

Blessed to be a blessing

The following text is Jonathan Green's speaking notes from the gathering held at The Sanctuary on 1st March 2007

Introduction

This evening we are going to launch right into Act 3 of this 'Story we Find Ourselves In'. During act 1 we thought about the process of creation and its ongoing character throughout the earth. During act 2 we thought about the nature of the crisis that occurred in the garden and the ongoing way in which people live against God's good intentions for creation.

During the story of God's involvement with humankind that unfolds during those opening passages in Genesis we see that God does not lose sight of what he created humans for. He never let go of that good end! We see this because although Genesis 11 with the story of Babel represents the peak in the advance of human sinfulness, of people 'going it alone', God once again tempers his judgments with mercy, for the very next act of the Biblical drama shows yet another new beginning for humankind, as God steadfastly pursues his purposes for his creation.

And so we move into act 3 and the story of Abraham. And from here on in we are going to be moving through scripture at a faster rate... we will be jumping through books and glossing over stories etc... as we make this journey I want us to pick up the thread of salvation history that runs through the Bible. If we went chapter by chapter we would be very old by the time we finished.

Called apart

So, God hatches a plan to create A New Kind of People In The World. And this time he is going to work with one man and his family. So let's follow through this story:

Genesis 12: 1 God calls Abraham to leave his country (Ur), his people and his father's household, to go to the land that God will show him (12.1-3).

Now, this is a radical call. It is no small thing! God invites Abraham to launch out on an adventure... you see, to leave the Tigris-Euphrates valley, was to leave the security of civilization and to enter the unknown. Abraham didn't even know where his journey would lead. There were no maps to show him the way, so it truly was a journey of faith, a sense, a hunch, a wild dream that there was something out there for him, and that someone would guide him there.... although he had little idea who or how or where.

Wonderfully, Abraham does give up all, for the sake of obeying God. He takes that great risk and follows that call... to follow where God will lead... And so Abram sets out with his wife Sarah, his nephew Lot and their extended family.

God is going to work through Abraham

But we ask ourselves: What is God up to in all of this? By narrowing his focus to Abram, has he given up on all other peoples? The biblical narrative answers with a resounding 'No!' The next two verses of Genesis 12 spell out for Abraham what God plans to do through him.

Genesis 12: 2-3 God promises:

- 1) To make Abraham's family into a great nation:
- 2) To bless him;
- 3) To make his name great;
- 4) To make him a blessing;
- 5) To bless those who bless him and curse (or judge) those who judge him;
- 6) and ultimately to bless all peoples on earth through him!

Promising poetry

Now it is important as we read through this text to always keep in mind what kind of literature the narrative comes to us in. The form gives us many clues as to how to interpret it. If you remember back to Genesis 1 we saw that the whole of the first chapter is poetic in nature and that the poem was argumentative in nature because it said something against the surrounding cultures gods. Here, God's promise in the story was recorded as a poem. Ancient Hebrew poets loved parallelism: in parallelism, the poet repeats a sentence structure, with slight variations, for various purposes, maybe for restatement, or intensification, or clarification, or elaboration, or contrast. The Psalms are full of this kind of poetry. The prophetic literature too as much prophetic words come in song and poetic prose.

So let's go through the different parallels here in verse 2 and 3.

I will make you into a great nation... I will make your name great: This restatement intensifies the sense that Abraham is being given a wonderful promise and is entering into an inspiring destiny.

I will bless you... you will be a blessing: The great status promised to Abraham, however, is not exclusive. He is not blessed to the exclusion of others, but rather, he is blessed instrumentally. In fact, being blessed is elaborated on in the second phrase: the kind of blessing that Abraham will receive is the blessing of being a blessing to others.

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse: Oddly, Abraham's blessing won't exempt him from conflict. In fact, the promise suggests that conflict - being cursed at times by others - will be part of the identity of this blessed people.

All peoples on earth will be blessed through you: The English translation here obscures the fact that the same single Hebrew word underlies the different English words "people" and "nation." In that light, God says, "Leave your people. Leave your identification and status as a member of a certain known people. Now step out into the unknown, from a certified somebody who is a member of a people and step into a journey where you don't know who you are anymore. As you do this, I will give you a great new identity: you will become a new kind of people in the world; you will have a new identity. And that new identity - as a people blessed by the one true and living God - will bring blessing to all the other peoples.

Blessed for a reason

Therefore there was an end beyond just being the recipient of blessing! God always blesses people so that the blessing may touch others. Being selfish with what God gives goes against all that God is and is doing in the world...

When religions assume that their adherents are chosen only to be blessed, and forget that they are blessed to be a blessing, they distort their identity and they drift from God's calling for them. When they assume that they are blessed exclusively rather than instrumentally, when they see themselves as blessed to the exclusion of others rather than for the benefit of others, they become part of the problem instead of part of the solution. And we see this again and again throughout the world's history and certainly in the world today!

Reversing the effects of disobedience...

You see, if we look closely at what is going on here we see that in essence the blessing and its potential affect is designed to reverse the effects of disobedience and independence. The fivefold repetition of the word 'bless' is deliberately set in opposition to the fivefold occurrence of the word 'curse' in chapters 1 to 11 of Genesis. God's curse or judgment on humankind has meant their loss of freedom (3.14-16), their alienation from the soil (3.17-19), their estrangement from one another (4.11) and their moral and spiritual degradation (9.25).

The repetition of 'bless' in Genesis 12: 1-3 declares that through Abraham, God is at work to reverse the effect of judgment on his creation. Though sin has brought God's curse on creation, God is still at work to recover his purpose of blessing for all that he has made, and Abraham is to be the human channel through which divine restoration will flow out over the whole world.

Through Abraham, 'all peoples on earth will be blessed'. God narrows his redemptive focus to one man, one nation. But his ultimate purpose is to bring redemptive blessing to the whole creation. God's promise to Abraham is God's answer to sin, which has corrupted the whole creation. God will restore his world.

From the beginning God's people are to be 'missionary', in other words, chosen to be a channel of blessing to others.

God's solution

Here we start to see how God will respond to what has gone wrong in his creation. Through Abraham he will bring into being a nation, Israel, which is to be God's own people among all the other peoples of the world. It is through this nation that God will bring blessing to all the other peoples of the earth (18:18-19). He has not given up on his world or its peoples. His plan is still secure, Though the biblical story from here on will focus on Abraham and his descendants, God does not forget his purposes for all the nations of the world: through the one, many will find God's blessing.

When God wants to change the world – he collaborates.

2 further lessons...

Taking a step of faith

God called Abraham to make a step of faith! While the heaped up I will's reveal how much greater is God's part in the promise. At the same time their future outworking emphasizes the bare faith that was required: Abram must exchange the known for the unknown and find his reward in what he could not live to see (a great nation), in what was intangible (his name) and in what he would impart (blessing).

Often, God calls us to make a step into the unknown. To leave what we know and find security in and move on into something different. Now, I know many of you well, and have heard something of your stories. I know that this group consist of many who have taken bold steps just like Abram. We know this, God is faithful!

Felicity and I have many stories we could tell of similar steps we have made...

Abraham wasn't fully obedient to God's call

I had never really noticed this before, but Genesis 13:1-18 is such an interesting story!

Lot chose the seen - and found them corrupt and insecure; choosing selfishly, he was to grow ever more isolated and unloved.

Abraham on the other hand found liberation.

Always keep this in mind!

We are given gifts and blessing so that it may flow from us to others! Can you imagine what London would be like if all the Christians here would live like that! Can you imagine what this community would be like?

Be obedient to the call of God on your life... if God has spoken, act! We saw a few weeks ago that Noah's obedience ended up saving his life, this week we have seen that Abram's obedience had worldwide implications!

So that thing that God is calling you to do... that step of obedience... do it... do it!

And remember, God has blessed you, us, to be a blessing to others. So let God's gifts and resources flow through you, let them flow through us as a community, for the good of the world!