

## The Call of God

Genesis 12:1-9

### Introduction

**Broken Promises:** How many of us have made a promise before? (Show of hands). How many of us have broken a promise? (Show of hands). *Pay attention kids, mommy and daddy are sinners too.* Why do we break promises?

- We're sinners. We don't break *all* of them but we all break *some* of them.
- We lack the power or knowledge to keep certain promises. Story of a dad who promised to be back in time for his son's football game (traveling but the weather looked good). Mechanical problems grounded the plane (couldn't see that coming). Kids (under 5th grade) don't keep promises as much as parents because the parents are *usually* stronger, smarter, and more character formation. *One day* these kids will be as smart and as strong as their parents (or smarter/stronger).
- We are limited in our strength to keep our promises. That is not true about God. **God is not limited in keeping his promise in any way.** He is not limited by intelligence, strength, or character. "God never out-promised himself" (Thomas Boston).

**Recap: In the beginning** God created all things by his word. He made man and woman as the pinnacle of creation, to worship and serve him by stewarding creation and cultivating it for his glory. They would multiply and fill the earth with his glory as an act of worship. But, they gave in to the temptation of the serpent and **disobeyed God**. The result was a curse that spread to each one of their descendants. They were expelled from the presence of God in the garden.

**The garden held a promise that God's glory would fill the earth** and, even after the first couple sinned, God promised to **reverse the curse** and redeem his creation for its intended purpose.

**Capstone to the Primaeval Account:** In Genesis twelve God comes to a man named Abram (who would become "Father Abraham," who has many sons, and many sons have Father Abraham). Everything in the first eleven chapters of Genesis is leading to this moment in chapter twelve that explains how the promises of God are accomplished by Abraham and his descendants.

- If you trace the genealogies of Genesis 1-11 you see that they are leading to Abraham (e.g., Cain v. Abel/Seth; Noah v. Lamech; Ham v. Shem). The tower of Babel story interrupts the genealogy that culminates in Abram.
- In the midst of the sin and destruction of the world, the promises of God still remain. God still calls us out of darkness and into his light.

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> 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." <sup>4</sup> So

Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. <sup>5</sup> And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, <sup>6</sup> Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. <sup>7</sup> Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. <sup>8</sup> From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. <sup>9</sup> And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

God is continuing to spread his glory through the call of salvation to those who would place their faith in him. Notice three things about the call of God tonight.

### 1. God's call is a gift of salvation in the midst of judgment.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

**Context of Judgment:** Notice the context of Abram's call. He is coming from the scattered nations of Babel. This is the same call as Noah who was called from among a people whose hearts were wicked to the core (Gen 6:5).

- God offers salvation in the midst of our wickedness and sin.
- "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23).
- "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one" (Rom 3:10-12).
- I read a story this week of a three year old girl who was playing on an unicorn shaped inflatable in Greece and the wind swept her almost a half-mile out into the Mediterranean Sea. She was rescued by a Ferry Boat captain. Describing her situation, he said, "There was nothing she could do. She was helpless." Isn't this our story? Swept into the sea of darkness by sin, we are helpless until God rescues us.<sup>1</sup>

**Act of Grace:** The fact that God saves *anyone* is pure grace. The fact that he doesn't destroy the whole thing is mercy. The fact that God saved *you* is pure grace. You didn't clean yourself up enough to deserve salvation. You didn't get your act together to earn his grace. Salvation is **not** like picking a kickball team where (e.g., random, skill-based, etc.). All of us are enemies of God in our sin ("For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life," Rom 5:10).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/28/world/europe/greece-girl-unicorn-rescue.html>

- God is the standard of righteousness (which is why we don't live up to it). *And* I think most of us aren't libertines but legalists. What *most* of us do is, rather than admitting we fall short of God's standard, we create a manmade standard to which we fit.
- We create man made rules and codes of conduct. Everybody gets their righteousness from somewhere (where you shop, where you don't shop, what you eat or don't eat, who you vote for or don't vote for). Whether left or right, human standards are false standards *and* they're all in danger of fundamentalism and legalism. No one will ever be pure enough to live up to your manmade standard (e.g., cancel culture).

The first step in salvation is acknowledging your sin, then throwing all of your hopes on Jesus.

- Prussian King Frederick the Great (1740-1786) was once touring a Berlin prison. The prisoners fell on their knees before him to proclaim their innocence – except for one man, who remained silent. Frederick called to him, "Why are you here?" "Armed robbery, Your Majesty," was the reply. "And are you guilty?" "Yes indeed, Your Majesty, I deserve my punishment." Frederick then summoned the jailer and ordered him, "Release this guilty wretch at once. I will not have him kept in this prison where he will corrupt all the fine innocent people who occupy it."
- We spend so much time defending ourselves that we miss the freedom that comes from admitting our sin and receiving forgiveness.

**Toward:** Everything is *moving toward* the chosen people and the promised land, a path away from the familiar to a "land" that God would give. With Babel as the backdrop, Abram is called from among the nations to pursue a land that God is giving him. Just like God put his first creation in a land, bringing order out of chaos, he is calling Abram to a land of his choosing.

**Separation and Blessing:** Abram is called *out of* his world to receive a blessing and be a blessing. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. God calls us out of sin. **You can't hold onto your sin and hold onto Jesus.** You can't sprinkle a little religion into your life and think it's going to work (e.g., a little leaven).

- Some of us want to take our worldly dreams and add a little Jesus.
- Some of us want to keep our sin and just "balance" it out with Jesus (like adding some water to poison). Light and dark can't coexist. Jesus is all or nothing (adding sugar to dirt doesn't change it from dirt).

**God Calls:** The history of all things begins with God speaking. History of redemption and new creation, begins with God speaking. We have a God who speaks life into death.

- We are dead until God speaks life. *God* gets our attention.
- God is calling each of us out of sin and judgment and into his life and salvation.

## 2. God's call is a renewal of his blessing for the whole world.

<sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

**New Beginning:** When God created everything it was “good.” It was perfect. Sin broke that perfection. Sin separates us from God. Sin separates us from each other.

- In Noah we saw that his blessing was a renewal of God’s command to fill the earth and bless it.
- We see that blessing escalated again in Abraham. The chaos of the world is funneled into an orderly plan of God.

Creation was intended to bring God glory and was a blessing to all that God created. That blessing is reaffirmed in Abram. God blessed Adam and Eve (Gen 1:28), God blessed Noah (9:1), now he promises to bless Abram (12:2), and through him bring blessing to the whole world.

- The blessings of God are going to multiply from Abram to all peoples, which is why his name is changed to Abraham, the “father of many nations” (Gen 17). God always wanted to expand the blessing of Eden to all the world, that’s why we are told to “multiply and fill the earth.”
- The promise for Abraham is a renewal of God’s vision for all of humanity to be blessed.

**Reverse the Curse:** God wants to bless his people; **he is unstoppably committed to blessing us.** To accomplish this blessing he must reverse the curse of sin. It is no accident that the curse is mentioned five times in Genesis 3-11 and blessing is mentioned five times in Genesis 12:1-3.

**How are We Blessed?:** The locus of God’s promise, the means by which he accomplishes it is through a chosen family. The promised seed comes through this special family in the promised land. The purpose of Abram, the father of Israel, is to be a blessing. All of God’s people exist for a missiological purpose – to bless the world. “The ultimate purpose of redemption which God will bring about in Israel is that of bridging the gulf between God and the entire human race” (Von Rad). And that bridge is built through the cross of Jesus.

- The only way to be blessed is through the promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ: he is the only way.
- One of the lies of sin (from the garden onward) is that you can have blessing **on your own terms.**
- You were created by God and for God. There is no blessing outside of him. There is no true, eternal joy outside of doing what he’s called you to do (like a fish wanting life outside of the water).
  - Most of life is learning that God’s plan *really* is better than mine.

**What is the Blessing?:** Being with Christ is better, “very far better” (Phil. 1:23). True blessing is being where God created you to be, doing what he created you to do. He created you to be in relationship with him, enjoying his bountiful creation, worshipping and serving him as you steward creation. True flourishing is living in communion with God the way he intended.

**God Works:** I don’t want to minimize Abram’s call to obedience but notice that the promise relies on God’s work (e.g., “he will make,” “he will bless”). God is the one who works.

- The inhabitants of Babel (we learned last week) tried to “make a name for themselves” only to be punished and scattered because of their hubris.
- The irony of blessing is that Abram’s name is made great because of God’s work, not his own. God builds him into a great nation.
- The paradox of the Christian life, the way up is down. Our blessing comes not from our strength but from our submission. The more we humble ourselves before the Lord, the more we are lifted up.
- All of our weaknesses and deficiencies are simply building blocks for God’s glory. Think about it, God builds a great and numerous nation through a barren couple (which the genealogy of 11:30 goes out of its way to make clear).
- This is why it all depends on faith (i.e., trust, dependence, reliance, submission). As Paul says: <sup>16</sup> That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, <sup>17</sup> as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. <sup>18</sup> In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” <sup>19</sup> He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. <sup>20</sup> No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup> fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. <sup>22</sup> That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” <sup>23</sup> But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, <sup>24</sup> but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, <sup>25</sup> who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4:16-25).
- I don’t know how some people have turned faith into a magic commodity that we conjure to spend at the piggy bank of God’s wealth. That you can somehow concentrate hard enough and believe more and “get more blessings.” Like faith is analogous to a Jedi’s Force Power or something. **No!** Faith is the full-hearted, desperate trust we place in Jesus. Faith is letting go of the illusion of our own strength and resting completely in his finished work (e.g., drawing in the ocean, relax and let the lifeguard pull you in).

### 3. God’s call is an opportunity to walk by faith in the promises of God.

<sup>3</sup> 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.”

**Future Promise:** “I will bless” is a *future* promise. He’s not saying “here is your blessing” but “your blessing is coming.” Abram is being called on to believe in a future reward. He is being asked to plant his flag in future soil. **And he does.** <sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. <sup>5</sup> And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had

gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, <sup>6</sup> Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. <sup>7</sup> Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. <sup>8</sup> From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. <sup>9</sup> And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

- He built an altar in Shechem and in Bethel, recognizing the promise of God to grant those places to him. When his grandson, Jacob comes back through, he retraces his steps to these places.
- There is a sense that the patriarchs are simply walking in the paths carved by the promises of God.

**The Promises of God are Certain:** When Balak, the king of Moab, wanted to curse the people of God in Numbers 23-24, he found it impossible. He hired Balaam, a non-Israelite, prophet to curse Israel and what happened? Balaam had to bless them! "And Balak said to Balaam, 'What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have done nothing but bless them.' And he answered and said, 'Must I not take care to speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?'" (Num 23:11-12). "Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you" (Num 24:9).

**Choice Between Blessing and Cursing:** If we look ahead in the Torah we see the Israelites pass through Shechem where Abram builds his altar. God reminds them in that place that they have a choice to trust the promise of God and obey the command of God or not. <sup>26</sup> "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: <sup>27</sup> the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, <sup>28</sup> and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known. <sup>29</sup> And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal" (Deut 11:26-29).

- The choice of faith is ours as well. Abraham walked by faith. Will we?

**Walk by Faith:** <sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup> For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. <sup>11</sup> By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. <sup>12</sup> Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore" (Heb 11:8-12).

- Will you exchange the known comfort of your current sin, situation, for the unknown promise of God? Will you live for only what you see or will you trust that the unseen promises of God are more real?
- I want to live with simple, straightforward, faith-filled obedience.
- “My task (as a church planter) is to learn to recognize the King’s voice and quickly obey. Don’t ‘wrestle with Him.’ Don’t ‘struggle with Him.’ Do the only thing a subject is able to do in responding to his sovereignty: “Obey him.” Smooth-sounding, evangelical easy-speak cannot adequately disguise a fearful heart, nor can it replace the joy found in a well-planted faith” (Christopherson).
- The call to “go” is the call to find our home not in this earthly world but in the God by whom and for whom we are made.

**Can’t Follow God and Stay:** To have this kind of faith-filled obedience I have to be able to hear the call of God clearly like Abram. But it’s hard to hear God when I’m listening to everyone and everything else. “If you are not feeding your soul on the realities of the presence, promises, and provisions of Christ, you will ask the people, situations, and the things around you to be the messiah that they can never be” (Tripp). “I went to bed last night and realized that in my hurt and despair, I reached for my husband, my twitter, my news but not my God. I didn’t reach for him because my hands were already full” (Heather Thompson Day). You can’t see the land God will show you until you leave your current place and follow him.

- To truly follow God we have to fill our lives with him. We can’t pursue comfort, wealth, pleasure, self-fulfillment, and expect to hear clearly the call of God and see clearly the path of God.
- **And there is only one path, it is the path of faith and obedience to Jesus.**
  - It is the only path to blessing.
  - It is the only path to life.
  - It is the only path to joy.

Can you imagine a tightrope stretched over a quarter of a mile and spanning the breadth of Niagara Falls? The thundering sound of the pounding water drowning out all other sounds as you watch a man step onto the rope and walk across! This stunning feat made Charles Blondin famous in the summer of 1859. He walked 160 feet above the falls several times back and forth between Canada and the United States as huge crowds on both sides looked on with shock and awe. Once he crossed in a sack, once on stilts, another time on a bicycle, and once he even carried a stove and cooked an omelet! On July 15, Blondin walked backward across the tightrope to Canada and returned pushing a wheelbarrow while blindfolded. The crowds watched and “Oooooohed” and “Aaaaahed!” He asked his audience, “Do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow?” The crowd enthusiastically shouted “Yes!” They **believed**. It was then Blondin posed the question: “Who will get in the wheelbarrow?” None did.

- Faith is not “saying” you believe, or merely thinking the right things, it is putting your entire life, hopes, dreams, desires, and future into God’s hands. It is submission and trust.
- “A ship is always safe at shore but that is not what it’s built for” (Albert Einstein).

## Conclusion

**Promises of God Revisited:** Remember, I opened talking about God's promises. Let me ask one last question, how can we trust God's promises? God comes to Abram and *promises* to "make of [him] a great nation" He will "bless [him] and make [his] name great, so that [he] will be a blessing... and in [him] all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:2-3). That is a massive, crazy promise. Imagine if God pulled you aside and said "I'm going to take you and make you a mighty nation. Through that nation, all the families everywhere on earth will be blessed because of you." That's borderline ridiculous (Chandler). Then centuries later, he would say to King David: "And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam 7:16). He promises that someone in David's family tree would reign and rule forever! This isn't a strong nation or a strong dynasty but a **forever** dynasty. He promised one day to write his law on the hearts of his people (Jer 31:33). And he promised to save those who call on the name of the Lord, to rescue those who repent of their sin and trust in him. He promises to work all things for good. He promises that nothing can separate us from his love. **He promises to hear and respond to our prayers, to discipline us in love, to sustain us in suffering, to always remain faithful.** And in 2 Corinthians 1:20 we are reminded that "all the promises of God find their "yes" in Jesus Christ." The promise made to Abraham and the promise made to David has found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The promises of God are "yes" in Jesus. That takes us to the promises made available to us in this room. God has promised to save us from our sins, to grant to us salvation. The only way this is possible is in Jesus Christ. He lived a perfect life and died a perfect death, absorbing the wrath you deserved so you could enjoy his righteousness before the Father. And he's promised to do good to us always (Rom 8:28). That's the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that he will protect our faith in him, he will give us the Holy Spirit, and he will grant us eternal life. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the offer of blessing goes out to all people. **And** if God's promises find their "yes" in Jesus, then those promises are "no" anywhere else. If the promise is, "I will save you from your sins" and that "yes" is found in Jesus Christ, that means you will find salvation for your sins nowhere else. You will not find it in being a more obedient version of yourself. You will not find it in any other religion. You will not find it on any other pleasure, accomplishment, or path of success.

- God's "yes" in salvation is found in Jesus Christ. God's "yes" in hearing of your prayers is in Jesus. God's ability to sustain you in suffering finds its "yes" in Jesus Christ.
- Everywhere else the answer is "no" which is why we cling to Jesus, pursue Jesus, preach Jesus, exalt Jesus, make much of Jesus. He is the author and the perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:1).

**Tonight:** **(1)** Turn from your sin and trust Christ. **(2)** Listen to the call of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. **(3)** Unreservedly obey everything God is calling you to do in his word. It is only and always for your blessing.