

# The God of Promises

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Thanks very much, Heather. Great, let's just get straight stuck into these really significant verses in the Bible. As we've already said, what we're going to see here is how God puts the wheels in motion for his eternal rescue plan to bring to himself a people. And we today as the Church of Jesus Christ, we're going to see are the result of this plan.

And that's one thing I really want to emphasize right at the start, and I hope that we'll see that again and again as we look through these old, old chapters of the Bible right near the beginning. We are not looking at what God used to do and what God used to be like, but actually what we are looking at is the beginning of our salvation story. Promised right back here in Genesis carried out through Jesus and are waiting its glorious fulfillment when Jesus comes back again. And so these words are our words as a church and for us to learn from and listen to. We're going to look in kind of four sections working through this passage.

The first two about what God has done. The second two about our response to that. And so the first one is this, is we see God's gracious initiative. God's gracious initiative. When it comes to films, I think particularly in terms of superhero films, but Hollywood really loves, and thankfully I also kind of love, an origins story. You know those films that take you right back to the very beginning where we get to see how a kind of a well-known character came to be the person, often came to be the hero that we know and love. A few kind of famous examples. You know, young Bruce Wayne sees the mugging and the shooting of his parents. You have this kind of slow motion pearls dropping down to the floor in an alleyway. And so he grows up to be Batman fighting crime in Gotham City. For Superman, it's a little baby being sent off from the planet Krypton, and he'll use his kind of alien strength and strength and abilities to be able to save our world in various ways once he's older.

Plenty of other great films in that kind of origins genre as well. And here is Abraham's. He's called Abram at this point. But here is his origins story, really. Here's where it all started for the man who will be looked back on and who will be remembered as a real hero of the faith. And yet we see that for someone who God, the God of the Bible, is going to use to put his rescue plan in place, to undo all that has gone wrong, to bring a people to himself. What we see here is really a pretty unlikely start.

The final few verses of chapter 11, where our reading began, where we're introduced to the family of Terah. They were from a place called Ur. It's not a great name. Ur of the Chaldeans. They moved to another place called Haran. Both of these places, Ur, Haran, were centers of pagan worship, particularly focused on worship of the moon god. Both of the women in this passage are probably named after things to do with the moon god religion. Abraham was part of that. That was Abraham's family.

[ 3 : 3 8 ] That was Abraham's heritage. And so Abraham is not someone who is following the God of the Bible. We are not starting here with one kind of faithful man who is going to, you know, in his own goodness, put things right. Not only that, but we're told his wife, Sarai, verse 30, was barren. She had no child.

Children, for the first readers of Genesis, were a mark of blessing and God's favor. Even humanly, and Abraham and Sarah have none. Even humanly speaking, Abraham's story will finish, will come to an end when he dies. There is no future generation. There is no future expectation. And so this is not a kind of an introduction that makes anybody sit up and listen and think, okay, well, this guy is going to be good. Or surely this is the person who is a great candidate for putting right all that is wrong with the world. And yet we see, don't we all, we're going to see throughout this series, this is exactly who God chooses to use. So why are we given this unlikely introduction to Abraham? Why is he the person? Well, really it's to show, I think, that this is God's gracious initiative. That this is God who is going to do all that is needed. That it's only through God's divine action that the curse that has entered the world through sin, and that all that is wrong with what was a perfect creation but is now fallen, is going to be able to be undone. Here's the truth that echoes throughout the story of the Bible, that there is a Bible story.

There is a story of salvation. There is a hope. And the brokenness of our world is not the last word because and only because of God's gracious initiative. And it's a great place to start any sermon, great place to start a new series, that reminder that we are here as a church, not because we've done something, not because we've set the wheels in motion and God has kind of got on board, but we're only able to be his people because God has first moved toward us. And so we live our lives in a worshipful response to that. That's something that we can never hear too many times.

That's something that the author of Abraham's account really wants to kind of underline as we begin, that the story, that the shape of Abraham's story is the same as the shape of the whole Bible, the shape of the gospel that God acts, that God takes this gracious initiative to do what we cannot.

God puts right what we can't. God makes and keeps his promises to unlikely and undeserving people like Abraham and like us. And we are to live by faith in those promises. So that's the beginning.

[ 6 : 47 ] We see just briefly there God's gracious initiative. That leaves us on then to what's next. The first three verses of chapter 12, we see here God's gracious promises. We said God is a God who makes promises. Well, here they are. And really, we cannot underestimate how important these verses are in the big picture of the Bible. I'm sure I say that a lot, but that is especially true of Genesis chapter 12, verses 1 to 3. Have you ever had that experience where you hear a new word? It's a word you don't think you've heard before. And suddenly, once you've heard it once, you hear it all the time.

It feels like everyone is using this word that you'd never come across. Or maybe it's a brand or a logo. You're made aware of it once. And all of a sudden, you see it everywhere. It's all over the place.

I had a quick Google about this this week. Apparently, it's called the Bader-Meinhof phenomenon, if you're interested. It's been studied and researched. And the research shows it's not actually that you are hearing the word more. It's not actually that you're seeing the image more.

It's just that now you're aware of it. You kind of pick up on it all the time in all the different places where it pops up. I mentioned that because I'm kind of hoping that we'll have the Bader-Meinhof phenomenon with these verses and these promises from God. That once we're aware of them, as we get to know them, we'll see them actually that they're actually throughout the Bible. You could almost say that the outworking of these three verses of God's gracious promises to Abraham really is the rest of the Bible. And certainly, it's going to be the controlling theme for the rest of the Abraham story. These promises, these gracious promises that God from his initiative makes.

We're not going to give them these verses, in some ways, the time they deserve this week. That's okay. Because as we just said, we'll keep on coming back to them. We'll keep hearing them be reaffirmed by God. We'll keep seeing them be clarified. We'll keep witnessing them being put into action by God over these weeks in Genesis. So we'll keep returning to these promises. I hope we'll get really familiar with them. And that will help us see how they tie the whole Bible together.

[ 9 : 07 ] But firstly, here's a quick summary then of them. What does God promise Abraham? It's often broken down into four key aspects to this promise. Number one, he promises Abraham a land. Verse one, go to the land I will show you. That's then clarified in verse seven, to your offspring, I will give this land. So Abraham is promised a land. Second, Abraham is promised, verse two, that God will make of him a great nation. Now what an incredible promise that is to a man with a barren wife and no children. And that will be a huge part of this story. But God promises that he will make Abraham and his descendants into a great nation. Third is the promise that God will bless him.

God will be with him as part of that, that God will be on his side, as it were. I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonors you. I will curse. And then fourthly, climactically really, finally, the end of verse three, and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. God promises that he will bless all the nations. God promises the undoing of the curse of sin, kind of blessing and curse are always opposites throughout the Bible. God is going to undo what is wrong for all the people.

And remember, this is all God's work. This is God taking the initiative. This is God making these promises. This is God in his grace who is going to bless the nations. And yet he's going to do it. He promises incredibly Abraham that he's going to do it through him, that it's most unlikely of candidates. And yet that is what God promises here, Genesis 12 verse three. We're going to see all of these promises worked out in various ways in this series. We'll see how they relate to us as a church as well. We'll see how all of them find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. But this morning, I do just want to hone in on that final one, God promising that in Abraham, all the families of the earth will be blessed. Because that is the promise. That is kind of almost the headline, the overarching promise.

That is the blessing that God has kept through Jesus. When we turn to the New Testament, the part of the Bible written after the birth of Jesus, the very first verse of the New Testament, Matthew chapter one, verse one, we read this, the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

And then from verse two onwards, Matthew gives a genealogy, a family tree, starting with Abraham and running all the way through to Christ. It's often been kind of mentioned that for our kind of Western sensibilities, that doesn't always seem like the most exciting start to a book, a whole list of names.

[ 12 : 13 ] And yet this is incredibly exciting, when we remember the promises that God has made of what he's going to do through Abraham. The point is clear, Matthew is making, that what we read in the Gospels, what we see of Jesus, what he came to do, that is God keeping, that is God fulfilling his promise to bless the nations, to bless the whole world through the family of Abraham. And that was God's plan from the very beginning.

And so one thing again that we're going to see as we work through Abraham's life is really see this kind of oneness of how the whole Bible fits together in this way. It can be a big question for people, can't it?

How do the different bits of the Bible relate to each other? You know, how do the promises to Abraham, or we could go elsewhere in the New Testament, how does the law given to Moses, or how does that relate to us today as Christians in the church? Perhaps sometimes we can think as if the Old Testament was kind of attempt one, or like a practice run. God had a way of saving people, and yet it didn't really work all that well, or it only worked for a certain number of people, or it was a bit limited. And so it's as if God kind of wiped the slate clean, turned over a new page, and started with a new idea in the New Testament to rescue us through Jesus. Or we might hear people talk about the God of the Old Testament as if there was a contrast to the God in the New Testament. But the Bible is really clear that that is not the case. We see how the beginning of the New Testament points us right back here to these early chapters in the Old, and we see here that the whole Bible is one God working out his one salvation plan promised in the Old Testament, fulfilled in the New, to gather his one united people to worship him. People who, even those in the Old Testament, even those who lived before Jesus, are part of God's people through Jesus, as they trusted in his promises that were ultimately fulfilled in Jesus. And today the church of Jesus is the heir to the promises made to Abraham, as we are blessed through Abraham's greatest descendant, Jesus Christ. Another verse in the New Testament, Galatians 3, 14, speaking of the death of Jesus, of him taking the curse on the cross, says that that happened so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, that we are brought into these promises that God has made. And it means as well that the ultimate blessing that we have, that what God is pointing to right here in Genesis chapter 12, is the blessing of forgiveness that God has won, that Jesus has won for us on the cross. And that forgiveness, again, is God's initiative, is God's work freely given to us, and most unlikely people freely offered to us who are the nations, or are the Gentiles, or those previously far from God. And yet God has blessed us and brought us into his story, just as he promised he would back in Genesis chapter 12. And I think it's really important then to emphasize that. I think a really important part of looking through this story of

Abraham is to see that kind of big picture of the Bible, how it's all tied together. Let me give you two kind of quick reasons why that's important that we grasp that. One, a kind of a global political thought. Another, a kind of personal faith reflection. Firstly, global politics, and we don't often go here on a Sunday morning, so I'll speak briefly. I'll speak cautiously about this, but I do think it's worth mentioning this at the beginning of this series in particular.

We hear a lot about Israel on the news today, and people will have different views on what's happening in the situation there. We also read a lot about Israel in the Bible, especially in the book of Genesis, especially in light of Abraham and his descendants, this nation that he was promised.

[16:38] I want us to kind of be clear here. I want us to say that that same word Israel that we use is really describing two different things here, and the fulfillment of these promises here that continue on throughout the Old Testament, the various blessings that God has committed to bestowing on his people, those blessings are fulfilled in the church, in the covenant people of God, God, and not in any one earthly kind of state or nation. I think it's worth highlighting that.

It's not to kind of pass comment on anything that's happening in the Middle East at the moment, and that we see on our news. That's purely a theological position to say that as a church, we are able to rejoice in these promises that have been fulfilled for us in Jesus, and that we'll see more and more of that fulfillment as we work through these chapters. It perhaps helps us frame what is happening in our world. It perhaps helps us understand our Bibles as well a little bit.

Perhaps when we sing from the Psalms, as we do as a church, words like, oh Israel, put your hope in God, and perhaps we wonder, hang on a minute, why are we singing that? Well, the reason we're able to sing that as a church is because that the New Testament church of Jesus Christ is the new Israel, is the covenant people of God through Jesus's work in the gospel.

So happy to talk about that a bit more, if anyone liked. Maybe there's some kind of big picture thoughts about that. But really the second takeaway from this is something much closer, I suppose, to my own heart. And it's this, I think this is something I've probably shared before as well, but it's this unity of the Bible. It is this one consistent story of the outworking of the promises of God, with this line running right from Genesis chapter 12 right through to us this morning.

Being shown that for me was one of the key factors in me personally taking God and his words seriously in my life. If you're a Christian this morning, but perhaps struggling with your faith, so it's kind of one thing among a whole load of others, you're not really sure what to do with it.

[ 18 : 51 ] Or you hear a lot of attacks on God's word, the Bible. Can it really be trusted? Is it something worth basing our lives upon? Or perhaps you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, or you're not really sure what you believe about Christianity. You've heard various things and you're not really sure. As always, we're so glad that you're with us. But I think there's this huge encouragement to know that the invitation of Christianity, what we're called to follow, is not just a kind of a book with a few kind of random nice stories or some helpful principles or the occasional memory verse here and there. Actually, we can have real confidence in God's word and in the gospel that it reveals to us. Because the Bible is the consistent and the coherent true story of the one God who has covenanted himself, who has made these relational promises to his people, who has worked those promises out in history, coming to fruition in Jesus Christ,

God himself coming to earth to save us. That incredible, miraculous, that once-for-all event, God has made these promises, and yet which God had been promising and preparing from before the beginning of time. God, right back in Genesis 12, makes these gracious promises. And we, as his people, the church, rejoice that he has followed through in these promises, rejoice that in Christ he has fulfilled them, and he has done that for us. That's a great encouragement as we look back at what God has promised and worked out throughout history. Now, let's carry on then. We've kind of majored, I suppose, on God's action so far. He's the initiator. He is the main character in the story. Let's move on and touch on what is also a big part of this section of the Bible and what we'll also see a few times, which is Abraham's response. And as we look at Abraham's response, we learn, I think, about our response.

We also learn about God's continued faithfulness as well. Two short sections here. Firstly, we see a response of faith. Very simply, chapter 12, verse 1, Now the Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

We've said how Abraham doesn't deserve these promises. Abraham hasn't earned all these promises. But he is called to act in line with these promises. God says, Go. He makes his promises.

And we see verse 4, So Abraham went as the Lord had told him. We see in Abraham this response of faith, that actually Abraham believes in the gracious promises of God. He trusts God to do what God has promised he will do.

[ 21 : 53 ] And he leaves his country. He leaves his family. He leaves his home. Instead, putting all his hope in the promises of God.

The book of Hebrews in the New Testament puts it this way. 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. It goes on to say, For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

Abraham is looking for what God has promised. Something better. Something more secure. Something more permanent. And so he responds in faith to God's promises.

He believes and he goes. And in that way, Abraham is a model for us here. That we are called to respond in faith to the promises of God.

[ 22 : 51 ] We are called to step out, to put all of our weight on the promises that God has made. And of course, we have this huge advantage over Abraham in that we have seen the fulfillment of these promises in Jesus.

We have seen the coming of Christ. We have seen his life, his death, his glorious resurrection. We have far, far more reason and grounds to be able to trust.

And know that we can trust these promises that God has made. And yet, we are still called to that challenging response of faith. There is no half measures for Abraham.

God doesn't say, you know, just have a little look. See what you think. See if you like it. No, he says go. Leave behind what you know. Leave behind what is old.

And trust that God will provide. That God will do what he has said he is going to do. That's really the challenge for us this morning. If God asks us to go.

[ 23 : 58 ] If God asks us to step out to do something incredibly costly. Unusual. Radical. But trusting in his promises that he will bless his people. That he will give us all we need.

Most of all, that he has already given us that. In our forgiveness through his son, Jesus Christ. Would we, like Abraham, be willing to go? And actually all of us.

It's not a hypothetical question. Because all of us, in one way or another, are called to go. It might not be to another place. It might not be to the other side of the world. But that ongoing response of faith is something that we're going to see.

And I hope to be challenged by and grow in again and again through these chapters. Will we each day choose to have our faith in God and what he has promised.

Rather than trusting in the little security blankets that the world offers us. Will we be willing to pay the cost in day-to-day ways. Stepping out in faith in terms of our time.

[ 25 : 01 ] Our energy. Our hospitality. Our finances. Are we willing to release our control in those things. And instead trust in and build our lives on what God has promised.

Are we willing to do that? That we can step out boldly in faith. And knowing that he will never let us down. And perhaps for some this morning it actually means being willing to put your trust, put your faith in Jesus for the first time.

For the first time to make that step of faith. Leave behind any hope of saving yourself. Any hope of earning God's love. Or any hope of putting right all the things we've done wrong.

And instead in faith turning to Jesus. Confessing our sins. Accepting that forgiveness. Receiving that ultimate blessing given to us in Christ that we all need.

Trusting his promise and having your faith in him that he will give you all you need for eternity. And the absolute promise of the Bible is that if you make that step of faith.

[ 26 : 09 ] If you put your weight on what God has promised and kept in Christ. That he will not let you down. It might be costly. It might mean changes.

It might mean leaving things behind. But there is nothing more important. And there is nothing more certain than the eternal hope and future it grants us.

So we see from Abraham a response of faith. It's a model for us that we too are to respond in faith to these promises. But also finally, really briefly, but I find this really encouraging.

We also see here from Abraham a response of failure. Very briefly, verses 10 to 12. This episode where Abraham and Sarai go down to Egypt.

This is Abraham failing to trust in God. That under the pressure of this famine, he fails to trust that God will bless him and care for him as he's promised.

[ 27 : 07 ] Instead, Abraham takes matters into his own hands. He lies about Sarai, his wife. He treats her, you know, think about this. He treats her terribly. Hands her over to another man to be his wife in order to save his own skin.

Abraham is not doing well here. And there's all sorts of things we could say about this. But the point is that Abraham is not a perfect model.

And Abraham, like us, makes mistakes. Abraham, like all the figures of the Bible, is kind of presented in weakness as well as strength. But the lesson is that God remains faithful.

And we see here how God intervenes. God brings Abraham and Sarai up out of Egypt. Not only that, despite their lack of faith, God blesses Abraham. He's given these sheep, oxen, donkeys, servants, camels, the works.

God is faithful to his promise even when Abraham's faith fails. We are called to trust in God. We want to learn more and more to stand on his promises.

[ 28 : 16 ] As we've said, that will be a big part of this series. I hope that's something that we'll grow in together as a church. And yet for all of us, there will be times when our faith falls short.

All of us will make mistakes. Looking through these chapters in Genesis will not make us the perfect Christians who never doubt. None of us are perfect.

And yet what looking through these chapters in Genesis will show us is that even in those times, God remains faithful. That we have never blown it. But that God keeps on calling us back, welcoming us back.

He will keep his promises because it is his grace and it is his initiative. And he will see them through to the end. I was speaking to a young guy this week.

He said to me, he said, I think I'm damned already because I've done a lot of things wrong. We're talking about kind of Christian things. I think I'm damned already because I've done a lot of things wrong.

[ 29 : 17 ] That's a pretty grim place for anyone to find themselves, isn't it? And yet the good news of the gospel is that God has promised to bless the whole earth through Jesus as we put our faith in him.

And that as we see in this closing section, that our failures cannot undo his faithfulness. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God who has made promises. You have made promises of blessing to undo the curse of sin.

We thank you that you are a God who is faithful. That you have kept those promises in Jesus Christ and in his work, his finished work in the gospel.

We thank you that if and when we trust in him, we find forgiveness and are welcomed into your family to receive all the blessings that you pour out on your people.

[ 30 : 45 ] We thank you that we can start to experience those now, a genuine relationship with you, the gift of your Holy Spirit, fellowship with one another. But we can also look ahead even more to the perfect fulfillment in the world to come.

Lord, we thank you that our salvation, our rescue is your work from beginning to end. And we ask that you would help us to simply respond in faith, standing on the promises of your word.

We pray that each day you would help us to make faith-filled decisions as you show us more and more what you are like and how we can trust in you. Now please, Lord, forgive us as well when our actions aren't governed by your word or when our lack of trust leads us away from reliance and obedience to you.

We thank you that when you are faithless, when we are faithless, that you remain faithful and are always ready to welcome us back to you with open arms.

And so, Lord, please be with us this week in all that we do, helping us to live through your glory with our faith in your promises. We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.