

JONATHAN GRIFFITHS

**STRANGERS
&
EXILES**

*Pursuing faithfulness
as pilgrims in a
faithless world*





Contents

Introduction: Strangers and Exiles	01
1. Blessed to be a blessing (Genesis 12)	03
2. The open hand of faith (Genesis 13)	15
3. Battle and blessing (Genesis 14)	27
4. Grace in times of fear (Genesis 15)	39
5. The cost of self-reliance (Genesis 16)	53
6. The sign of the covenant (Genesis 17)	65
7. The friend of the righteous (Genesis 18)	77
8. The judgment and mercy of God (Genesis 19)	89
9. An unflattering comparison (Genesis 20)	101
10. The God of astounding faithfulness (Genesis 21)	113
11. The Lord who provides (Genesis 22)	125
12. Waiting for a homeland (Genesis 23)	139
13. The blessing continues (Genesis 24–25)	153
Conclusion	165
Endnotes	167
Scripture Index	171
Acknowledgements	175



Introduction: Strangers and Exiles

The journey of the earthly pilgrim walking with the Lord on the dusty trails of this world is rarely smooth or straight or easy. We do not need to walk with the Lord for long to know that this is true. Each one of us who walks this journey must learn over time the dynamics and realities of it, not least dynamics of our own frailties and of the Lord's great faithfulness. We learn these through the declarations of the Bible—through its statements of propositional truth—but we learn them as well through the stories of the Bible. We learn them through tracing the storyline of the Lord's calling and keeping and using of frail, feeble and flawed human beings—human beings like us.

Abraham is a foundational figure in the history of Israel and the church, a justly famous follower of the Lord and servant of the God of heaven. But he is at the same time profoundly human and raw and real. In his story, we see what it means for the Lord to take hold of a sinner, call him, privilege him with his promises, uphold him in his power, bear with him in his mercy, use him in his service, and sustain him to the end. Abraham trusts the Lord and Abraham fails the Lord. Abraham shows integrity and strength, compromise and weakness. And the Lord achieves his purposes in him and through him.

More than all this, in these key chapters of the book of Genesis, God sets out the pattern of salvation in the call of Abraham and, in varied ways, points through him to the greater Leader and Servant of his people who was to come. In Abraham we see a multi-dimensional but unpolished pattern of our own

discipleship—and we see a hope-filled but imperfect foreshadowing of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is my hope that this study will first and foremost nourish your soul as it deepens your knowledge of the Lord and his Word. I would encourage you to read it Bible in hand, reading first the chapters of Genesis that the chapters of this book treat. I believe that it could make a good basis for personal devotion or a group study. Secondly, but significantly, I hope that Bible teachers who plan to tackle the Abraham narrative will find in these pages some pointers and insight for the exposition of this portion of the Word of God—and in that way, I trust that there might be a wider benefit to those who sit under their teaching.

Blessed to be a blessing

Genesis 12

When things go wrong or relationships turn sour, it is wonderful if an opportunity comes along to make a fresh start. I suspect all of us, at one time or another, have longed for that chance. A partnership, a friendship, a business venture, a new project—it started so well, but then things went off balance. If only we could put things right.

The book of Genesis begins in beauty, innocence, and hope, with a good and gracious God, and a world full of promise. But things soon take a darker turn and the beautiful tapestry of life as God created it to be begins to fray. The people God created as the crowning glory of his work start to doubt his goodness and refuse to live his way in his world. God responds to their sin by placing them and the world under judgment. He sends the man and woman out of the Garden of Eden, and they face the prospect of life in a chaotic world, outside the immediate presence of God. We see things quickly go from bad to worse. As sin takes hold, relationships break down, and the order of God's good world is disrupted. Chaos and acrimony set in, and death soon swallows up life itself.

God eventually decides he will have no more of it, and he wipes out life on the earth with a great flood, sparing only Noah, his family, and the animals on the ark. There is a fresh start for Noah and his family, but all too soon we find Noah falling into drunkenness and shame, and the downward spiral resumes. The low point comes in Genesis 11 with the Tower of Babel, where people in their arrogance seek to make a name for themselves, even trying to ascend to God's own place in heaven. God judges their pride and arrogance by mixing up their languages and scattering the nations in confusion.

It is against this backdrop that we read of the fresh start of Genesis 12. It is a glorious and thrilling fresh start. It is the fresh start that establishes the foundation of the gospel, giving hope not just to one nation, but to all the nations. God declares that sin and judgment and death will not be the end of the human story, but will give way to a wonderful plan of redemption. The story of Genesis 12 is the story of a very great blessing.

Thus far in Genesis we have seen the good world God made come under judgment for sin. But here in Genesis 12, we have an emphatic and gracious new start. Five times, God speaks blessing on Abram and his family. "I will bless you... and you will be a blessing... I will bless those who bless you... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (verses 1-3). The story of Abram is one of a great blessing that comes in the place of curse. It is a fresh start that takes place amid pain, loss and the sheer wreckage of sin. It is a story of hope and, ultimately, a story of salvation.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Abram's story begins in simplicity, and perhaps a degree of obscurity. A man named Terah lived in a place called Ur of the Chaldeans, located in modern day Iraq. He had three sons, one of them named Abram (11:27). He planned to move with his family to the land of Canaan, but instead, they stopped in a place called Haran,

in modern day Turkey, and ended up settling there. And that is where Terah died. We find out that Terah's son Abram married a woman named Sarai, that they were childless, and that they lived in ancient Mesopotamia around four thousand years ago or so. An unremarkable life, so it seems, but one that is about to become very remarkable indeed.

We do not know where Abram was at the start of Genesis 12 or what he was doing. Maybe he was out with his herds or resting in his tent, escaping the noonday sun. Perhaps he was at the marketplace, buying and selling animals or produce. We know little of his context, but we do know that into his ordinary life comes the Word of God. Without recorded pleasantries or introduction, the Lord taps him on the shoulder (as it were) and simply says: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (verse 1). *Leave your home and everything that is familiar, and go to a place that is yet unknown to you, a place that I will show you.* It is a challenging thing to ask of Abram, but that great call is immediately joined to an even greater promise:

"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" (verses 2–3).

It is a stunning promise. It is almost too much to contemplate that this childless man will father a nation. This unknown man will have a great name, and through him, blessing will come to others. It is a staggering prospect.

As we zoom out from Abram and read the wider story of the Bible, we soon see that the story points ultimately not to the arrival in the land or the multiplication of Abram's descendants. It

points to one great descendent who would bring the blessing of God's salvation to the whole world. The greater Son of Abram will come and will live the perfect life and then die to bear the penalty for sin, so that all who come to him might be forgiven and enter the family of God. The curse will be lifted. That is where this is all heading. This is a *gospel* promise at the start of Genesis 12. In fact, the New Testament will teach us that it is *the* gospel promise. Abram is blessed with the blessings of salvation right here. He is promised a future, a homeland, and a great people. In Christ, we have that future, that promised homeland, and that great people with whom to share those blessings in eternity. In Abram, we have a picture and a foreshadowing of how God's salvation blessings can come to us.

God's blessings come by his initiative

The story of Abram teaches us that the salvation blessings of God come to us by his own initiative and grace. We learn very little about Abram in the verses leading up to the pronouncement of this great blessing. He was son of a man named Terah, married to a woman named Sarai, from a place called Ur. That is more or less it. We do not hear of Abram doing much in chapter 11, either good or bad. And then suddenly, out of nowhere it seems, comes one of the most monumental promises ever spoken by God anywhere in the Scriptures. It was not grounded in anything Abram had done or would do—but simply in the initiative of God himself. God has chosen Abram. He is going to bless him, make his name great, make him a blessing, and give him a whole nation's worth of grandchildren. God is going to do it all. Abram is little more than a bystander at this point.

The Lord could have told us more about Abram as an individual, but the story highlights something very important: God's salvation blessings never come because of our achievements,

goodness or moral record. What we see in Abram is a pattern that is repeated throughout the Bible: God gives salvation and bestows his kindness because he has chosen to do so—because he is gracious, because he is kind. Abram was born into a world broken and ruined by sin, and at a low point in human history. But God intervened, and because of his gracious work, the situation was radically changed. A life was redirected, a nation was established, a Savior came, the good news went out, and the church was born. God acted on his own initiative and out of his own grace. We too are part of the ruined race, participants in the downward spiral of sin, citizens of this stricken world. Yet God comes to us in Christ and speaks to us in the gospel, offering us salvation blessings. He invites us to be part of his family, and beckons us to his eternal home above. Not because we have done anything to catch his attention or earn his favor, but simply because he is kind.

For those of us who have been walking with the Lord for some time, this is a truth for us too if we are in any way tempted to think that we have placed ourselves in a position of special favor with God by serving well, following faithfully, and giving generously. Those things are good, but they are not the basis of anything in the sight of God. The only starting point is the kindness of God. Everything else is response.

God's blessings come with a call to respond

We are often called upon to believe unbelievable things. Just the other day I received an email with the happy news that the International Monetary Fund wished to compensate me \$1.5 million because of fraud I had apparently suffered. I only needed to provide \$3,000 to cover administrative costs and the monies would be deposited into my account without delay. The message was pure nonsense, of course. It is worth registering the apparent impossibility of all that God is calling Abram to take on board

here. He is calling him to leave everything—his family, security, and land—and go to an unknown place. God is promising that he will be father to a great nation. It all seems so unlikely, so against the odds. Abram is 75, rather old for having kids. More than that, his wife Sarai is barren (11:30). It is almost laughable that this couple should believe they will produce offspring, let alone a whole nation. The land that is promised is already occupied by the Canaanites (verse 6), and before too long, a famine will strike the land, and they will need to look elsewhere for food (verse 10). It is challenge after challenge, obstacle after obstacle. But God, without hesitation, irony, or embarrassment calls Abram to believe and go. And Abram went, “as the LORD had told him” (verse 4). In the gospel, God promises to take the messy lives of sinful people like us, and, because of the death and resurrection of his Son, forgive us, accept us, and welcome us into his family. He promises to bring us to his heavenly home and pour his kindness upon us in all eternity.

As we look at the mess of our lives, we wonder if the miracle of forgiveness can be true. We hear promises of heaven and eternal life and wonder if it is just a fairy tale. We hear the promise that God will take us all the way home, and we look out at the hard road ahead with its challenges, difficulties and griefs on the way. We wonder if the journey is actually feasible. We wonder if we can persevere. And then there is the question of our own comfort here and now. Later in verse 5, we discover that Abram had actually done quite well for himself in Haran. When Abram and his household left their home at the Lord’s command, it sounds like they needed a little fleet of moving trucks. The shipping containers were lined up on the driveway. Abram and Sarai had quite the set-up in their own country, quite the household. Yet the call was to pack up everything, leave their support networks and their prosperous livelihood and go to an unknown place.

The writer of Hebrews sees in this a remarkable model of faith:

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents... For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:8–10).

Abram was a man of faith. He was not expecting a nice piece of real estate in the ancient land of Canaan. No, his eyes were set on eternity; he was looking to a more permanent home in the city above. Because of that, he was willing to do something that, humanly speaking, looked ill-advised. He was willing to leave his home, his extended family, his support networks, and all that was familiar to go to a place he did not know.

In all this, Abram is indeed a model of faith for us. As we put our hand in the hand of the Lord Jesus by faith and entrust our life to him, we are turning our back on the familiar, the tangible, the apparently safe, and we are entrusting ourselves to the promises of God. We are relying on his blessing and setting our sights on an unseen homeland above. We see that kind of faith years later in the response of the fishermen to Jesus. He issues to them the call to “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19), and immediately they leave their nets, their livelihood and their homes and follow him. We see that kind of faith in stories today of those who have heard the call to follow Jesus and have quite literally had to leave their families because they have been rejected by them for their faith. We see it in those who have left their homes to make Jesus known in unfamiliar, far-flung, and hostile places. We see it in those who have left financial security and worldly ambition to serve in the

work of the gospel. We see it in any who have decided to trust in Jesus, hope for heaven, and set aside the drive for success or fulfillment or wealth in this world.

In the gospel, the call is the same for us as it was for Abram. Have you heard that call to follow Jesus, to trust him, and to set your sights on heaven above? If you have already responded to that invitation in years past, are you still trusting the promises of God, delighting in his blessings, holding lightly to this present world, and longing for the home he has prepared for us?

God's blessings come to a flawed and sinful people

It is amazing how quickly things go wrong when Abram decides to follow God's leading. He gets to Canaan, the place of God's calling and God's will, and sets about making altars to the Lord here, there and everywhere, claiming the land for the Lord. We might now expect showers of blessing. We tend to anticipate that things will go smoothly when we are on a mission for the Lord, but it is rarely like that. Trouble strikes quickly: "Now there was a famine in the land" (verse 10). That was not what we expected. That certainly was not in the travel brochure. This was no minor heatwave or a few dry days, this was a severe famine. There were no clouds in the sky for day after day, week after week. The green fields had become dustbowls. If you had looked at the herds, you would have seen gaunt figures with ribcages on display, cattle dying for lack of water. Children are going hungry and crying for food.

How can this be the Lord's plan and the place of the Lord's blessing? Abram might start to remember how good things had been in Haran. He had built up wealth there, he was prosperous. In Canaan, he found he had to deal with the Canaanites, he had to trek around setting up altars and claiming the land for the Lord, battling no doubt against godless opposition. The land of blessing turns out to be not so blessed, it seems.

Maybe you have had an experience that resonates with this. The Lord calls you to follow him, and it is exciting and joyful. But, no sooner do you trust in Jesus and commit your life to him, than things start to get a whole lot harder and more complicated. The life of blessing starts to look like a life of trial and heartache. Or you sense the Lord leading you to a new area of Christian service, a new ministry or a new mission field. You embrace the cost and risk and sign on, perhaps quitting your day job, taking a financial hit, moving your family. You anticipate the blessing of the Lord but, immediately, difficulty descends or disaster strikes. You find yourself asking, *What is going on, Lord?*

The time of pressure becomes a time of testing, a time of vulnerability. In Abram's case, we see that it also quickly becomes a time of failure and a time of sin:

“When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, ‘I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, “This is his wife.” Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake’” (verses 11–13).

Here is the great hero of faith, the man at the very center of God's plans not just for the nation of Israel, but for the world. He is God's man to overturn the damage of sin and to make a glorious new start. He is at the very beginning of a great venture with the Lord and for the Lord. What does he do next? He makes a catastrophic and sinful mess of it.

Abram is under pressure. He has got to get food for the family. He has got to manage a crisis. Now he is presented with a challenging and difficult situation, and he decides to leave the land of promise and head to Egypt. We wonder if that is wise. Abram