

# Abraham and the Mission of God

## *The Life of Abraham: A Study in Genesis 12-22* Sermon 2

Genesis 12:1-3

February 5, 2023

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Last week we kicked off our new sermon series, *The Life of Abraham*. Abraham's life is one we are meant to examine and imitate. We are to "walk in his footsteps" (Romans 4:12). Abraham's biography begins in Genesis 12 and begins with God's calling. The Lord's voice breaks through the noise and confusion of Babylon, calling Abraham to be a man who lives for the True God.

This week we remain in Genesis 12, looking closely at verses 1-3. We'll see that God's call comes with a *commissioning*. "The Lord said to Abram, Go..." (12:1). Verses 2-3 announce the mission of God. These verses set the framework for God's dealings with humanity from here onward. This week we focus on the mission of God as announced to Abraham. Next week we'll consider what saying "yes" to that mission entails, looking at Abraham's faith and obedience.

We should acknowledge an objection that may surface as we discover the scope of God's mission. We will discover that God's mission touches upon the *individual*, *national*, and even *global*. God's promises to bless Abraham (individual), make him a great nation (national), and through him bless all the families of the world (global). Implied in this passage is that the flourishing of all peoples from all nations *depends* on their relationship with the God of Abraham.

This is what postmodern thinkers call a "totalizing truth claim." It sets the stage for what such thinkers call a "universalist culture." Cultural universalism, according to this line of thought, is "the cultural counterpart of imperialism."<sup>1</sup> Here, one culture assumes they possess universal truth and set out to convert the world to it or impose it by force.

In the weeks following September 11, 2001, chief rabbi of England, Jonathan Sacks, wrote a piece for *The London Times* reflecting on deep questions the attacks raised for an increasingly global community. Sacks wondered how universalist cultures could co-exist in a global world. Universalist cultures like Ancient Greece and Rome, or the modern-day Enlightenment culture of the west, can bring "inestimable gifts," Sacks recognizes. But they can also bring great suffering. They can be like "a tidal

wave,” he writes, “sweeping away local customs, ancient traditions, and different ways of doing things.”<sup>2</sup>

*Is the mission of God as announced to Abraham just another totalizing truth claim, seeking to remake the world in its own image? Is it just one point of view that like a tidal wave sweeps away all uniqueness and difference of other cultures—even using its religious stories like a political theology justifying the domination of others?*

As we look at God’s mission announced to Abraham and consider its development across the Bible, we’ll have to keep this objection in mind. And I hope you’ll come to see, as I have, the truth of what one leading scholar has said: “Almost certainly Christianity exhibits more cultural diversity than any other religion, and that must say something about it.”<sup>3</sup>

The mission of God, as announced to Abraham, doesn’t sweep other cultures away. Rather, it seeks to bring all that is true, good, and beautiful in them, to fruition. But to see this we need to dig into Abraham’s commissioning, noting three things about God’s mission: (1) The Blessing, (2) The Curse, and (3) The People of the mission of God.

## I. The Blessing

The theme of blessing shines like many gemstones in Abraham’s commissioning. Five times the word is used in verses 2-3. Not only does God promise Abraham, “I will bless you” (v.2), but also promises to make Abraham a blessing-bearer, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (v.3). Whatever else the mission of God is about, at its heart is delivering a *blessing*.

*What does the Bible mean, specifically in Genesis, when it speaks of God’s blessing?*

### **Creational**

The first thing we notice is that blessing in Genesis has a *creational* meaning. It speaks of the creation working at its full capacity. It refers to what we might call, *flourishing*.

- The word is first used after God creates the sea creatures and birds. In Genesis 1:22, we read: “God **blessed** them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth’” (Genesis 1:22).

- It's used next in Genesis 1:28 after the creation of man and woman: "God **blessed** them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" (Genesis 1:28).
- Then God blesses the Sabbath day, making it holy—a day set apart for people to rest from their work and fellowship with their Maker (see Genesis 2:3).

We might define the biblical idea of blessing as this: *creation at its full potential—bearing fruit and enjoying fellowship with the maker.*

The mission of God, therefore, is the mission of *the Creator*. It's the Creator's hands reaching down into His beloved creation. And in this sense, we might imagine that in whatever culture God's mission goes, the aim is never to flatten and destroy but to straighten out and help grow. Remember that Genesis has taught us that all people are made in the image of God. Therefore, every culture will have elements that are deeply pleasing to God. There will be others that due to sin do not please Him. But the mission of God "connects the dots," so to speak, with the green shoots of any given culture and their ultimate flourishing. Deal with the weeds, yes, but for the sake of growth, not death.

But there is more to God's mission than unlocking creation's potential. And this is because there is more wrong with the world than stunted growth. We must now turn to a second element of the Mission of God, *the curse*.

## II. The Curse

Though muted in comparison to the five-fold use of blessing, the term *curse* appears once in our passage: "Him who dishonors you I will curse" (12:3).<sup>4</sup> This means that people who ultimately set themselves against the God of Abraham are under a curse.

Just as the term *blessing* sent us back to the beginning, so too does the word *curse*. Think back to Genesis 3 and the fall of humanity. When Adam and Eve sin, breaking their trust with God and choosing their own way, they discovered that God was not only the Creator but also the Judge. And the moral logic of their rebellion leads to a judgement taking the form of a curse:

Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return (Genesis 3:17-19).

So now God's curse has entered into the world alongside His creational blessing. The curse is the present judgement upon human sin, and we experience it as pain, brokenness, and death—and it spreads everywhere, touching the physical, relational, and social.<sup>5</sup>

Underlying our physical and social problems lie spiritual and moral ones—like a great root system below a tree. Human beings under the curse live under the wrath of God—His judgement. And this is true of all of us.

## **Redemptive**

Because of this curse, God's mission must offer more than a straightening up of the created order. The blessing—if it is to be a blessing at all—must have not only a creational element but also redemptive power. It must deal with the curse—the judgement of God, the wrath of God.

And this is where the mission of God parts ways with (or goes deeper than), say, the mission of the United Nations Millennial Development Goals, or the mission of the American Government. It goes where other blessings cannot—into the depth of humanity's spiritual condition.

*How does the God of Abraham bring this blessing—how does He lift the curse and protect from wrath?* Through the offspring of Abraham, Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> Paul puts it this way:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.... (Galatians 3:13-14).

As it turns out, Jesus Christ is the ultimate blessing bearer, because he is also the curse bearer.

Here then are two elements of the mission of God, which both might be included in God's desire to *bless*: a desire to see the creation flourish, which ultimately requires its people to be redeemed.

As Isaac Watts writes in his wonderful hymn, *Joy to the World*:

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make His blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as, far as, the curse is found.*

If the creational blessing is brought by working for the *common good*, the redemptive blessing is brought by working for *conversion*.

## **The integrity and ordering of our mission**

We don't always do such a great job holding these two things together—caring for the natural as well as the spiritual needs of the world around us.<sup>7</sup> In the past century, at least in America, we've seen some churches focus entirely on the social and natural, forgetting altogether the spiritual plight of the neighbors we are called to love. And we've seen other churches overlook the physical elements of life here and now, and only speak of people's spiritual needs. We can do better. What we need is a properly integrated view of God's mission.

An analogy I've come across that helps me grasp how these two elements—the natural and spiritual—in God's mission hold together, is that of a driving wheel of a car. Think of the car's engine as the Gospel, the power of God through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Think of the hub of the wheel as addressing the spiritual state of those around us (conversion). Then think of the tire that's on the hub and touches the ground as the cultural engagement (social action).

The order is important. God's mission is fueled by the Gospel. God's mission sees that the problems in the natural world have sin at their root. And so, we are always working with this system and keeping order in mind. The Gospel is the power, conversion is the first act, and engagement with the world around us is a necessary fruit.<sup>8</sup>

That Jesus Christ and his cross are at the center of God's Mission has implications for how that mission is carried out. Especially in the tone and tenor. We'll draw this out as we turn to our third observation: The People.

### III. The People

God's mission involves a people, not just an individual, but a collective group. We see this in verse 2 when God says to Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great." A great nation. God's blessings flow through the individual Abraham to the whole world, but there is another intermediary in this process—a people, or, as put here, a great nation. Here again, we need to see how this part of God's mission unfolds across time.

#### Israel and God's attractional people

When Abraham dies, he is not a great nation. But, some 400 years later, his ancestors are formed into a nation, the nation of Israel. They'd become enslaved in Egypt and under the leadership of Moses God delivered them—this is called The Exodus and is recorded in the second book of the Bible.

In the development of Israel as a nation, we see a second integral component to the mission of God. God's mission to bless the nations will involve an *attractional people*. God's covenant people are to be formed around the identity of God so that they reflect the heart of God to the nations around them. Israel is to be a light to the nations (see Isaiah 49:6).

More so than just an individual, the organization and ordering of a people is an opportunity to show brightly the ways of God. This is why during 40 years in the wilderness, God gives Israel His law. This law is meant to order their religious and social life, so that they become a burning and shining light, signaling to the world: *here is what true humanity looks like.*<sup>9</sup>

Let me offer an example of how God's law might have made Israel attractional—how it displayed the unique character of their God:

There were obvious laws in Israel to protect justice: laws against stealing, murder, and lying. But there are also laws that address more subtle situations of justice—situations that focus on the most vulnerable. In a farming culture like Israel, the use of day labor was common, especially during harvest

season. When a landowner needed to increase their workforce quickly, they would hire day laborers. In both Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy 24, there are laws that make clear that if you hire a day laborer you had to pay them that same day before they went home:

You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning (Leviticus 19:13; also Deuteronomy 24:14-15).

*Why was this important?* Because day laborers were the poorest of the poor, they lived hand-to-mouth. They needed what they earned that day to feed their family that night. To keep their wages from them for any reason was an act of injustice that God would not abide. So, He wrote this rule into the laws He gave His people. By caring for the most vulnerable, Israel showed the *heart* of the True God.

### **Jesus Christ and the attractional people of God**

Jesus Christ now stands as the center of the people of God. All those attached to Jesus by faith—whether Jew or Gentile—make up the people of God, the Church.<sup>9</sup> And it is still the case that *how* God's people keep God's laws is meant to make us attractional, not cold and judgmental.

This has implications for how the mission of God is meant to be carried out.

Along with people speaking Gospel words in their communities and caring for the needs of others, the local church—the people of God—are to be the attractional epicenter of God's presence in the world.

And a keyword used for Christian mission in the New Testament is *witness*. The church witnesses to the Gospel in a way that is clear and also compassionate, articulate, and also embodied. Here is truth in the flesh, lived out among a people.

And at the heart of the Church's witness is God-crucified—Jesus dying for people. This surely must foster a type of humility and love in our mission toward others. The witness of the Cross, through the people of God, is not coercive and domineering; it is humble and servant-like. We would persuade all men and women of the Good News of Jesus Christ, through whom comes the promises made to Abraham. But we would not coerce or arrogantly boast to anyone, because that is not the way of our servant-king.

*Is God's Mission, as announced to Abraham, a "totalizing truth claim" that like a tidal wave seeks to sweep away all cultural differences?* Not at all. It is the arrival of the Creator and the Redeemer, who seeks to bring to fruition all that is good and true and beautiful in any people group while washing away the curse. The Gospel is the very light and water in which the goodness of any culture can flourish. This is why it has taken root in almost every culture of the world—but without tearing down all uniqueness of those cultures.<sup>11</sup>

And finally, to those intimidated by the topic of mission, who may wonder if they are called to this great work, or how they'd do it. Here is a start: prayerfully pay attention to the relationships God is building around you—through your neighborhood, gym, school, and place of work. And ask Him to show you a friend you might invite to church sometime, or invite to join a fun evening with your small group. After all, it still is the case that God's mission works through God's people—and it may be the smiles and warmth of our own community that's the first touch of God's blessing upon a neighbor or friend.

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## Endnotes

1. Referring to the thoughts of Jonathan Sacks, as recorded in Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Baker Academic, 2003), 1-2.
2. Cited in Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Baker Academic, 2003), 2.
3. Ibid, 8.
4. Many translations render verse 3, "him who curses you I will curse." However, the Hebrew word for "curse" is used only once and the former term is better rendered "dishonor."
5. You might find this idea hard to believe. But I'll give you one sign to look for to see it upon people: *mortality*. "You are dust," God says to sinful humanity, "and to dust you shall return." Saint Paul explains that "death came into the world through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).



6. John Calvin, *Genesis, Vol 1*. (Eerdmans, 1948), 349. John Calvin pictures the scene with Abraham following God and hearing these promises like this: “Therefore God (in my judgement) pronounces that all nations should be blessed in his servant Abram, because Christ was included in his loins. In this manner, he not only intimates that Abram would be an *example*, but a *cause* of blessing.... For whereas, from the time of the first man’s alienation from God [meaning Adam], we are born accursed, here a new remedy is offered unto us.”
7. This tension was evident from as early as the second and third centuries in the Donatist controversies. As Tom Holland recounts: “What was the surest way to plant anew a Garden of Eden on earth? Was it, as the Donatist argued, to raise a wall against the clutching of briars and nettles, and to tend only those narrow flower beds that were manifestly clear of weeds? Or was it, as their opponents insisted, to attempt the planting of the whole world with seeds?” Tom Holland, *Dominion* (Basic Books, 2019) 135.
8. This analogy comes from John Stott and Christopher Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World: Updated and Expanded Edition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 49.
9. There is a beautiful prophecy in Isaiah depicting Israel’s archenemies, Egypt and Assyria, being drawn to Israel and blessed along with her. This exhibits the attractional element of Israel’s mission: “In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.” (Isaiah 19:23-25).
10. In writing to the Galatians Paul refers to obedient Christians as the “Israel of God,” “And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the **Israel of God**” (Galatians 6:16).
11. This is why historians like Professor Ninian Smart, in his work *The Phenomenon of Christianity*, was so struck that Christianity was able to take root in such various cultures, without eroding their uniqueness. He asks, “What do the Amish of Pennsylvania have in common with

[expressions of Christianity in African]? What does [Lutheran] Sweden share with the old faith of Ethiopia? What transition is to be made from the Catholicism of Lombardy to the [Baptist churches] of Georgia or the Calvinism of the Voortrekkers [the Afrikaners of South Africa]." See Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Christianity* (London: Collins, 1979), 7.