

Genesis 12:1-4. Great Expectations

"In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed." With these words God promises to use Abraham to bless every people group in the world.

A superstitious woman asked Pope John XXIII to bless some medals and rosaries which she had in her purse. He blessed them immediately before she had time to take them out of her purse. So she asked him to bless them again. He asked her, "Signora, do you believe my blessing cannot pass through plastic?" Here it is not only the woman who is acting foolishly. The Pope himself doesn't have a clue about what blessing really means. We read, *"In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed."* God's blessing is for people not objects. The word *bless* or *blessing* is used with great frequency in the Bible and almost always concerns God's blessing of people. The only exceptions are references to God blessing the animals at creation and his blessing of the seventh day. In Deuteronomy 28:7 Moses promises, "God will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to", but he immediately explains, "The LORD your God will bless you in the land he is giving you." In other words, the blessing is not really on the barns and objects as such but on God's people as they work in the barns and use their hands.

God is not interested in blessing your house or your land or objects. In Pakistan I once gave thanks in Urdu for the food we were about to eat. Afterwards another man felt obliged to also give thanks because I had not blessed the food. By contrast, the Bible is almost completely preoccupied with God's desire to bless people not impersonal objects. God has committed himself to creating a world in which all people enjoy his blessing. That's how he first set it up. Our sin has not caused God to move one millimetre. God is still determined to form a world in which all people enjoy his blessing. That is, a world in which everyone enjoys the wonderful benefits which come from gladly letting God call the shots. To be blessed is to enjoy the benefits which come from living a God-controlled life.

Are you experiencing this blessing of God? Are you enjoying the benefits which come from living a God-controlled life?

How does God bring the rich benefits of his rule to the world? God always works through people. Initially, it was Adam and Eve through whom God brought blessing to the world. But they botched things and at the Flood everything went back into a state of chaos again. So God re-created the world and through Noah began again to bring blessing to the world. Did that work? At the Tower of Babel we see a sinfully united world trying to create the good life for itself, but a good life which refuses to let God be in control. The world of Genesis 3-11 is not a world which experiences God's blessing. It is a world which experiences God's curse. But God assures Abram, *"In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed."* Indeed in the promises God makes in verses 2 and 3 the word "bless", in some form or other, is used five times. Guess how many times the word *curse* is used in Genesis 3-11? Yes, five times! That is, through what God will do with and through Abram the curse will eventually be removed and a world will be created in which all people enjoy the blessing of God. God will do four things with Abram to achieve this: (1) give him a land; (2) make him into a great nation; (3) give him a great name; (4) give him global influence.

1. Great Land

In verse 1 God commands Abram: *"Go to the land I will show you."* In the previous chapter united sinful humanity spotted some land they wanted to settle on. It was not

a land given to them by God and they wanted to claim it in defiance of God's will. Abram is now presented as the opposite of the city and tower builders. Abram does not decide what land to settle upon. He ends up in the land which God shows him. The great poet Tennyson wrote, "The shell must break before the bird can fly." Abram is about to spread his wings. First, however, he must break the shell of previous ties: *"Leave your country, your people and your father's household."* That would have been tough for Abram. In his day, about 2000 BC, Ur had been established by King Ur-Nammu as the capital of a new Sumerian dynasty. At the time Abram's home city was probably the richest and most powerful city in the known world. God called Abram to leave the comforts and pleasures of Ur and step out into an uncertain future. And Abram did what God told him to do.

The faulty tower of Genesis 11 was probably a ziggurat and it was Ur-Nammu who built the famous ziggurat in Ur, the temple of the god Enlil, which towered above all other buildings. "He who never leaves his country is full of prejudices" says an Italian proverb. Abram would have become prejudiced against God if he had stayed in Ur. Later Joshua tells the Israelites: *"This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods'"* (Josh 24:2). Ancient readers would probably pick this up quite readily as they read Genesis 11 and 12 even though there is no explicit reference to idolatry. Ur was well known as a major centre for the worship of the moon god called Sin or Nanna who was born to the goddess Ninlil when the god Enlil raped her. Abram's father believed that Sin decided the fate of the dead and that he spent three days every month in the underworld. Terah lost his son Haran in Ur (11:28), leaving him in Sin's hands. Guess where the other major centre was located? Where did Terah take his family when he left Ur? Haran (11:31-32). Haran, was perhaps an even more important centre for the worship of Sin. Maybe Terah settled in Haran precisely because he worshiped the moon god. To be fully devoted to God Abram had to make a clean break not only with Ur but also with his father's household. Only in this way could Abram conclusively put idolatry behind him.

But there's something else here which is highly important. Remember what we are told about Sarai, Abram's wife in 11:30 - in the very same context that Ur and Haran are mentioned. We are told: *"Now Sarai was barren; she had no children."* Now the Sumerian people also believed that Sin, the moon god, was the god of fertility as is symbolised in an image found on a cylinder seal which associates Sin, holding a crescent on a pole (representing the moon), with two bulls, symbols of fertility. Sin hadn't done much good for Sarai had he? Maybe God used Sarai's barrenness to give Abram that extra push he needed to turn his back on Sumerian idolatry and to look to God to do that which Sin was incapable of doing. But it was hard for Abram to leave.

About 15 years ago my wife and I took our young family to serve as missionaries in Pakistan. For me it was not so difficult. I had already left my country and my people and my household back in New Zealand years before. But for my wife it was very difficult. She had only lived in three houses all her life. Her mother had died but her father was and is still alive and they were very close. My wife felt very settled. To leave her country, her people and her father's household was immensely difficult for her. She did not always find it easy living in Pakistan. But she had an excellent attitude and she reaped rich benefits in her own personal life and for our children.

When Abram left his country, his people and his father's household he came under the blessing of God. It has been quipped: "Travel broadens you, especially that rich foreign food you eat." But the blessing Abram experienced was not the blessing of rich foreign food. It was the blessing of God-controlled life he began to experience, a life

which was to bring with it unspeakably great benefits.

2. Great Nation

Garfield commented, "Territory is but the body of a nation. The people who inhabit its hills and valleys are its soul, its spirit, its life." The land of Canaan merely provides the context in which the Abrahamic nation, Israel, will develop. Once again, Abram is the opposite of the sinful people described in Genesis 11 and also of Nimrod, the cruel empire builder portrayed in Genesis 10. Adolf Hitler said, "The broad mass of a nation ... will more easily fall victim to a big lie than to a small one." In Genesis 11 we see a united humanity deceiving themselves into thinking that they can manipulate God into giving them what they want. They wanted to make themselves into a great city-state or nation in defiance of God's will. By contrast, God will make Abram into a great nation which will fulfill his will and plan.

The Abrahamic nation is distinguished from "the families of the earth." Here God indicates what will be the fundamental relationship between the Abrahamic nation and the rest of the world. The word "nation" refers to a political state which exercises government. By contrast, all other people groups are to be regarded as "families". The implication is that God will exercise his rule over the world through the Abrahamic nation. In the first instance, Israel was the Abrahamic nation. However, it failed to be the kind of nation intended by God. Jesus himself has formed a new Israel which is made up of non-Jewish people like you and me as well as those Jews who love and follow Jesus. Today, the great nation promised to Abraham does not occupy a particular geographical territory on earth. Our "territory" is now the kingdom of heaven. But it is through the Church that God exercises his government, his rule over the earth and brings blessing to other people. In particular it is as we communicate the gospel to people that this happens.

3. Great Name

Success or failure can depend upon whether you know the right name or not. Would you believe that last year, they had a very innovative zoology examination at Sydney University? When the students entered the examination room, they saw ten stands with ten birds on them with a sack over each bird and only the legs showing. It was explained to the students that this examination involved looking at the birds' legs and then writing down the common name, habitat, genus, species, etc., of the bird concerned. One student had stayed up all night preparing for this exam. But the more he looked at the birds' legs the more upset he became. They all looked the same to him. Tired and frustrated he couldn't take any more of this. He stamped up to the supervisor's desk and raged, "What a stupid examination! How can anyone tell the name of these birds just by looking at their legs?" He chucked his test papers on the supervisor's desk and turned to leave the room. The supervisor noticed that the student hadn't put his name on the test paper. Just as the student reached the door the supervisor called out, "What's your name?" The furious student reached down, pulled up the legs of his trousers and said, "You guess! You guess!"

Whether you are blessed or cursed by God depends on whether you know the name that matters or not. God tells Abram that whether people are blessed or curse will depend on how they relate themselves to Abram himself: "*I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse.*" This brings us now to consider the fourth way in which God will act to make Abram the one through whom he creates a world in which all people are blessed.

Again we must contrast Abram with the Babel builders. Why did they try to build that tower? To make a name for themselves! In Chapter 10 Nimrod makes a name for himself as a savage empire-builder who hunted down people. He in turn reminds us of the Nephilim who in the days before the Flood were likewise “men of name” (6:4). But only those people have a great name who have been given their name by God. Significantly, Abram comes from the line of Shem and the name Shem means “Name.” That is, Abram comes as the climax of the line which bears the name of God. Now the great name has been taken over by the ultimate Son of Abraham, Jesus, who has been given the name above all names. Where you will spend eternity depends on how you relate to Jesus.

4. Great Influence

The efforts of the Babel builders served to remove humanity from the blessing of God. By contrast Abram is God’s chosen instrument to bring blessing to the whole world.

The flea said to the elephant, “Boy, didn’t we shake that bridge when we crossed it?” Abram didn’t experience much shaking of the bridge at all in his lifetime. He died owning only a field in the promised land, a field he used to bury his wife in. But Israel certainly became proud of what it thought it had accomplished. They were like the flea.

“It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” Sometimes in Pakistan I would be out with my family and complete strangers would come and ask to have their photos taken with us. Why? Usually, so that they could put the photo on the wall and boast about their Western friends. The photo would be used to impress people in their village and improve their own standing in their community; to deceptively indicate that they had relationships with people of status which, tragically, was how many villagers thought about Westerners. “It’s not what you know, but who you know.”

One of the most basic cultural institutions of Pakistan is what the people call *safarish*. The only way to get things done, apart from paying bribes, is to get someone who has more power than yourself to intercede for you and argue your case for you. I was often approached by Pakistanis who wanted to migrate to Australia. They assumed that I was in a position to intercede for them with the Australian Consulate and they would put pressure on me to do *safarish* for them. When it comes to inheriting the blessing of God, God gave Abraham a position akin to this. We see this even more acutely in the greater Son of Abraham, Jesus.

As the children of Abraham we Christians are in the privileged position of being able to do the ultimate *safarish*. We have influence with the most powerful person in the universe. We are in a position to intercede for people and be used by God to bring them into the place of ultimate blessing. But for this to happen they must bless the name of Jesus, that is, welcome and exalt Jesus as he really is, the one and only way of accessing and experiencing the saving blessings of God. May the Lord use us to incorporate others into the great God-ruled “nation” of God’s people to which we belong so that they may join us in “[praising] the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3).