

True Greatness Is Only From the LORD

Genesis 11:10 – 12:3

Halifax: 22 February 2015

Introduction:

Today in our sermon series in Genesis, we come to the introduction of one of the most important persons in redemptive history—

- Abram—whose name was later changed to Abraham.
- He is presented to us in scripture as the father of all the faithful—that is, the father of those who have faith in God.
 - God made promises to Abram and his seed, and in the New Testament, we are told that we who have trusted in Christ and been baptised in His name are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promises made to him.

And as we are introduced to Abram at this point,

- I especially want to emphasise how the promises made to Abraham here relate to what we saw about Babel.
 - The men at Babel were looking for influence with God, to make a great name for themselves, and to find security in working together...
 - But they sought these things by their own wisdom and strength.
 - In Genesis 12, the LORD comes to Abram and promises that He will give him essentially the same things the men of Babel sought...
 - But they will be given to them as gifts from a sovereign God—gifts of grace through faith to believing Abraham, the man of faith!
 - *God* will freely bless him, and *God* will make his name great, and *God* will unite him with the families of the earth for blessing.
 - Abraham will become the model of what it means to find grace in the eyes of the LORD standing against all efforts by men to secure their own blessing.
 - Here is a man of faith, depending upon God for all; in contrast to men of pride, depending on the flesh for all.

Our text today is Genesis 11:10 – 12:3.

- Please give me your careful attention as I read this to you.

Genesis 11:10 – 12:3: This is the genealogy of Shem: Shem was one hundred years old, and begot Arphaxad two years after the flood. ¹¹ After he begot Arphaxad, Shem lived five hundred years, and begot sons and daughters. ¹² Arphaxad lived thirty-five years, and begot Salah. ¹³ After he begot Salah, Arphaxad lived four hundred and three years, and begot sons and daughters.

¹⁴ Salah lived thirty years, and begot Eber.

¹⁵ After he begot Eber, Salah lived four hundred and three years, and begot sons and daughters. ¹⁶ Eber lived thirty-four years, and begot Peleg. ¹⁷ After he begot Peleg, Eber lived four hundred and thirty years, and begot sons and daughters. ¹⁸ Peleg lived thirty years, and begot Reu. ¹⁹ After he begot Reu, Peleg lived two hundred and

nine years, and begot sons and daughters. ²⁰ Reu lived thirty-two years, and begot Serug. ²¹ After he begot Serug, Reu lived two hundred and seven years, and begot sons and daughters. ²² Serug lived thirty years, and begot Nahor. ²³ After he begot Nahor, Serug lived two hundred years, and begot sons and daughters. ²⁴ Nahor lived twenty-nine years, and begot Terah. ²⁵ After he begot Terah, Nahor lived one hundred and nineteen years, and begot sons and daughters. ²⁶ Now Terah lived seventy years, and begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. ²⁷ This *is* the genealogy of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Haran begot Lot. ²⁸ And Haran died before his father Terah in his native land, in Ur of the Chaldeans. ²⁹ Then Abram and Nahor took wives: the name of Abram's wife *was* Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife,

Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and the father of Iscah. ³⁰ But Sarai was barren; she had no child. ³¹ And Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan; and they came to Haran and dwelt there. ³² So the days of Terah were two hundred and five years, and Terah died in Haran. ^{12:1} Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. ² I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

May the Lord bless the reading of His holy Word.

- You see here that the Lord comes to Abram and calls him—just out of the clear blue as they say...
 - This man whom God makes a pattern of all the faithful is just an ordinary run of the mill guy—which is a great encouragement...
 - Because that means that God does not save people who do great feats or some impressive work or who have some kind of extraordinary spirituality—
 - It is just ordinary, unimpressive people that are transformed by His grace.
- This ought to be a tremendous encouragement to you to seek the LORD of grace!
 - You don't have to be anyone special or to have done anything special.
 - The great message of true religion is that it is not fallen man that does the saving, but God in Jesus Christ—and it is ours to leave the saving to Him!
 - Of course we are to obey God and come to Him in response to His call, as Abram does, but we come not to impress God with what we have done, that God might do the saving.
 - If we are trying to do it ourselves, we put ourselves in competition with God and His Son—and that is disastrous.
 - Then we have our way of salvation set up against His way!
 - You do not want to be in competition with God because you will end up looking like a complete idiot—to even think that you can do what only God in Christ can do!
 - Don't even think about it...
 - Look at our text and see how clear it is here that...

I. There is nothing extraordinary about Abram and his family

- A. They were at Babel, like everyone else...
- In the genealogy we have Shem, Arphaxad, Salah, Eber, and Peleg...
 - We have very good reason to believe that they were at Babel with everyone else, trying to secure greatness and blessing by united human effort...
 - 1. We have reason to believe that because we are told in Genesis 11:1 that the whole earth (meaning all people) journeyed together to Shinar...
 - There were only around 500 families in the world and they were all together...
 - and there is no reason to think that Abram's forefathers were not among them.
 - 2. What makes this all the more likely is that Peleg himself is named Peleg because the earth (meaning *the people of the earth*) was divided in his day.
 - That indicates that Peleg was there—perhaps he was born on the day that the LORD confused everyone's language at Babel.
 - For him to be named after the event indicates that his family was involved.
 - They were there and they were scattered.
 - They were involved in the same foolish work with the others.
 - 3. We saw that God put a stop to it because it was not His intention for the whole world to ruin itself in this way.
 - He intended to save a people for Himself.
 - So it wasn't as if Abram had special ancestry that opposed the idolatry, pride, and carnal security that was growing like a weed at Babel...
- B. What's more, we see that there is nothing special about the whole line of persons that are named here...
1. We are told that they lived and had children, and we are told how long they lived.
 - And we can see that the lengths of their lives got shorter and shorter after the flood—as did everyone's.
 - They are no different.
 2. The most striking thing about this genealogy is how ordinary it is.
 - They just do what everyone else was doing at the time...
 - Having been scattered at Babel, they live, they have children, and they die... that is all.
- C. And then Terah, the father of Abram is mentioned and there are some rather unimpressive things we know about him from holy writ...
1. We see that he was from Ur, a prominent ancient city where idols were worshipped, and even worse, we know that he was an idol worshipper!
 - a. The Jews even say that Terah had an idol shop—they tell an interesting story that when Abram was called by the LORD,
 - he destroyed all the idols in his father's shop but one.
 - When his father found out about it, he confronted his son and Abram replied, "Perhaps this idol destroyed the others," to which his father replied, "Do not be ridiculous—this idol can do nothing," to which Abram replied, "Just so, father!"

- b. We cannot say for sure if that story is true,
 - But what we can say on the authority of God’s word is that Terah worshipped idols...
 - In Joshua 24:2 it says:
 - **Josh 24:2: And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘Your fathers, *including* Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, dwelt on the other side of the River in old times; and they served other gods.’”**
 - c. Besides that, in our text we have the names of Terah’s sons and relations, and they are names associated with *Sin*, the moon god (his name happens to be Sin).
 - Laban, Sarai, and Milcah all have associations—
 - Sarai being the name of the wife of the moon god,
 - And Milcah was the title of Ishtar, the daughter of the moon god.
- So God did not come to bless Abram on account of his godly family!
2. But it is very encouraging to see that Terah may have repented!
- We are told in Genesis 31:53 that the LORD was also his God, and it is noteworthy that he went to Haran when God called Abram there...
 - We can see in Genesis that Terah is said to have taken Abram and his grandson Lot and his daughter-in-law Sarai to Haran.
 - Stephen makes it clear that this move was in response to God’s call of Abram when they were still at Ur.
 - Stephen speaks of this in his address in Acts 7:2-4:
 - **Acts 7:2-4: And he said, “Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, ³ and said to him, ‘Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.’ ⁴ Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell.”**
 - There are some things that are not clear, but it appears that Abram was born quite a few years after his oldest brother.
 - The way the numbers work, it appears that he was born 60 years after his oldest brother, when his father was 130 years old.

TRANS> So while Terah may have repented, it was in response to God’s call to Abram.

- He was, before that, a worshipper of idols—Abram grew up in an idol worshipper’s home!
 - What is your background?
 - It does not matter if God has called you! He gives you a new start in grace!
 - Don’t let that hold you back.
 - We are saved by grace, not by our pedigree.

- Be thankful if you have a godly family, but don't hold back from the God if you don't!
- It is all of grace!

D. And then fourthly we see that Abram himself is childless and has a barren wife.

1. Moses draws attention to this in verse 30 with the double statement...
 - **Gen 11:30: But Sarai was barren; she had no child.**
 - He could have just said that she was barren, but he also says that she had no child.
 - Sarai's barrenness, of course, becomes a very prominent part of God's working with Abram.
 - God uses it to show that it is not what Abram does, but what He does for Abram that counts!
 - Blessing comes from God—it is by His grace alone.
 - And of course in Abram's case, the barrenness shows that we could not bring forth the seed of the woman that was promised in Gen 3:15 who would come and crush the serpent's head—but more about that later.
2. So whatever your limitations may be, whatever you may be lacking; that makes no difference to the LORD.
 - Not your ability, your wisdom, your background, your righteousness, your strength, your resources or anything of the kind matters...
 - It is rather God's calling, God's blessing, and God's promise that counts.

TRANS> What is that calling and that promise and that blessing?

- Well let's turn now to take a look at it!
- And keep in mind as we do that God has called us to receive the same blessing—in essence—that we are, as Galatians says, heirs of the same promises.

II. God comes to Abram and promises to make him great

- Again, He comes to him and to all of us in him who are called.

A. Look at the excellent things that are promised by grace to Abram (and to us!) in Gen 12:2-3.

1. First the LORD promises to make him a great nation!
 - This is that fruitfulness that we saw promised to Adam in the garden and then to Noah after the flood...
 - This is the promise of the kingdom of God!
 - As we have seen all along, God has no interest in vast numbers of ungodly people when He calls us to be fruitful—it is not the multiplication of wickedness that He is after!
 - A *huge* nation is not a *great* nation just for its size.
 - The promise certainly does speak about size, but it is not just size—it is a huge number of godly people that is the true seed of Abram.

- The LORD is here promising that by grace through faith, there will be a huge number of people who have the enmity against Satan spoken of in Gen 3:15.
 - To put it in the language of the New Testament, a great many people who will be born again and so become members of Christ's righteous kingdom.
 - Revelation tells us that it will be a great multitude which no man can number.
- And it is all by God's grace!
 - We have seen that Abram was quite ordinary, the son of an idol worshipper, the husband of a barren woman!
 - It is the LORD who brings forth a great nation of godliness!
 - Believing this ought to make you all the more eager to evangelise.
 - His power will convert the hardest heart—it will convert idol worshippers and their sons...
 - Pray earnestly and labour diligently, not with confidence in the flesh, but with faith in God's promise...
 - "Your Kingdom Come, Lord Jesus!"

TRANS> Next, the LORD says,

2. "I will bless you."

- This is very wonderful for its simplicity!
 - When God says that He will bless you, it means that He will make you happy.
 - It is that simple.
 - To be blessed of Him is the ultimate happiness because He knows how to bless us—how to make us happy.
- This is much better than having a genie in a bottle that gives you three wishes or even a thousand wishes—even whatever you want...
 - Because we do not even know what would truly make us happy—it would be too much responsibility for us to have to decide what we would have.
 - So if you had such a genie, you should ask only that you be blessed of God—that would make your happiness certain!
 - You would not know how to make for your own happiness.
- Augustine once ridiculed the pagans who had their gods for everything—protecting their doorway, supplying the bread, etc...
 - He pointed out that there was no use in having gods for all these things if you have the one God who is over all and who can guarantee your happiness.
 - He is the only one you need.
- Having this perspective is so helpful for getting through life in this fallen world in our yet mortal state with all the trials and tribulations...
 - Just to know that God has promised to bless us if we are in Christ sweetens the deepest darkest trials and floods them out with hope.

- As Paul says,
 - **2 Co 4:17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,**

TRANS> In close connection with this is the next promise that God makes...the LORD says, "I will bless you..."

3. *And* "I will give you a great name"

a. The men at Babel wanted a great name—

- It probably even refers to immortality—a name that would never be forgotten!
- Of course we saw that they indeed got a name that was never forgotten, but it was the name *Babel—Balel—confusion!*
 - That is how they are remembered!
 - The monument to the strivings of man for greatness is *confusion!*
 - Self-wrought religion and fleshly efforts bring no greatness—only death and shame at last.

b. But here a great name is promised to Abram by grace!

- It is by the blessing of God rather than by human effort!
- God was promising him true immortality—a name that would live forever.
 - This is brought to its fullest expression in Abram's seed, the seed of the woman who came and crushed the serpent's head...
 - The Son of God in human flesh who was crucified and rose to immortality on the third day and was given the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that He is LORD!
 - He is the one who ascended with eternal life to give to all His seed, all who, like Abram, hear His call and come to Him for eternal life.
 - He is ascended to the right hand of the Father to reign until He has given eternal life to all of His people!

c. And we who follow Him are given His name—we are called Christians, and we are baptised into His name, and we are given immortality through Him, by God's grace.

- Like Abram, in Christ, we have a great name—we are now the children of the everlasting God—He is our Father...
 - We are heirs as His own adopted sons, destined for glory.
 - Try to attain *that* by fleshly efforts—you get confusion!
 - Receive it in Christ by grace and it will be true greatness!

➤ And there is still more—it is a part of true greatness...when it is really true...

4. The LORD says that He will make Abram a blessing—

- It is actually an imperative—He says, "be a blessing."
- But it is an imperative that comes with enablement...as when God told the animals to be fruitful—
 - He was empowering them as He commanded them.

- a. And I say, what a great blessing this is—it is something we all surely desire!
 - Really! What son or daughter would not love to be a blessing to their parents—to please them—
 - We are so disappointed with ourselves when we don't—when we do things that strain our relationship with them—when we anger them and frustrate them and disappoint them again.
 - But what if you really could be a blessing to them...
 - And to others!
 - What parent does not want to be a blessing to his children—and what employee to their employer and what manager to his subordinates?
 - Wouldn't that be marvellous?
 - To have all the people in your life filled with appreciation for you?
 - Well that is just what God promises here.
 - One of the reasons we are often disappointed in our relationships is because we want to be a blessing to others—but we fail so...
 - I want to be a blessing to you as a pastor...
 - I want to be a blessing to my wife and my children—to my friends—to those who are closest to me...
 - And to know that God will give me that—and that He is giving me that is a wonderful thing!
- b. But the LORD makes it clear that this blessing of others will ultimately be from Him (I mean from the LORD).
 - For He says, **“I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you.”**
 - The blessing that Abram and that you and I are able to bring to people—the blessing we are blessed to bless others with—is *God's* blessing.
 - 1) When they see the relationship that we have with God—
 - the reconciliation, the forgiveness of sin we have in Jesus Christ,
 - the new life we have by the Holy Spirit...
 - the walk we have in communion with the living God...
 - the hope we have in His promises...
 - They either want that and they bless us and they are blessed of God...
 - 2) or they hate that and count it a challenge because they are trying to make their own blessing by their own works.
 - a) That is when they are in competition with the LORD.
 - To them, Jesus is a threat and an intruder.
 - They do not want His help—they want to do it themselves!
 - They are proud.
 - They don't want to be told that they are sinners who need the blessing of Abram—which is salvation by Jesus Christ.
 - So they are found fighting against God—a battle they certainly cannot hope to win.

- b) And indeed, they curse Abram (and anyone else who has true faith) for even suggesting that they need grace—for himself bowing to grace...
 - They curse Abram and God curses them.
 - They will perish with Satan who led the entire human race into the notion that we could be like God and bring blessing to ourselves without Him...
 - so foolish—when we are not the creator—we do not possess immortality—we were not around when God made the world and formed our DNA.
 - They are so desperate to deny God that they even try to deny Him as Creator—
 - with something so absurd as self-creation—the big bang—aliens—anything but God, which is the only reasonable answer.
 - And God curses them...He frustrates them, He scatters them, He gives them at last the fruit of their own way.
 - c. Yet, the LORD tells Abram at the end of verse 3 that all the families of the earth will be blessed in him...
 - All of those families that were scattered at Babel will be brought back together....
 - There will be persons from all of the major language groups that were brought about at Babel...
 - There will be those from all the major families that will find favour with God and receive the blessing of Abram.
- B. And how do you obtain this blessing? How does Abram obtain it?
1. God comes to Abram (and to all who are blessed in him) freely—
 - a. It is all of grace—free election.
 - We saw it in Ephesians—that God chose us before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love.
 - We who were first to be ruined by the fall, God purposes to restore in Jesus Christ... not because of anything we had done...
 - b. We have seen that with Abram...
 - There was nothing special about him—the LORD just came to him with His grace and called him to blessing!
 - There is no indication that Abram was even seeking Him.
 - The LORD just came to him and called him!
 - All Abram did was say, “sure”—and follow the LORD for His promised blessing!
 2. Do you realise that that is all you have to do?
 - a. God calls all people everywhere to repent...
 - His call has gone out into all the world, that whoever calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.

- **Romans 10: 8-13:** “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): ⁹ that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. ¹³ For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”
- He calls you to come to Him for blessing and He assures you that He has never rejected anyone who comes to Him for saving mercy in Christ.
- b. You can be so confident when you come to Him because you see how He took the initiative to come to Abram...
 - And He has done the same with you...
 - Right now, I represent Him as a minister of His word...
 - He has sent me to call you to come to Him for blessing and salvation.
 - Not because you are good, not because you have sought Him, not because of your family or anything else...
 - Just because He is gracious—He says to you that if you call on His name, looking to His provision in Christ, you will be saved.
 - Don’t think for a moment that you can come on your own terms...
 - You must come in Christ—relying on Him as the provision.
 - Really, when you get down to it, those who bless Abram and are blessed are those who bless Christ...
 - They come when God calls because they see that they need Jesus to save them and nobody else can!
 - They bless Him and God blesses them!
 - They bless Him for coming and dying for our sins and God blesses them with the forgiveness of sin.
 - They rely on Him and His work rather than themselves and their own works and God saves them.

Conclusion: Surely you can see! Greatness is only from the LORD.

- Abram could no more make himself great than he could fly or could create the world!
- Babel is just plain silly!
 - For anybody to think that they could somehow work it so that they could manipulate God to bless them—build a tower to connect with Him in heaven...
 - or to think that they could make a great name for themselves—could someone attain immortality and life without God—it’s insane...
 - or that they could make themselves secure by uniting with all the world...
 - what good will that do when you are on death’s doorstep?
 - What good will that do when you stand before God on the day of judgement?
 - None whatsoever—only irreparable harm.

- Every good thing you have now comes from the LORD.
 - Go on and admit it and stop your foolish looking for self-blessing.
 - There is no such thing
- Blessing comes from God—greatness is from Him alone—not by our efforts, goodness, cleverness, or anything else.
 - You have no power to control your fortune and happiness (seek the LORD!).
 - You can't even keep yourself alive...
 - You can't even do what you know is right consistently—much less what God wants (seek the LORD!).
 - You can't make up for the wrongs you have done to God—not even close (seek the LORD!).
- We all want what the men at Babel wanted...
 - But we must not seek to obtain it by the flesh as they did...
 - Receive it rather from the LORD as Abraham did.
 - You will not be disappointed—you will be blessed.