

Genesis 12:1-9
Light in the Darkness
Notes from a sermon preached at
Christ Church Liverpool

What does it mean to be blessed? What does it look like to live a blessed life?

Is a blessed life that of the Premiership footballer? Of £50k a week for playing the sport you've loved since as long as you can remember? Of all the houses, cars and women you could want?

Or it a blessed life that of the "ladies who lunch"? No responsibilities other than to ensure that all the people who are paid to keep your home in OK magazine style have done their jobs properly and to make sure that when you lunch you do so only where it's fashionable to be seen?

Well I guess that, instinctively, most of us feel that there is something missing from those descriptions of a blessed life.

That there must be more than a material dimension to living a blessed life.

Mind you millions of Christians around the world do believe and teach that we should expect God to bless us in such ways.

One of the best known proponents of this "prosperity theology" as it is often called, argues that God's will is to prosper all Christian people in three ways:

- 1 Financially
- 2 Physically
- 3 Spiritually

Now I imagine that most people here this morning are instinctively a little bit sceptical about that. After all I'm sure we've all met lovely, godly Christian people who don't seem to be prospering in one or more of those ways.

And Genesis 12 seems to be a good place to start when we're thinking about blessing. After all words related to blessing come 5 times just in v2 & 3 – as many times as they have in the whole of the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

But when we look at the passage what we find is that God's promises to Abraham and to his descendents do seem to be very much about prosperity.

God's blessing in these verses seems to be about land. About many children. About those who will not be on Abraham's side being cursed. At first sight, in other words, God's promises of blessing to Abraham seem to be about prosperity here and now.

So then what should we believe, here and now, this morning, about God's blessing?

What **does** it mean to be blessed by God? As we study the Bible of course the context of a passage – the things that have been going on in the preceding chapters – is always incredibly helpful in trying to establish what a passage means.

And nowhere, I think, is that more true than in Genesis 12. Unless we have a good "big picture" idea of what has been happening in the first 11 chapters of Genesis, we won't understand what is going on here. The passage itself hints at that for us doesn't it:

Now the Lord had said to Abram. V1

As he writes Genesis 12 Moses assumes that we have read the story so far. That we know who this Abram is – that we have read his family history. That we know that he is Terah's son, descended from Noah and Shem and, ultimately, from Adam and Eve – the first humans, and the first rebels against God.

We know from the immediate context that things, after Babel, are looking pretty bleak.

In the first 11 chapters of Genesis we've seen, again and again, the pattern of God's blessing, of human rebellion, of God's judgment and of God's mercy and grace. But after the tower of Babel has been abandoned and humanity is scattered and divided across the world under God's judgment the heavens are silent. God is silent for generation after generation.

This is God's curse.
A fallen world.
A scattered humanity.
Divided peoples.
And death.

So if that is what the world looks like at the end of Genesis 11 what will it look like for anyone to be blessed by God?

Well in Genesis 12 we see that God has not given up on his great project to make a people for himself. God is not about to abandon humanity and start again in some parallel universe. Instead, just as he always planned, he is going to build a new humanity, a new people for himself.

And he is going to start with one man. One man blessed by God.

And, as we'll see, God's blessing is going to about far more than providing a few extra sheep for his friend Abram. God's blessing is actually

going to bring about the reversal of the curses and judgments that human being have brought upon themselves.

1 God will reverse Babel's curse and gather his people

It must have been quite a shock when God spoke to Abram. We know from the book of Joshua that Abram's family were pagans – that they worshipped other gods, false gods. This was a family of idolaters. We have no reason to suppose that Abram was any better. God chose Abram, not because of any merit on his part. He wasn't better, or stronger or cleverer than any of the other people in the world. God, in his sovereign freedom simply chose him to be the one who would bring blessing to the world.

And what God will do, through Abram, is to reverse the curse of Babel. God will give Abram a land. You see that in v1 where he is instructed to go to the land God will show him. And in v7 it's made explicit:

to your offspring, God says, I will give this land.

It's an astonishing promise. If the curse of Babel was the scattering of people's across the earth; God's blessing to Abram and his offspring is that they will be gathered together in the land God will give them. And that is a theme that you find running throughout the rest of the Bible.

As you read on in the Old Testament you find that God blesses his people by gathering them together and bringing them into a nation state – Israel. But when their leaders become rebellious God divides the nation into two opposing kingdoms. As the people continued to reject God and his word God allowed foreign nations to invade Israel and scatter the people across the globe. The Old Testament prophets looked forward to a time when God would, once again, gather his people. The prophet Isaiah wrote these words:

"In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills and all nations will stream to it."

In the future, Isaiah says, not only ethnic Israel but people from all nations, God's people from across the globe will be gathered together – that is God's blessing.

I think it's extremely sad that the contemporary church devotes so much energy to talking about the place of the actual land of Israel in God's plans for the world.

Because that is to take Genesis 12 out of context. Sure in Genesis 12 the land, the physical place of Israel, is very important. We're told about it, aren't we, in great detail? How Abram travels. Starting in the North of the country he moves right into the geographical centre of what would later become Israel – at Shechem (v6) where he builds an altar to the Lord. He moves on again and by the end of v9 we find him approaching the southern borders with Egypt – the Negeb.

So the question to ask is **why** is the land important?

Because it is the place where God's people, the nation that God promises to Abram in v2, are going to be gathered together.

What matters about this nation is not so much exactly *where* it is.

What matters is *that* it is. This is a real place. For a real people. Who really will be gathered together.

So what might that mean for a group of Christians meeting on a Sunday morning in Liverpool 4,000 years later?

Well we need to learn that God's gathering together of his people is a sign of his blessing.

As we read through the Bible we discover that ultimately that blessing will be found when God gathers every single one of his people ever.

Abraham, Moses, King David, Isaiah, Esther, Peter, Paul, John and, if you are a Christian here this morning, you too, will be gathered in a new land, a new city that is described in the Bible sometimes as a new Jerusalem or sometimes as a new earth.

To be with other believers for ever is to be blessed by God.

He will give his people a "land". Not a physical place we can draw on a map of the earth at the moment. But a real place where we will actually be with God's people. That is God's blessing to Abraham that all Christian people can share in.

And that great blessing from God is not just for the future – we also experience it now as God gathers us together in a local church. As part of a gathering, a congregation, a church of God's people.

God's blessing to Abraham was, v2, that he would make of him a great nation – that his descendents, his family would be huge in number.

And that's one of the reasons why the Bible consistently describes church as a family. It's to remind us that in church God is fulfilling his promises to Abraham to bring blessing to his people.

Now I don't know how much you think that this church, Christ Church, or your church if you're a visitor this morning, is part of God's blessing to you. I hope you do. I hope you rejoice in the relationships and friendships and love in your church. I hope you feel that church is not a scattered group of people who happen to be in the same place for about 90 minutes once a week but a gathering of God's people, united by bonds of concern, love and prayer.

Because that is how we should currently experience God's blessing in our lives.

Jesus said that those who followed him, even if, like Abram, they had to leave possessions, family and friendships behind, would receive 100 times as many in return. That wasn't a promise that all Christians would have loads of children of become massively personally wealthy.

It was a promise that all Christians can belong to a community of God's people who are our family and who generously share what they have.

But if God is really going to bless his people there will have to be more to it than gathering them together.

Because there is another, older, more fundamental judgment than God's scattering after Babel.

And the great news of Genesis 12 is that...

2 God will reverse Eden's curse and be with his people

Do you ever wonder what it is like not to know God?

In one sense of course all of us here this morning who became Christians at an old enough age to remember not being Christians can answer that question. Because if you're not a Christian then you don't know God.

But all people in our corner of the world, Christian or not, have access to God's word, the Bible. We can look at it, in our own language, and find out what God is like and how we can know him.

But imagine for a minute Joe and Fred, two Canaanites from 2000BC with unusual names.

They're on their way to the annual pilgrimage to the massive oak tree called Moreh at Shechem to make their offerings to the gods.

Joe has had a great year.
Fred has had a terrible year.

Joe has had marvellous crops, family weddings and his first grandchildren.
Fred has had locusts eat all his crops, the family are constantly hungry and his son in law has died.

As they approach the site and see the high branches of the tree towering into the sky what do they know about the pagan gods they have come to worship?

They don't know what will please the gods.
They don't know what makes the gods angry.
They probably don't even know which of the hundreds of gods they believe in is responsible for their particular blessings or struggles.

They are groping around in the darkness, searching for they don't know what.

It is a terrible thing not to know god.

What a difference Genesis 12 makes.

Here God, the Lord, Yahweh, has a name, v1.

And he speaks.

This God, the one true God, reveals himself to Abram.

You see the worst aspect of a world under God's righteous judgment is that it is a world that doesn't know God. And so God, in his grace and mercy, breaks in and reveals himself to Abram.

Abram is commanded by God to leave behind him all the things that have become symbols of security and identity in the post-Babel world. Look at v1 there:

Abram is asked to leave his land or nation. His people – his clan. His family – his Father's household.

And Abram, v4, does exactly what God asks of him. The ESV brings this out better than the NIV:

*Go, says God, v1.
So Abram went, v4.*

Why did he go? Because he knew that God's promise could be trusted and that God went with him.

That's the significance of the altar building in v7 and v8. Abram wasn't claiming this plot of land for God – he knew God has already given it to him.

Abram was acknowledging that God was with him as he travelled through the hostile, occupied territory that would one day belong to his descendents.

God appeared, v7, to Abram. He shows himself to Abram and speaks to him.

In contrast to the sacred pagan oak tree at Shechem Abram's altar is a devoted commitment to a god, to the God, Abram knows. A God who speaks. A God who makes promises that he will keep.

We often think that the greatest blessing of being a Christian is that we will live forever – eternal life, salvation. That's what being a Christian is all about.

Well that's certainly an astonishing blessing but it's not quite, I think, how the Bible presents the heart of what it means to be blessed by God.

The ultimate blessing of being a Christian, of being one of God's people, is knowing God.

The great blessing of being a Christian is that God reveals himself to us, through his words, so that we can know him.

And because we know the eternal one, that relationship will go on for ever. Being a Christian is not so much about living forever – not just more time to fill. It is about eternally knowing the eternal God.

It is about the reversal of the curse of Eden, when Adam and Eve, and all humanity with them, were excluded from the garden, shut out from God's presence, the way barred by an angel with a flaming sword.

As we read on through the Bible we learn more of how it is that God will reverse this judgment.

Firstly, just as he went with Abram God was present with his people Israel. There was a tent in the desert and later a temple. Places in the centre of the gathered nation of God's people where God himself was present.

Finally, the Bible says, God's people will all live in a perfect temple. A new Jerusalem. A place where even the sun and moon won't be needed because the light of God's presence will illuminate Abram, Jacob, Joseph, Ruth, Solomon, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, James, me and you if you're a Christian here this morning.

But what about now? What is God's blessing to us as his people today?

Well God has reversed the curse of Eden. But he's not finished yet. The total fullness of his presence still awaits us after Jesus returns.

But if you are a Christian here this morning you are not shut out of God's presence. He has come to live with you, in you, by his Holy Spirit.

A downpayment on God's perfect presence, guaranteeing that he will keep his promises to bring us to be with him forever.

How can God do all this?

Well Genesis 12 even points us towards that.

Because God's plan for Abram is not simply that he will be blessed – God isn't working merely for Abram's benefit.

And it's not even just Abram's genetic family who will be blessed – although, v7, they are the ones who will physically possess the beautiful land that God takes Abraham wandering through.

God's plan, v3, is that through Abram all peoples on earth will be blessed.

God starts over with one man, not to reject all the other people of the world – for Abram is no more deserving of God's blessing than anyone else.

God chooses Abram so that all kinds of people, from all the nations of the worlds might be blessed by being gathered in God's family and experiencing his eternal presence.

The details of that are left here as a mystery. How can God bless all through one? We're not told here. How will God's light come to the nations through one man and his offspring? It's not made clear at this point.

But the plot for the whole of the rest of the Bible story is now set. We are looking for God's blessing to come to all nations through Abraham's offspring. And as we read through the Bible we see that happen.

Joseph goes to Egypt and manages to avert disaster and famine in that country by becoming prime minister and storing up grain in the good years. The nations are blessed through Abram's offspring.

The kings of the world come to listen to the wisdom and knowledge of Israel's great, wise

king Solomon. The nations are blessed through Abram's offspring.

But all of those are just shadows. For one will come whose commission to his followers is to gather disciples from every tribe and nation and people and language.

One will come who will finally take on himself the full weight of God's curse and judgment.

Who will be separated from God and utterly cut off from his presence. Who will bear the weight of the sins of the world.

One will come whose sacrifice and obedience will tear the curtain that excludes men and women from the presence of God, whose death will make possible the coming of God's Spirit so that all God's people may know him intimately and truly.

God will bless the nations through Abram's seed Jesus Christ. In Jesus is God's blessing.

In Jesus is the reality now of gathering with God's people that points us to the perfect reality in future of knowing all God's people forever.

In Jesus is the reality now of knowing God pointing us to the perfect reality in future of being in God's presence forever.

God's promises to Abram of a family and a place where God would gather his people were real. They were really fulfilled in real history.

But for us they were tokens, signs, pointers to greater blessings that are ours if we trust in Jesus.

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