



## **The God of the Covenant**

### **Behold Our God! – Read the Bible for Life Series #2**

**Genesis 12**

**Pastor David Sunday**

**September 11, 2011**

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Lord, would You rule and reign over this time of proclaiming Your Word and send forth Your Spirit that we may hear and by hearing, we may receive it with faith and then be transformed more into the bold and courageous army whose battle cry is love, reaching out to those in darkness, bringing Your blessing to bear on our neighbors and the nations. Unto Your greater glory, Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Please open your Bible this morning to the twelfth chapter of the first book of the Bible, Genesis chapter 12: God's promise to Abram whose name will soon be changed to Abraham who is married to Sarai whose name will be changed to Sarah. We've begun reading through the Bible together as a congregation with a 15-month plan. We begin with Genesis 12 in our reading plan today.

Two years before I was even born, on August 31, 1968, two people made a covenant with one another. They made promises to one another and which have set the trajectory for my life. Through those promises, I have been a beneficiary of countless blessings. But I was not there when the promises were made; I had nothing to do to earn them or deserve them. In fact, when they made those promises, they didn't even know me. Of course I'm talking about my Mom and Dad and their marriage vows.

That covenant has shaped my life. That covenant has brought blessing into my life and likewise, these ancient covenants we read of in Scripture are meant to shape and inform our lives. They are meant to cast a vision for how we live in this world today. We are meant to hang on to these

covenants and believe the promises contained in them as if they were spoken to us personally because Scripture makes it clear in Galatians 3 that if we share in the faith of Abraham, then we are Abram's offspring; we are heirs according to the promise. If we walk in the faith of our father Abraham, then we share in the covenant that God made to him. We walk in that faith if we trust in the Lord Jesus Christ—He is the promised seed of Abraham. So as we listen to these promises, let's look to the God of promise in faith. Let's believe that God intends to shape our lives through these promises as well.

Genesis 12:1-3:

*"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. 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. 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.'"*

I don't know what Abram first felt when he received these magnificent promises. I don't know if he felt a little bit the way we do when we get one of those Publisher's Clearing House sweepstakes in the mail that says, "You can be the winner of fifty million dollars if you just fill out this form and send it back." I usually take it and say, "No thanks" and toss it in the garbage because it's too good to be true. It's unbelievable.

That could be our response when we come to Genesis 12. After all, in the words of one commentator, "No sane person can explain why there is a Genesis 12." Why is it here? After Genesis 3 with the Fall, man's rebellion against God and all the misery that ensued after that. Then Genesis 4 with the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. Then Genesis 6 where "*the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the*

*LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart*” (Genesis 6:5-6).

Then comes more sin and a flood that destroys the earth except for Noah’s family. Then Noah sins and his son Canaan sins. And there is cursing. But there is also blessing.

Then we get to Genesis 11 and we see man strutting about in his pomp and arrogance, attempting to make a name for himself, building a tower that they thought could reach into the heavens. There God confuses the languages and scatters the nations. By the time we get to the end of chapter 11, everything looks bleak and barren.

What verse 30 says about Sarai is very much a paradigm for the whole people of God at this point. Look at Genesis 11:30: “*Now Sarai was barren...*” To underscore the point Moses, the author, adds this phrase, “... *she had no child.*” So she’s barren; she’s childless. Everything looks bleak. Everything looks like there’s no hope. It would be utterly fair and just for God to wrap up the story here at the end of Genesis 11 and say, “That’s it. I’ve shown mercy after mercy and the people of My creation continue to rebel, continue to revolt.”

But God does not do that because He made a promise in Genesis 3:15 that from the seed of Eve would come an Offspring who would crush the serpent’s head and bring salvation and deliverance to God’s people. God made a covenant at the time of Noah saying, “Never again will I destroy the earth by a flood. In seed time and harvest, sun and moon, day and night shall never cease. I will be faithful.”

Here in Genesis 12, we see again that God has not finished with His promise. When we get to this point, Ralph Davis says we should expect that “the end should come; the Judge should appear; the lava of divine grace should petrify the world.” But instead, what’s the main word that stands out in these three verses? What does God give to a world that mocks Him and

defies Him and rejects Him? What's the main word? "*Blessing... I will bless you... You will be a blessing... In you all the families of the earth will be blessed... Blessing... New creation...*"

What's happening here in Genesis 12 when the Word of the Lord appears to Abram is the same thing that happened in Genesis 1 when the Word of the Lord said, "*Let there be light and light came out of darkness.*" The Word of the Lord brought order into the chaos and filled the empty void with the fullness of creation. Now the Word of the Lord comes to Abram and God is saying, "I'm going to make a new creation out of you, Abram. I'm going to fill my world with My blessing through you, Abram." We should be startled at how this word *blessing* leaps off the page. It's like a bright neon light against the dark backdrop of sin.

The Hebrew text emphasizes that God has a bias for blessing. Moses, who recorded these words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, uses a plural form for *blessing*, and he uses only a singular form for cursing, as if to say God has a wide scope for blessing and a narrow scope for cursing. Yes, God judges. Yes, God curses. But His delight, His pleasure is not in the death of the wicked. His delight is in doing good. He rejoices in blessing with all His heart, with all His soul. God is a God who is bounteous in blessing. A God who delights to bless.

That's an appropriate thought for the tenth anniversary of 9/11 because any one of us who was over five years old when that day first occurred will never forget those events and what has followed. I remember the silence in the skies and how eerie that was. No planes passing over for days. I remember how frequently these three words were on the lips of our fellow citizens: *God bless America*. Do you remember how just a few days after 9/11 all the members of Congress—Democrats and Republicans and Independents—united on the front steps of the Capitol Building and they sang those words? I believe they meant them. *God bless America*.

When we come to the bottom of ourselves, we realize we are desperate for blessing. The very idea of blessing expresses the truth that this isn't something we can secure for ourselves. This is something that must be given as a gift of God's grace. We cannot bring about the blessing. We long for it; we're craving it; we're desperate for it. The problem is, we imagine in our folly that we can achieve this blessing for ourselves. That's what they were trying to do in Genesis 11 by building that tower. They presumed they deserved the blessing, that they could achieve the blessing. They had a spirit of self-advancement and self-reliance. They were saying, "We want to make a great name for ourselves." But God said, "No. You cannot achieve the blessing through your own self-reliance and self-determination." Whenever the nations say we're going to achieve a great name for ourselves, we're going to build up ourselves, God says, "No you won't. I'm going to thwart those plans; I'm going to scatter those plans."

God will not allow us to storm the heavens and to seize His throne and to set ourselves there in His place. The harder we try to achieve greatness while revolting against God's sovereign and gracious rule, the more we will find our designs thwarted. God will humble us, God will defy us—not because He wants to make us miserable, but because He wants to constrain us to depend on Him from whom all blessings flow.

But then God comes one chapter later and says, "What you are craving to do for yourselves, I will do for you if you trust Me. If you believe in Me. I will give you, by grace, what you cannot achieve for yourselves." The very thing they were trying to achieve at the Tower of Babel, God says to Abram, "I'm going to do for you Abram. *'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'* [Genesis 12:2]. When that blessing comes, you will know that I did it. That it was not of your own doing. You will boast, not in yourself, but in My grace and My kindness in the Lord Jesus Christ."

We cannot understand this blessing. We cannot understand why God should use Abram. If we read Joshua 23, it's clear that Abram comes from an idol worshiping family. He was not any more likely to receive God's blessing than anyone else but in His grace, God chooses Abram. God sets His affection on Abram. We're beyond the grasp of reason when we come to verses one through three and we are "awash in God's grace" as one commentator says. We're just drenched in grace here.

Now before we make application of this passage, I want to give you a four-point outline that you can take from these verses and use as you go through your Bible reading, to trace how important this passage is in the whole history of Scripture. Genesis 12 is the seminal passage in the history of redemption. We really cannot understand the Bible aright unless we see that Genesis 12 serves as a paradigm for everything that God is going to do from here on out. As you read through the first five books of the Bible—the Pentateuch—it will be very interesting for you to observe that this promise God makes to Abraham has four components to it.

The fulfillment of this promise is being traced throughout the first five books of the Bible. We look at the history of Israel and see that God is still about the fulfillment of this promise. Then we come to the New Testament and see that Jesus is the promised Son of Abraham and all the way to the end—the book of Revelation—we see God has not forgotten His ancient promise.

There are four components you might want to write down and use as a tool for observation as you search the Scriptures. Look for these four components in your Bible reading:

1. **God promises Abram a people.** Verse 2: "*I will make of you a great nation.*" There are going to be many offspring that this old man and his

barren wife are going to enjoy. They are going to become a great nation. So God promises a people.

2. **God promises Abram protection.** Verse 3: *"I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse..."* So people and protection.
3. **God has a plan** in the second part of verse 3 that He is working from: *"...in you [Abram] all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* There's not going to be tribe, a tongue, a language or a nation that is not going to fall under the glorious scope of this blessing. *"...In you all the families the earth will be blessed."* So God has a people, He promises protection, He has a plan and the last component is...
4. **God has a place.** Look at verse 1: *"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."* Then verse 7, *"Then the LORD appeared to Abram, who is now in Canaan, and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him."*

So four P's: People, Protection, Plan, Place. In many ways the whole story of the Bible is the story of how God is fulfilling this promise. It will be interesting for you to read the Bible through that lens and see how many times it's coming back here to Genesis 12.

Before we make application of this, let's turn to one more passage that is very crucial—Genesis 15. Here, God takes these promises that He made to Abram in seed form in Genesis 12 and He formalized these promises in a covenant that He's going to make with Abram. I'd like us to read Genesis 15:1-5:

*<sup>1</sup>After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield [see the protection there?]; your reward shall be very great." [So Abram is thinking of the promise of people, of an offspring.]  
<sup>2</sup>But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"  
<sup>3</sup>And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." [Now this is a problem. Abram who is 75 in chapter 12 is now*

about 90 and his wife Sarai is also old and...] *she is barren; she has no child.* [God, how are you going to do this?] *“And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man [your servant, Eliezer] shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.”* <sup>5</sup>*And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”*

Wow! An amazing promise: People, Protection, Plan, Place. And Abram hears these promises and how does he respond? My favorite commentary on these verses comes from Martin Luther. I love Luther because he dares to go to the edge of irreverence at times in his remarks but he never falls over the edge—he quickly brings us to the heart of the passage. Listen to what he says about this word that God says to Abram when He promises that he would have as many offspring as stars in the sky and sand on the seashore.

Luther says, “What could be more irrational and laughable, ridiculous and impossible, than God's words to Abraham? Moreover, all the articles of our Christian belief are, when considered rationally, just as impossible...and preposterous. Faith, however, is completely abreast of the situation. It grips reason by the throat and strangles the beast. It affects what the whole world and all that is in it is impotent to do. But how can faith do this? By holding on to God's Word and by accounting it right and true, however stupid and impossible it may appear. By this means did Abraham imprison his own human reason...”

Abraham believed. That's why Genesis 15:6 is one of the most frequently repeated verses in the New Testament. Abraham *“believed the Lord, and He counted it to him as righteousness.”*

This brings us to the application section of this message. There are three lessons I think we need to learn about what we should do with the promises of God and the God of promise—the covenant making God. Three ways that we, the people of faith in 2011 who are still living in the scope of these promise, three ways we should respond:

## 1. Faith Laughs at Impossibilities and Believes the Promises of God

That's how we should respond first and foremost. When God makes a promise that humanly seems ridiculous and impossible, faith looks at the promise, laughs at the impossibilities and says, "I believe. I believe." God loves to be trusted. What do you do with the promises God has made. Do you trust Him? Do you in believe?

What does Scripture say about believers? We are blessed "*with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus*" (Ephesians 1:3). We are living in the wake of this blessing. Do we live like we believe that? Or do we walk around like we are paupers, like we're orphans?

Scripture says that God is able to do, through His church, exceedingly, abundantly above all we could ask...or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). We're not content to just survive are we? We're expecting God to do great and unimaginable glorious things through our church, right? Faith laughs at impossibilities and says, "I believe in Your promise, God." Jesus says, "*Go into all the world and make disciples of all the nations...*" (Matthew 28:19). Sounds a lot like God's covenant with Abram doesn't it? In you, Jesus is saying, "all the families of the earth will be blessed. Go. Make disciples of all the nations and I am with you. My promise is that My presence will go with you."

God says to His church, "I will bless you. Whoever blesses you, I will bless and whoever curses you, I will curse. *Behold, I am with you always even to the ends of the age*" (Matthew 28:20).

Do we live like we believe that? Do we live like we are empowered by the indwelling Spirit of the Risen Christ to bring blessing to your neighbors and to the nations? Or do we functionally live our lives as if the promises of

God are just too good to be true? Do we treat the promises of God the way we treat the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes—see it and toss it?

“Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees,  
And looks to God alone;  
Laughs at impossibilities,  
And cries, ‘It shall be done.’”

Father of Jesus Christ, My Lord  
(Charles Wesley & Karl Harrington)

That's what faith does. It laughs at impossibilities. I love how Charles Spurgeon puts it: “He who trusts in the Lord and laughs at impossibilities, shall soon find that there are no impossibilities to laugh at. For to the man who is confident in Jehovah, all things are possible.”

That's application number one.

## 2. **Faith Embraces God's Demands without Demanding an Explanation**

“*Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go...’*” (Genesis 12:1). “If you trust Me, you must obey me.” God, who spoke light out of darkness, speaks in a similarly authoritative way to Abram and says, “Go, Abram.” He brings an agonizing demand, “Leave all that is familiar to you. Leave your country. Leave all that is comfortable to you. Leave all that is dear to you, your kindred and even your father's house. Go. Go, Abram.” An agonizing demand.

“God, where do You want me to go?”

“I will show you.”

“Well, how long will it take me to get there?”

“Don't worry about that. I'll show you, Abram?”

“What do I need to bring for my journey?”

“Just go. Just trust Me.”

“Will I ever come back?”

“Abram, go. Go. Go, Abram. There is something infinitely more important than your comfort, than your security, even more important than your family and that’s that you obey Me. That you cling to Me. That you depend on Me. If you have Me you have all that you need.”

Jesus says the same thing to His disciples in Matthew 10:37-39:

*“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”*

Verse four is beautiful: “*So Abram went...*” He went. He obeyed. He acts on his faith. He does as the Lord told him and already he’s becoming a source of blessing to others.

*“...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.”*

So enemies, despisers, dishonorable ones, cursers are in the land, but God reminds Abram of His protection, of His presence. Verse seven says that for the first time in Abram’s life, the Lord appears to this man whom the Scriptures call a friend of God. He experiences God’s presence.

*<sup>7</sup>Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ [The promise of a place, the promise of a people, the promise of God’s presence.] 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.”*

It’s a time of worship. It’s a time of trust. It’s a time of growing in grace for Abram. He’s getting to know God. He’s testing God’s promises. He’s settling into the awareness that God is his God and if he has God with

him, he has all that he needs. He's calling on God's name. He's worshipping Him. He's growing in maturity.

But there will be greater demands. There will be tests. Just like there will be in our lives. We don't just believe once and that's enough. There's an on-going demand on the life of the disciple to trust God everyday and "*to lean not on our own understanding*" (Proverbs 3:5) but to rely on Him with all our hearts. Just as God has already demanded that Abram leave his past behind, there's going to come a point when God is going to say to Abram, "You need to leave your future behind, too. You need to lay your son on the altar." But that's getting ahead of the story and we'll look at that next week.

There's an intermediate test here in verse ten. He's in the land that you would expect to be a place filled with milk and honey but what do we read in verse ten? "*Now there was a famine in the land.*" It's not what Abram was expecting—not what he was expecting which leads us to our last lesson and application this morning.

### **3. Faith Anticipates Setbacks**

It is helpful to realize there will be tests in your life of faith as you trust in the promises of God and in the God of promise. There will be setbacks. I don't know if you've ever taken a step of faith and you're walking with God and you're doing what you believe God has called you to do. You're stepping in the path of God's will and then suddenly there's this huge disappointment. An unexpected job loss. An illness. The death of a loved one. Or conflict in relationships and everything is a mess now. Instead of experiencing blessing and prosperity, you feel like you're experiencing famine and hardship and disappointment and heartache. You wonder what has happened to the promises of God. What am I going to do to secure the blessing?

Where does Abram turn when he comes into this famine? He's been going south, south, south. Down, down, down. Instead of going back up to the place where the LORD met him in verse seven and saying, "Lord, I'd rather have stones in Canaan in the midst of Your will than bread in Egypt outside of Your will."

*"So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there..."* In Egypt, he shows that he's faltering in his faith. He doesn't trust in the promise of God consistently. You know the rest of the story—if you don't you can read it today in the Bible reading plan. Abram lies about his wife Sarai to Pharaoh and his officials. They see how beautiful she is and they are about to take Sarai into Pharaoh's harem. If that would have happened, all of God's promises could have been sabotaged. But what we learn about God—the God of the covenant—in this story and Abram's life is that God is faithful to His covenant of grace even when we are faithless. When we are scheming and disobeying and not doing what He asks us to do, even then God's promise cannot be thwarted, not even by our own sin. As the New Testament says, *"If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself"* (2Timothy 2:13).

So this chapter should be a great encouragement to us this morning. We see a man of faith believing in the promises, laughing at impossibilities, acting in faith in spite of great costs and then doing just what we do so often—faltering.

What is Abram struggling with down in Egypt? He's struggling with what one writer calls "the gap between God's promises and reality." God has made great and magnificent promises to His people, astounding things that He wants us to believe and act upon. But here's the reality: Life is full of disappointment. Life is full of trouble. It often is completely outside the realm of our understanding how God is going to fulfill His promises in our life situations. There's a gap.

We see the promise but we're living in reality. We're living in famine and we don't know how God is going to fill that gap and we start to worry, "What if I obey God in this circumstance? What will it cost me? What if things don't work out? Will God really take care of me?" We struggle to believe God's promises in the face of life's overwhelming disappointments. We get weary in the waiting. We falter in our faith. That's life and it's encouraging to read that Abram struggles with the same things. It's even more encouraging to read how faithful God is to him.

I read a story about a man who crossed a great river in the middle of winter on ice. It was frozen solid. He knew he could get across but he got in the middle of that river and he panicked. He thought, "Here I am in the middle of this river. What if I fall in?" He couldn't walk anymore because he was shaking so hard. He got down on his hands and knees and he crawled across the rest of the river. He was cold and wet and aching by the time he got to the other shore. Just at that point, another man came racing across in a sled, smiling and waving. The sled was loaded down with all kinds of heavy stuff and he waved at the man and went on his way in the journey. The writer of this story said this. Listen carefully: "It will be like that for some Christians traveling through life with 'only' the word of the Lord Jesus Christ to rely on. Some anxious, fearful and hardly daring to think that God can cope with their failures, doubts and inadequacies; while others are driving on with confidence and joy, trusting the weight of their whole lives on the God who cannot lie. Like the man crawling on ice feet thick, so many believers are inching toward survival when they could be striding towards victory; creeping along on our own pilgrim's progress when we could be moving in confidence and power through our society and generation, telling others what God has done and what God can do for them. When we come to stand before God, surely the thing we will most regret is that we didn't take Him at His Word more fully. His promises are not thin ice."

Do we trust Him? Are we confident? Will we embrace faith's demands without demanding an explanation? When we are faced with the tests of faith, the disappointments, the apparent inability of God's promises to fill the gap between my reality and His promise...when we're faced with that, will we move on with confidence in God? The God of the covenant?

That's what this table is about. Jesus, our Savior, did not just leave a city in Ur of the Chaldeans.

“He left His Father's throne above  
So free, so infinite His grace—  
Emptied Himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam's helpless race...”

And Can it Be that I Should Gain?  
(Charles Wesley & Thomas Campbell)

Jesus left heaven, clinging to promises from God. Jesus believed God the Father would make of Him a great nation. That He would see His offspring. That He would prolong His days. That the will of the Lord would prosper in His hand. Jesus believed that in the path of obedience, He would become the source of blessing to all the families of the earth. That was the promise Jesus believed. And what did our Savior do when He was faced with the gap between reality and the promises of God? In the wilderness, after having eaten no bread for forty days, Satan came and said, “Turn these stones into bread.” Jesus said, “*No, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God* (Matthew 4:4). I will live and stake My life on the promises of God.”

Where did Jesus' faith take Him? It took Him to the darkness of Calvary where He cried out, “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?*” (Matthew 27:46). It looked like there was a huge gap there between reality and promise but our Savior believed and on Easter Sunday the gap was closed. God raised Him from the dead and He has made of Him a great name. He has given Him “*the name that is above every name* [Jesus, our Lord], *so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on*

*earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”* (Philippians 2:9-11). And in Him, all the nations are being blessed.

As we come to this communion table, He invites those who trust in Him...those who have forsaken the empty, fleeting promises of this world and sin...those who are banking their lives on His promise to be merciful to our iniquities, to forgive our sins and to give us everlasting life. Jesus says come to us whose lives are filled with disappointment, who may feel like we're in a spiritual famine. We may feel like we have no idea how a blessed future is going to come out of our miserable present and He gives us bread and He gives us the cup and He says, “*Take and eat*” (Matthew 26:26). And these become to us the tangible reality of God's faithfulness to keep every promise He has made. No matter how many promises God has made, they are all “yes” to us in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20). So let's partake now of the signs and the seals of these covenant promises as we come to our Savior's table.

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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