

REDEMPTION BEGINS

Genesis 12:1–8 • Char Brodersen

Introduction: Good morning, church! This morning, we are entering a new chapter in our “Story of ...” series. We wanted to do something new this year by taking our church through biblical theology so we can know and understand how the whole of Scripture works together to tell God’s great story of redemption in and through Jesus Christ. This morning, we are starting a new chapter in this series, and for the next few weeks, we will be looking at the Story of the Promise, the People, and the Nation, all of which concerns the family of Abraham—the Jewish people and Nation.

Last week, we looked together at God’s great promise of redemption to Adam and Eve through the head crusher, and we saw how Jesus is the promised head crusher who defeats the serpent and brings us into the fullness and ideal of what God created humans for—to live under his reign, to be in fellowship with him, and to partner with God to steward and rule over his creation.

This morning, we are continuing our journey through Scripture and the story of redemption, but we are going to pass over Genesis 4–11. As we have considered how human beings bear the Image and Likeness of God in Genesis 1–3, we are going to look at how God chose one family to bear his Name and that through them, he is going to work his plan of redemption to redeem humanity and the earth as his good kingdom.

In Genesis 4–11, God is present but not in the way we would expect, given the promise of redemption in Genesis 3:15. I think a good way to see and understand it is that God is mostly reactive rather than proactive in Chapters 4–11 (God reacting to Cain’s anger and murder; God reacting to humanities sinfulness and depravity in the judgment of the flood; God reacting to humanity’s rebellion in the building of the tower of Babel). As we read through these chapters, it’s as if humanity is in this downward spiral, and the reader is probably wondering: what about God’s promise of redemption? When will God reestablish the earth as his good kingdom? How will humanity get back to the garden?

It is here in Genesis chapter 12 that we see God begin to take the story of redemption forward as he calls Abraham and his yet to be family to bear the Name of God.

(Read Genesis 12:1–8)

The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

² I will make you into a great nation,

and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,

and you will be a blessing.

³ I will bless those who bless you,

and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth

will be blessed through you.”

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. ⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the

possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

⁶ Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

⁸ From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.”

I. Redemption Begins

A. The first three verses in Genesis 12 spell out for Abraham what God plans to do through him.

1. To make him a great nation
2. To bless him
3. To make his name great and to be a blessing
4. To bless whoever blesses him and curse whoever curses him
5. To bless all people on earth through him.

(a) This five-fold repetition of blessing is deliberately set in contrast to the five-fold occurrence of the word curse in Genesis chapters 1–11 (Genesis 3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25).

(b) This repetition of blessing in Genesis 12:1–3 indicates that through Abraham, God is at work to reverse the effects of judgment on his creation—redemption is now on its way. Or in the words of C. S. Lewis, Aslan is on the move!

B. The story narrows here in Genesis as our focus goes from the nations represented at the Tower of Babel to one singular family that God will work through in order to redeem and bless all nations.

C. What is being offered here in these few verses is a theological blueprint for the redemptive history of the world through the family line of Abraham. Abraham and his descendants are the means and vehicle that God will use to carry his redemptive plan forward.

1. Theologian Michael Goheen reminds us that,

“From the beginning God’s people are to be ‘missionary.’ They are chosen to be a channel of blessing to others. But in order to be a missionary people, they have to be formed to be like the promise they carry.”

—Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew, *The Drama of Scripture*

2. As we read through the story of Abraham and his descendants, we can see that they are not shining examples of people of deep character. They are all too human, made from the same stuff that we are. But it is as they journey with God, the God of covenant-keeping love, they are gradually shaped into people fit to bear the Name of God.
3. And I’ve come to believe that this is exactly what God’s faithfulness is meant to do in their and in our lives. His faithfulness makes us faithful.
4. When we look at the life of Abraham, other biblical characters, or even our own lives, we often wonder why God takes his sweet time, don’t we? Why all the charade? If this is God’s plan—why

doesn't he just get it over with and redeem the thing already? And I think it goes back to God's ideal from the beginning. God wants to bring humans into his work; he wants partnership with us, he wants relationship with us, and he wants to mold us into his image. This again is what we were made for.

5. This morning, I want to focus our attention on three aspects of God's calling, or work, through Abraham, and those are—the Land, the promise of his descendants, and the blessing to all the nations.

II. The Land and the Promised Child

- A. God made a promise to Abraham that he would give him and his offspring the land in which he so-journeyed, and Abraham was told to journey all through it. And this word of promise is reiterated by God again and again. And years pass by, and God still hasn't done it.
- B. God has also made a promise to Abraham again and again about his descendants—that they would be a great nation, that they would be as many in number as the dust of the earth, and then again that they would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Two big problems with this: Abraham and Sarah are super old, and Sarah is barren. She has never been able to bear children. But God doesn't blink an eye. He keeps speaking as though it's a done deal.
- C. Finally, one day God is telling Abraham these things again about his descendants and the land and Abraham seems a bit fed up. *God you keeping talking about my innumerable descendants—but you have given me no child, so as of right now my servant is set to inherit my household.*
- D. God responds:

“This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

—Genesis 15:4–6

- E. I love that it specifically notes Abraham's trust and faith in God's word to him—and also God's estimation of his righteousness (this is what is right—to believe and trust what God says).
- F. It needs to be noted as well that the conversation is not over. Abraham believes God, and that is righteous, but faith doesn't settle, it doesn't sit idle, it questions, it inquires—Faith wrestles with God. So Abraham asks God, *How will this happen?* And then again, *how will I know that I will inherit the land?* So God calls Abraham to cut a covenant. This account can be found in Genesis 15:8–21.
- G. Abraham would already be familiar with covenants, where two individuals would make a pact or contract with one another. They would cut various animals in two—splitting them right down the middle and place them in a row, with a path in between the halves. Each member of the contract or pact would walk through the split animals as a way of saying, *If I break my end of the bargain, may I be like one of these animals—I'm as good as dead.* So Abraham prepares this covenant, but when the time comes to make it, God is not present, and so Abraham waits, and then he falls into a deep sleep, and God speaks to him about the future of his descendants: their slavery and affliction in Egypt, the punishment of the inhabitants of the land of Canaan, and his descendants' possession of the land. As Abraham awakes from this wild dream/vision, he looks, and it says a smoking blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces alone. God in essence is saying—*Abraham, I make this covenant with you, but it isn't dependent upon you. I swear by myself—I will fulfill it.* This is taking us back to God's original word to him: I will, I will, I will ...

1. Some have seen here in this covenant that God promises/covenants to keep both his side of the contract/covenant and the human side—Abraham’s part. God will make up for Abraham’s faithlessness and his descendants faithlessness and failure and will bear the consequences and judgment himself.
- H. As we go forward in the story of Abraham, the promise of the Land will be challenged. Where is God’s promise concerning this land for Abraham and his descendants? In fact, by the end of the story, the only plot of ground that Abraham will have possession of in the land promised him by God is a burial plot so he can bury his dead wife, Sarah. How depressing! How can this have anything to do with the promise of God?
1. Abraham’s one claim on the land is the tomb of Sarah—the mother of Isaac—the matriarch of Israel, the child of promise.
- I. Ironically, the tomb of Sarah will become the anchor of hope for the family of Abraham. Abraham will be buried there. Esau and Rebekah will be buried there. Jacob and Leah will be buried there. Joseph will instruct the children of Israel that when they return to the land, they will bring his bones and bury him there. This plot of ground becomes an anchor of hope, a planting of the flag, and an assurance that God will be faithful to his word to give them the whole land as their inheritance.
1. Lo and behold, when we come to the culmination of this family and God’s promises to them—fulfilled in Jesus, Messiah—God will reclaim not just the land of Israel, but the whole earth as his kingdom through the tomb of the Promised One. Though crucified and buried, the third day, he is resurrected from the dead and initiates a new creation. From this one plot of land, the flag will be planted—the kingdom of God, the new creation, will spread to the ends of the earth, reclaiming God’s kingdom and his people’s inheritance. Here is the blessing to the whole world—creation reclaimed.

III. The Promised Descendants

- A. But what about the promise of the descendants? Well, it’s similar to the promise of the land. The promise was given, and they waited and waited. And they wondered and tried to figure out and even solve it for God. And when that didn’t work, they waited and waited. And in the face of Sarah’s barrenness, when they are long passed the age of child-bearing, Sarah is 90 and Abraham is 100, God gives them a single child. They receive the child of promise. And on him hangs all the hope and assurance of God’s promise to Abraham.
- B. I scratch my head at this—God says, “Abraham your descendants will be like the dust of the earth and the stars in the sky, but YOU will only see Isaac—the one child—as a down payment as it were, an assurance that more will come.
- C. Now you and I can only imagine how precious Isaac was to Abraham and Sarah—not just because he was their only child, the one they had been waiting for their whole lives, but on him was all their hope for the future for the blessing, for the promise, and on him hung the hope of humanity. And then one day, God calls upon Abraham to do the impossible.
- D. He says, “Abraham, take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” How can this be?
1. But all of this waiting on God, walking with God for all these years, testing God and watching him prove himself over and over has changed and even transformed Abraham. So he does the unthinkable—he obeys the voice of the LORD even though he doesn’t understand, even though it seems in absolute contradiction to everything God has said and promised, Abraham obeys. And in his obedience, Abraham will unknowingly act out and put on display the unfathomable love and goodness of God—he will bear the Name in his obedience.

2. Abraham makes preparation and sets off with Isaac and his servants for the Mountain of Moriah, and we are told:

On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided." The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

—Genesis 22:4–18

3. What just happened?! Abraham has demonstrated and put on display, through his obedience, in his willingness to hand over Isaac to God in total surrender and worship, what God himself will do in order to bless all nations through Abraham. Abraham has honorably bore the Name of the Lord! He has taken up and acted out the redemptive work of God.
4. So many years later, God the Father and his Son will walk this same path of Abraham and Isaac. The Son, like Isaac, will bear a cross of wood upon his back. The Father, like Abraham, the knife and the fire. And there on that same mountain, the Father and the Son will offer a sacrifice that will rescue and redeem all of humanity. The Beloved Son will be provided as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Here is blessing for the whole world—Humanity is freed while the Son is provided as a lamb for the sins of the world.
 - (a) At the end of Abraham's life, we do not see anything like the fullness of God's redemption promised, but we see that God has brought the story forward, and even in Abraham's life, he has given him a plot of burial ground in the Promised Land and a beloved son as a down payment, an anchor for his innumerable descendants. And what's more, God has done an amazing transformative work in Abraham over a lifetime of trusting God, walking with God, and wrestling with God. Abraham is now worthy of bearing the Name.

Conclusion: The Destiny and the Journey

As we think about how God worked in and through the life of Abraham, we can reflect on our own lives. We are also waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises. God has been so faithful—he has come and has brought redemption and salvation in and through Jesus Christ. But we are waiting for the end of the story—when Jesus Christ will be revealed in all of his glorious majesty as he will reign over all creation, both heaven and earth. We are waiting for him to make all things new, to judge all wickedness, and to reward all righteousness, to wipe away every tear, to restore what has been ravished and broken by sin, to bring humanity into all of its created fullness—we are waiting for the glory of the Lord to fill the whole earth.

But while we wait, God is at work in us! And the twist and turns, the ups and downs, the trial and difficulties are like a refining fire in our lives—purifying us and making us those who reflect more and more the image of Jesus Christ, to be a people who bear his Name in all that we think, say, and do.

Like Abraham—we must trust in the slow work of God.

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

*We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.*

We should like to skip the intermediate stages.

*We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new.*

*And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability and
that it may take a very long time.*

*And so I think it is with you. Your ideas mature gradually – let them grow, let them shape
themselves, without undue haste.*

*Don't try to force them on, as though you could be today what time, that is to say, grace and
circumstances, acting on your own good will make of you tomorrow.*

*Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give our Lord
the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling your-
self in suspense and incomplete.*

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Patient Trust*

We can trust in the slow work of God because he has proven himself faithful to his word again and again. Nothing will stop God from fulfilling his promise to rescue and redeem this world he so dearly loves

If I could sum up the book of Genesis after chapter 3 in a phrase, it would be this: Redemption has been promised, and nothing will stand in God's way of rescuing the world he so dearly loves.

- Not the wicked hatefulness of Cain. God will give Seth sin Abel's place.
- Not the whole world being contaminated by sin and wickedness; God will have grace on Noah.
- Not the whole world organized in defiance against God. God will scatter them and choose for himself Abraham, and gather his descendants under his rule.
- Nothing will stop God. His good news marches on!
- Not the decrepitness of Abraham and Sarah.
- Not the deadness of Sarah's womb.
- Not the sacrificing of Isaac.
- Not the lack of faith of Isaac or the lack of faith of Rebekah.

- Not the deceitfulness of Jacob.
- Not the wrath of Esau.
- Not the wickedness of Jacob's sons.
- Not the selling into slavery, false accusations, and imprisonment of Joseph.
- Not the continual lack of provision in the promise land.
- Not the going down to Egypt.
- Not the death of Joseph.

Nothing will stop God from rescuing and redeeming his creation that he so dearly loves. We can trust in God's promises, however slow they are in coming to pass.

Communion: As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, I imagine that the Spirit has brought to mind difficult things that we are holding and carrying—feelings of being overlooked or forgotten by God; thoughts of doubt or fear; feelings of shame and guilt of our own failure to trust and obey God.

Whatever it may be, this table is a weekly physical reminder—God is with us, he is for us, he loves us. He will never give up on us.

Because of human sinfulness and brokenness, there is not one of us who has lived up to the ideal of what God created us for—to love him supremely and to love our neighbor as ourselves. So as we come to the table this morning, we come as a people in need of forgiveness and in need of redemption and salvation. And that is what Jesus offer us at this table—forgiveness, redemption, and salvation. His life for our life; his righteousness for our sin and brokenness.

Prayer—

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*