

What Is God's Plan to Redeem the World? (Genesis 12-50)

Big Idea: God promises to redeem the world through Abraham's offspring – a promise that will survive our repeated failures.

We began a series last week that asked an important question: why is this world so glorious and yet so broken? Why do we have so much beauty, so many moments of transcendence and awe, and yet so much brokenness and suffering? Why does the song "All The World is Mad" by Thrice make so much sense?

Something's gone terribly wrong with everyone

All the world is mad

Darkness brings terrible things, the sun is come

What vanity, our sad, wretched fires

We started to answer by looking at the story of Scripture, which is the true story of the world, a story that includes all of us. We believe that the Bible is a unified story that includes you. It's the story of God, the world, and God's answer to the human predicament. If we are to figure out who we are and what our role is in this world, we need to understand this story.

And last week we answered the question, "Why is the world glorious but broken?" with the story from the first eleven chapters of the Bible: **The world is glorious because God made it, but it's also broken because we've wrecked it with sin.**

Okay. That's a good start. But we need to go even further and ask another question: **What is God's plan to redeem the world?** If things are so glorious and so broken, what is God's plan to fix it all?

For that, we need to look at the next part of the story.

Searching for Blessing

In the last part of the story that we looked at last week, the people were building the city of Babel. We learn their motivation: "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and *let us make a name for ourselves*, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4).

How do you live in a broken but glorious world? You try to make a great name for yourself. That's kind of the story of our lives ever since humanity has been in this mess. We try to overcome the futility of life by compensating with other things to fill the emptiness and frustration of our souls.

But it never works. Sometime soon we're going to go through the book of Ecclesiastes, which teaches us that all of our desires to compensate for the emptiness we feel in our souls, apart from God, leave us feeling empty. There's a hunger in our souls that we are powerless to fix.

So what's the solution then? At the end of Genesis 11, the story moves from humanity as a whole to a particular family: the family of Terah and one of his sons Abram. There's nothing remarkable about them, except that they're probably pagan members of the moon cult where they lived. God appears to Abram, and opens up a whole new movement in the story of the Bible and our story.

Read what God said to Abram:

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." (Genesis 12:1-3)

Notice where the story left off. The world is broken and frustrating. Our reaction is to try to find a way to make our names great, but it never works. Try as hard as you want to make your name great, and even if you succeed you will fail. It just won't work. Our problem is too big for our own solutions to work.

But then God appears and promises Abram the blessing that echoes the original blessing that God gave all of humanity at creation in Genesis 1:28, the blessing that we all long to have. He promises to make Abram's name great. What Abram can't do for himself, God promises to do for him. He promises to overcome the futility of Abram's life in a way that Abram can't do for himself. Why? The end of verse 3 tells us: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

What is God's plan to redeem this broken world? After humanity wrecked this world, God promised to send a wounded victor who would crush the head of the serpent, but who would suffer but kill evil at its source. At this point in Genesis, we've just seen generations of trouble because of how bad the world is. But all of a sudden the spotlight shines on one family, on one man. **God's plan is to bless and rescue the world through this one man's family.** Here finally is the solution to what we've needed all along, the answer to all that's wrong with the world. God acts and does what we can't do for ourselves. He provides a way for the world to be redeemed.

Later on, in chapter 17, God tells Abram (now named Abraham) that kings would come from his family. God even seals this promise with a covenant in chapter 15.

God's agenda is nothing less than the reversal of all that went wrong when humanity introduced sin into the world. God intends blessing for all people, for the whole world. Through Abraham and his descendants, God moves to save the world.

One Problem...Actually, a Few Problems

There's just one problem. Actually, there are a few problems.

First problem: Abraham didn't have any children. God told Abraham, "I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted" (Genesis 13:16). If God is going to bless the world through Abraham's descendants, it helps if Abraham *has* descendants – not an easy thing when Abraham is 100 years old, and Sarah is 90 (Genesis 17:17). You don't throw a baby shower in a nursing home. Not having a child is a really big problem for Abraham and Sarah.

But that's not the only problem. **The other problem is – how do I put this politely – Abraham can be a bit of a doofus.** You remember when God gave Adam and Eve a choice, to either trust God and obey him, or to choose their own way? Abraham repeatedly faces the same choice, and he passes some of the tests spectacularly (Genesis 15:6, 22:15-18). But he also fails a lot of tests.

Twice he conceals the truth about his wife's identity (Genesis 12:10-20; 20). If guys are hitting on your wife, and you deny she's your wife, that's a bad mistake to make once – and a horrific mistake to make twice.

Abraham sometimes tries to take matters into his own hands. For instance, he has a child through his wife's servant (Genesis 16), which was a common practice back then, but not at all what God promised.

It's not just Abraham, either. Spoiler alert: God miraculously gives Abraham and Sarah a baby in their old age. In chapters 25 to 50, we read about three generations of Abraham's descendants. They're a mess too.

- Abraham's son repeats his father's mistake and lies about his wife (26:6-11).
- Abraham's grandsons were guilty of deceit and treachery. In fact, one of his grandsons stole his brother's birthright and blessing (27). His whole life was characterized by deceit.
- Abraham's great-grandsons sold one of their brothers into slavery (37).

Abraham and his descendants repeatedly failed God's test. Remember the choice: trust God, or do what looks good to you and experience death. Abraham and his descendants repeatedly make the same mistake Adam and Eve did. They continually fail the test.

Through Abraham and his descendants, God moves to save the world – but Abraham and his descendants keep messing it up.

God's Relentless Plan

How is God going to redeem the world with these people? How is God going to bring something good out of this mess?

I want to close by looking at one story in Abraham's life that answers this question. In Genesis 15, God makes a covenant to Abraham and says, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great" (Genesis 15:1). God promises to give him heirs and land. Abraham asks, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" (Genesis 15:8). The answer is astounding.

God tells Abraham to get some animals. He splits the animals in two, except for the birds, and puts them in two rows. A deep sleep falls on Abraham, and then God speaks, promising Abraham that he will bring his offspring out of captivity from a foreign land.

And then we read: "When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces" (Genesis 15:17).

What is all this about?

Jeremiah 34:18-19 gives us insight into what's happening here.

The biblical world offers widespread evidence that animals were slaughtered in treaty contraction ceremonies. Some of these texts—but not all of them—suggest that the two parties to the treaty walked between the rows of freshly killed animal flesh, and in so doing placed a curse upon themselves if either party should prove disloyal to the terms of the treaty: May they too be torn apart if they are responsible in any way for violating the arrangement. (Victor Hamilton)

It's a dramatized curse. You would expect Abraham to walk through the animals as a way of saying, "This is what will happen to me if I don't keep my part of the bargain."

But instead, a smoking fire pot and flaming torch passes between the pieces.

God essentially says, "Not only will I pay the penalty if I am not faithful to the covenant; I will pay the penalty if *you* are not faithful to the covenant. You can be absolutely sure that I will be faithful to the covenant even if you are not." God is at work, even in their failures, to keep his promises.

There's no other God like this. We think that it's all up to us, that we have to live to a certain level and then God will bless us. But God comes and makes a covenant promise to do what we can't do for ourselves and to commit himself to keep his promises to us, even when we fall short, even when we fail.

God is saying, "Abram, I will bless you. No matter whether I fail, I will pay the penalty. No matter whether you fail, I will pay the penalty. I will make myself accountable to pay the penalty if I should fail my part of the covenant, but I make myself accountable to pay the penalty should you fail. I will absorb the cost for either of us, including you." This is a one-sided covenant. Unbelievable. This is God's way of saying, "I will be torn apart if I fail, or I will be torn apart if you fail. If you fail, I will take the consequences. I will take the penalty. I will do it." (Tim Keller)

And that's just what God does for us. God saves us, not because we keep our end of the deal, but simply because God is gracious, simply because God promises to keep his word and give us what he's said even if we fail.

What an amazing God we have! What is God's plan to save the world? It's a plan to raise up someone who will bless the whole world and undo the devastation of sin, and nothing – not even our failures – can stop this plan, because God promises to take our failures on himself.

What is God's plan to redeem the world? God promises to redeem the world through Abraham's offspring – a promise that will survive our repeated failures.

Two Questions

Every week we're asking two questions: What does this teach us about God, and what does this teach us about humanity?

Here's what it teaches us about God: that God is gracious and patient, and that he uses imperfect people by his grace who don't deserve what he gives them. God keeps his promises despite our failures.

Here's what it teaches us about humanity: we need God's grace. It's hard to be anything but humble when you read the story of the Bible. We fail and fail – and yet God chooses to use people like us by his grace. We need God's mercy.

So Father, thank you for your promise to bless the world. Thank you that you promise through Abraham's offspring to raise up someone who will crush evil's head. And thank you that not even our failures can stop this promise.

Thank you for Jesus who is the fulfillment of this promise, who takes upon himself the curse that belongs to us. We worship him today and put all our trust in him. In Jesus' name, Amen.