

E100 Week 2 Promises Promises (Abraham, Isaac & Jacob) 16th Jan 2011
Readings 6-10 Genesis 12, 15, 21-22, 27-28, 32-33

Last week we read the opening stories in the bible and we saw that God made a perfect world for humanity to live in, and Adam and Eve were in a perfect relationship with each other and God. Then it all went wrong as they rejected God and his provision and decided to go it alone, thinking that they could do a better job without God. And humanity has been doing the same ever since.

We were introduced to the theme of salvation and promise in the story of Noah and the flood, but we finished with the story of the tower of Babel and humanity, again, in rebellion against God and his provision, choosing to trust in their own ability. As a result, they were scattered across the world and their language was confused. On the plus side, it once again revealed that God is sovereign. Although he gives humans free will, he remains in control and does intervene in the events of the world.

On the negative side, it is clear that despite the perfection of the Garden of Eden and the wonder of God's creation, despite the flood and the cleansing that God brought, man is incapable of restoring his relationship with God. It is clear that man is predisposed to sin, and despite God's provision and care and desire for a relationship with humans, man seemingly cannot help but mess it up. Things were unravelling fast and the only hope was that God, just as he did when he clothed Adam and Eve in the garden, would do something for them.

So, chapter 12 is a pivotal chapter in the relationship between God and humanity as it reveals what God did, taking the first steps to save us. And the theme running through all of our readings for this coming week is God's plan for salvation and the promise he made to Abraham and his descendants.

In verse 1, God calls Abram to leave his country, his people and his Father's household and go to land that God would show him. And in verses 2 to 3, God reveals the four fold blessing that he would receive if he obeyed.

Firstly, God said, I will make you into a great nation. Abram, if he obeyed God, would lose his present country, but God would make him into a new one. And Abram would be its head, its founding father. Which at the time seemed unlikely, given the fact that Abram and Sara were childless, but we will get to that in a moment.

Secondly, God says "I will bless you." Abram would have to sacrifice a lot to follow God, but God is no man's debtor and God promised Abram prosperity and protection if he obeyed.

Thirdly, God says, I will make your name great. This was to compensate him for the loss of his Father's house. God promised that he would be the patriarch of a new house, and as a result his name would be known and honoured all over the world.

And then fourthly, God promises to make him a blessing. Not only would Abram receive God's blessing, he would become God's vessel for blessing others. Through Abram all nations of the earth would be blessed.

And so, these promises, this covenant that God made with Abram marked the beginning of a new phase in the relationship between man and God. Here in chapter 12 – God begins his rescue plan. Through Abram, through this one man, this faithful man who would trust and obey God, God would redeem the whole of humanity.

Through him, a special people would be formed, the Jews. And through them the whole world would be brought to God. They would be a blessing to others.

We know, from our vantage point in history, that the Jews failed to understand the significance of the final blessing – that they were to be a blessing to others. And throughout Jewish history they were inward looking and kept God's blessing for themselves and excluded others from it – rather than being the light to the Gentiles that God had planned for them.

But it is important for us to remember, that right from the start of God's plan, when the original agreement was drawn up, God planned to bless the whole world and bring the whole world back into a relationship with himself.

The second theme running through our readings this week is faith and obedience. The promises that God made to Abram were not unconditional. In order for Abram to receive this blessing, he had to obey God. He would only receive the blessing if he left his country, his people, and his father's household for the new land, the new start that God would show to him. If Abram stayed put with his family and successful business, the promises would be worthless. Unless Abram had the faith to trust God, to surrender to God, to obey God, then the blessing would not be realised.

But Abram, as we know, did obey. Verse 4, so Abram left as the Lord had told him. He didn't know why God had picked him, he didn't know where God was calling him to go, and he had no idea about God's grand plan to rescue humanity. All he knew was that God said leave home, so he did and he became one of the ultimate examples of faith in the scriptures.

And throughout the readings during the week, Abram's faith is tested and shown to be strong. In chapter 22, Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son Isaac, and we get a hint at how God would ultimately fulfil his promise.

The story is a strange one. God was always 100% against human sacrifice, unlike the pagan religions of the time. So it is very strange that he made this request to Abraham. It is also strange in that if this sacrifice had gone ahead, then Abraham's line would have come to an end, placing the whole rescue plan in jeopardy.

Perhaps Abraham knew this when he took his son up to the mountain – I always find it interesting that when he left the servants he said that they would return, plural – indicating that there was an expectation that Isaac would not die.

But more significantly, when his son asks him, where is the lamb for the burnt offering, Abraham replies, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering. God himself will provide the lamb. Abraham had faith that God would provide. One way or another, he believed that God would fulfil his promise and so he was willing to obey God's request.

And we know of course, that through this strange episode, unknown to Abraham, God was making a profound statement. That through the line of Abram, Jesus the Christ would enter the world. And he would be the lamb provided by God.

Through Jesus, the blessing given to Abram has been realised, and all humanity, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female have been blessed. Jesus died to save us all, to open up the possibility that we might all be blessed, restored, forgiven, and redeemed. And we will celebrate that a bit later as we gather round the table.

Back to our readings and you will have noticed that we have missed out the whole story of Abraham not having kids and being too old to have them, humanly speaking that is, and yet despite that, he trusted God and the promise God made, he obeyed God and followed God's plan but you can read that for yourselves next week.

And as you do, marvel at the faith of Abraham. And be inspired to follow his example and trust in God even when you cannot see God's plan, even when times are tough or bleak like they must have been for Abraham going up the mountain to sacrifice his son. I wonder, what is God calling us to do this week, this year? Will we obey and follow?

But, alongside the stories of faith and trust, there are also stories of doubt and failure. Even Abraham had his moments of doubt. Back in chapter 12, he is on his way to the place where God has called him, but there is a famine. What does he do? He goes to Egypt. There is no indication that God had told him to go there, it seems to be a human response caused by a lack of faith in God to provide for him. And when he gets there he asks Sarah to pretend to be his sister, because he doubts that God will protect him from the Egyptians when they see how beautiful Sarah is and decide to take her for themselves.

And again, in chapter 15 when God reaffirms his promises to Abraham, Abraham needed some encouragement. He reminded God of the fact that he was still childless, and then in verse 8, he questioned how he could know that he would inherit the promised land. Although we are told he believed and it was credited to him as righteousness, we get a sense that he had doubts about how God would fulfil all of this.

Then of course there is the whole incident with Sara persuading Abraham to sleep with the servant Hagar so they could have a child and help God fulfil the promise. And Abraham agreed.

So Abram was a man of faith, but he wasn't perfect, he did doubt and make mistakes. And then, as the E100 book says, a psychiatrist could have a field day analysing the dysfunctional family that Isaac went on to have. A permissive father, a controlling and manipulative mother, an errant older son and a deceptive younger son. This family would make some of the families on the Jeremy Kyle show look relatively normal.

And yet, God still used them to fulfil his purposes. They were not perfect, they made mistakes, some of them pretty big and pretty bad, but God did not abandon them, God continued to be close to them, to mould them and shape them and ultimately use them to fulfil his salvation plan.

And this fills me with hope. We know that God has placed a call on each of our lives. We are to be his ambassadors to his world, his witnesses, we are to shine his light into the darkness, we are to preach the good news and make disciples of all nations. And we also know that each of us makes a mess of that on a fairly regular basis. And yet, despite our doubts and mistakes, God continues to use us and bless us.

Which brings us to the next theme that runs through our readings this week, alongside the promises of God and the faith of Abraham, there is God's faithfulness to his promises.

In chapter 21, despite Abraham's doubts and disobedience, and the human impossibility of it all, God fulfils the first part of his promise and Abraham and Sarah have a son, Isaac.

In chapter 27, 28, 32 and 33, despite Isaac's family being a bit of a mess, God continues to fulfil his promise through them. Despite human failure and doubt and sin, God remains faithful and true to his word, and fulfils all that he has promised.

And as we have already said, ultimately the rescue plan that began with Abram was brought to fulfilment in Jesus and through him all people on earth have been blessed.

John 1:16 From the fulness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. Eph 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Gal 3:14 He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

We will celebrate that blessing in a moment as we gather around the table to share bread and wine together .

Before then, there is one final theme I would like to mention, and that is worship. Following Abram's decision to obey God and go in verse 4 of chapter 12, the Lord took Abram on a tour of the land that his descendants would inherit. In verse 7 the Lord appeared to Abram and said that this was the land that his offspring would inhabit. And in response, we are told that Abram built an altar to the Lord so he could worship God and offer a sacrifice to God.

And then again in verse 8, Abram pitched his tent and built an altar and called on the name of the Lord.

Worship, communion with God, experiencing God's presence, was important to Abram as he travelled through this distant land. He built altars so he could keep God central to his life. So that he could be reminded of why he was here, and what God had asked him to do.

Then in chapter 15, when Abram asks God for some reassurance, God reveals his plan to Abram, but of far more comfort than that, he revealed himself to Abram. God comes to him in the form of the smoking brazier and blazing torch, symbolising his holiness.

And in the story of Jacob, who was a devious, thieving unpleasant person, we see that he is transformed through his encounter with God.

Worship, experiencing God's presence, having an intimate relationship with God was the key to the faith of these founders of the Jewish nation.

Last Sunday when we looked at the call of Saul and Barnabas to the mission field in Acts chapter 13, we said that the church became aware of God's plan, they heard God's voice as they worshipped, prayed and fasted.

If we want to hear God's voice, like Abram, Isaac, Jacob, Paul, Barnabas, then we need to make worship a priority for us too.

If we want to have faith like them, then we need to keep God central. And we do that as we worship him. It is as we bow before him in adoration and praise that our eyes are turned back to him. It is in worship that our focus is lifted from ourselves and the things that are concerning us, and onto the glory of God.

I have heard it said that God is pretty selfish to demand our worship. But worship, like prayer, is a two way street and it is not only for God's benefit. Worship benefits us too as God reminds us of all that he has done for us, the blessing that he has given us and all that waits to be realised in glory.

In worship, not only is God given the honour that he deserves, but we are recharged, repowered, re energised to live for him.

And of course, we know that we can worship God anywhere, because of Jesus we don't need to go to the temple or to build an altar and bring a sacrifice. But none the less, the gathering of God's people in one place to worship together remains a powerful and I believe essential act of obedience to God if like Abram we are to remain faithful to him.