animated by the faith of Christ. The blessing is land, city, name, gospel, seed, Jesus, and the faith of Jesus. The faith of Jesus in an entirely barren place, like Abram or you. See faith is a gift.

Faith in what? Faith in God our Father. And who is God? Well, God is love. God is grace. In short, God is blessing. The blessing is God. The blessing is love. "The blessing" is blessing. That's the great joke on this entire upside down world. This entire upside down world constantly assumes: It is more

blessed to receive than to give. But Jesus said, *“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”* Or “You’re most blessed when blessing.” In other words, “To bless is the blessing.”

The blessing (noun) is blessing (verb). You know blessing is a noun and a verb, like love is a noun and a verb. And so God is a noun and a verb. God is a trinity – three persons constantly loving, constantly giving, constantly blessing. Like a great dance, an ecstatic party, a never-ending drama or game called love and life.

C.S. Lewis writes:

The golden apple of selfhood, thrown among the false gods, became an apple of discord because they scrambled for it. They did not know the first rule of the holy game, which is that every player must by all means touch the ball and then immediately pass it on. To be found with it in your hands is a fault: to cling to it, death. But when it flies to and fro among the players too swift for eye to follow, and the great master Himself leads the revelry, giving Himself eternally to His creatures in the generation, and back to Himself in the sacrifice, of the Word, then indeed the eternal dance “makes heaven drowsy with harmony.” All pains and pleasures we have known on earth are early initiations in the movement of that dance: but the dance itself is strictly incomparable with the sufferings of this present time. As we draw nearer to its uncreated rhythm, pain and pleasure sink almost out of sight. There is joy in the dance, but it does not exist for the sake of joy. It does not even exist for the sake of Good, or of love. It is Love Himself, and Good Himself, and therefore happy.

The Biblical term for that is “blessed.” You see, the ball isn’t the blessing. The game is the blessing. The ball is just equipment for playing the game. Your money isn’t the blessing, your house isn’t the blessing, and your land isn’t the blessing. These things are just equipment for playing the game. Hang on to them and the game is over, and you’re not blessed, you’re cursed. Even yourself, your very body and blood, is equipment for playing the game. You lose yourself and find yourself in the game. The “blessing” is blessing.

There is an ancient story:

“A certain man had two sons. One was rich and the other was poor. The rich son had no children while the poor son was blessed with many sons and many daughters. In time, the father fell ill. He was sure he would not live through the week so on Saturday he called his sons to his side and gave each of them half of the land... Then he died.

Before sundown the sons buried their father with respect as custom requires.

That night the rich son could not sleep. He said to himself: “The blessing my father gave is unjust. I am rich, my brother is poor. I have bread enough and to spare, while my brother’s children eat one day and trust God for the next. I must move the landmark which our father has set in the middle of the land so that my brother will have the greater share. Ah – but he must not see me. If he sees me he will be shamed. I must arise early in the morning before it is dawn and move the landmark!” With this, he fell asleep and his sleep was secure and peaceful.

Meanwhile, the poor brother could not sleep. As he lay restless on his bed he said to himself: “My father’s blessing is unjust. Here I am surrounded by the joy of many sons and many daughters, while my brother daily faces the shame of having no sons to carry on his name and no daughter to comfort him in his old age. He should have the land of our fathers. Perhaps this will in part compensate him for his indescribable poverty. Ah – but if I give it to him he will be shamed. I must awake early in the morning before it is dawn and move the landmark which our father has set!” With this, he went to sleep and his sleep was secure and peaceful.

On the first day of the week – very early in the morning, a long time before it was day, the two brothers met at the ancient landmark. They fell, with tears, into each other’s arms.

And that was the father’s blessing.

And on that spot was built the city of Jerusalem.”

With us, God is building His Sanctuary – the New Jerusalem. We’ve been “blessed to be a blessing – blessing incarnate.” We each have been blessed with money and talents. If you hang onto them, they turn into a curse. But if you bless with them, well, that is the blessing. We’ve been blessed with stuff, and even more, with each other (with beautiful stories of grace). And now, even more, we’ve been blessed with opportunities to bless, which is the great blessing.

In a couple of months, I expect us to be moving to Asbury. If we go asking, “How will I be blessed?” Don’t be surprised if it ends up feeling like a curse. But if we go asking, “How can I bless?” If we go blessing blessing itself, we can’t help but be blessed. For “it’s more blessed to give than to receive.” Most blessed to bless.

So Abraham is blessed to be blessing, and Abraham became blessing. Like blessing incarnate. So of course God says, “whoever blesses blessing is blessed, but whoever rejects blessing is cursed.”

Jesus said (Matt 8:11): *“I tell you, many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven.”* Why? Because they bless blessing – they bless grace. *“But the sons of the kingdom will be cast into outer darkness.”* Why? Because they curse blessing. They belittle grace. They think they deserve the blessing, which then isn’t blessing. They think they’ve chosen to be chosen, which is not being chosen. How could they be blessed if they desire blessing itself?

But this is how you know if you’ve really blessed blessing. If you rejoice at other people’s blessings... undeserved blessings... And especially if those blessings were once yours. If someone cheats you of what’s rightfully yours, takes your birth right, takes your name, takes your life work as their own, and yet they can’t really take it, because you give it with joy... well, then you are most blessed. For it’s more blessed to give than receive. More blessed. But in this world, also more painful.

See, in Heaven everyone gives, everyone passes the ball. And so it’s a great dance, a wild party, ecstatic love and life. Yet in this world, no one passed the ball; no one gave; no one loved; no one was righteous until God gave the seed. He gave the seed to get the party started.

The story I told you about the two brothers is just a myth. But this is not a myth:

There were two brothers – a first-born and another. To the first-born belonged the birth right, and the father's blessing. The first-born did everything in the name of the father, so his life's work was righteousness. And the younger boy was jealous, afraid, and filled with shame. On Christmas morning, they met at the ancient stone marker (the edge of the first-born's land and the little brother's land). It was an Ark of a Covenant in a sanctuary on the rock. It was a wooden manger placed on stone. It was a tree planted on Mt. Zion.

The older brother came to move the marker; he came to give. The younger brother came to take. And so He tried to cheat the birthright, seize the name, and steal the blessing. But he couldn't steal the blessing, for the father and the first-born had planned to give the foundation of the world and that is the greatest blessing.

So as we nailed our older brother Jesus to the tree of knowledge, on top of the ancient stone marker we call Mt. Zion, the first-born cried, "*Father, forgive them!*" and gave up His spirit... to us.

He took bread and broke it, saying, "This is my body which is for you." And He took the cup, saying, "This is the new covenant in my blood. Take, because I give... I forgive." And this is how He gets the party started. On this spot, the New Jerusalem comes down. The new creation invaded the old creation. Now Jesus is moving the marker till the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. This is the marker, and this is the blessing. When you receive this blessing.

And Jesus says to you, "Behold, my father is your father." The love He has for me is the love He has for you. Jesus is the Father's blessing.

If you bless Him, you are blessed. If you reject Him, you are already condemned and gnashing your teeth in outer darkness. But sons of the Kingdom, it's time to come home. Look, He's moved the ancient marker, little brother. He's moved it all the way from Mt. Zion to you – tonight. And so He calls you to meet Him. You give Him your nothing, and He gives you His everything. He is the love of God poured out.

Prayer: Oh, Jesus, we doubted that you were good. And you have proven us wrong. So now, by the power of your Spirit, help everyone in this room to lay down their old fears, their old shame, their old insecurities, their nothingness, and receive the grace that is you. The lifeblood of the living God. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Communion

Tonight you approached the ancient stone marker, because you heard there was a gift there... that the greatest blessing was there. But as you approach it, you're scared, you're intimidated, because from this land, blessing looks like a whole lot of pain: body broken, blood shed, sacrifice. But when you cross over to the other side of the stone marker and enter the kingdom, the same table from the other side looks like this: every creature in Heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, praising the Lamb on the throne. It looks like the greatest party, because in that kingdom, not only one gives, not only one blesses, but they all do. And you're home. So in Jesus' name, believe the Gospel, and get the party started... even here. Amen.

Disclaimer: This document is a draft and has not been edited by the author. Therefore, there may be discrepancies. Some discrepancies may be minor; some may have to do with theology. When in doubt, please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website and don't be shy about informing us of errors.