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Responding in Faith to the Promises of God (Genesis 12:1-3)

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Last week, we began to look at the call of Abraham recorded in Genesis 12, which I pointed out is one of the most important events in all of biblical history. It is in a sense the pivotal event of history, because by calling Abraham, God laid the foundation for all of His subsequent dealings with mankind. The rest of the biblical story following this event can be seen as God fulfilling in a step by step manner all the promises he makes to Abraham in this chapter.

This morning I would like us to consider in greater detail these promises that God gave to Abraham in the opening verses of Genesis 12. Then I want us to consider Abraham's response to these promises. The promises God gave to Abraham were so amazing, he could easily have been stumble at them in unbelief; but instead, he responded correctly, by believing God's promises and showing his faith by obeying God's command. What enabled Abraham to respond in this way? .

I. The Promises God gave to Abraham-- Let's begin to answer that question by considering first the promises that God gave to Abraham. How did Abraham understand these? How do we see them fulfilled in biblical history.

There are a number of promises God gives to Abraham in these verses. If you count them, you will find in all seven promises recorded in verses 2 and 3. They are as follows:

- 1) That God will bring Abraham to a distant land and show it to him.
- 2) That He will make of Abraham a great nation.
- 3) That He will bless Abraham.
- 4) That He will make Abraham's name great.
- 5) That Abraham will be a blessing to others.
- 6) That God will deal with people in the way they deal with Abraham-- those who bless him will be blessed, and those who curse him will be cursed.
- 7) That in Abraham all the families of the earth will be blessed

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Now, these promises will be repeated to Abraham, at least in part, on five more occasions: at the end of chapter 12, when he enters the promised land; then again in chapters 13, 15, 17 and 22. Each time God declares these promises, he clarifies their meaning a little bit more.

The interesting thing about each of these promises is that there is a multi-faceted nature to the way they are fulfilled in biblical history. The promises are very rich in meaning; in fact, their full meaning is only made clear as history progresses to the coming of Jesus Christ, whose advent brings a transition from the types and shadows of the Old Covenant to the eternal and enduring realities of the New Covenant. Today, we see more clearly than God's people of old the two-stage nature of the fulfillment of these promises, and how they will be fulfilled in eternity.

These promises can be grouped into three categories. First, there are promises regarding the land. Second, there are promises concerning the seed of Abraham. Third, there are promises of blessing-- God promises to bless Abraham, and to make him a blessing to all the families of the earth.

A. The Promises of Land-- The first promise that God makes to Abraham in chapter 12 concerns land. In verse 1, God tells Abraham to leave his familiar surrounding-- his country, his relatives, his father's household-- to go to a land he has never seen but God promises to show him. God does not identify that land by name; He simply calls it, "a land that I will show you." Notice, too, that God does not yet tell Abraham that He will give him that land as his inheritance; He simply promises to show him a land. It is only after Abraham arrives in Canaan, that God appears to him and says, "To your descendants I will give this land."

Now, how did Abraham understand this promise concerning the land? He obviously looked for God to fulfill that promise in a straightforward, literal manner. He expected to inherit a literal tract of land in the Middle East as a dwelling place for himself and his descendants. The literal character of God's promise is proven by the fact that God later told him the land he would inherit was visible to his eyes later (Gen. 13:14-- "Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are-- northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I will give to you and your descendants forever.") It is proven by the fact that God spells out the boundaries of the land (Genesis 15:18-- "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates. . ."). Abraham's expectation of a literal fulfillment of

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the land promise was certainly justified, for when his descendants entered the land in the days of Joshua, the Bible declares that God's promise to Abraham was thereby fulfilled, for his descendants took possession of the land and were settled in it, just as God had foretold. We read in the book of Joshua that after the people entered Canaan under the leadership of Joshua, "The Lord gave to Israel all the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it. The lord gave them rest all around, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers. And not a man of all their enemies stood against them; the Lord delivered all their enemies into their hand. Not a word failed of any good thing which the Lord had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass" (Joshua 21:43-45).

So Abraham's expectation of a literal fulfillment of God's promise was justified; but we mustn't think that Abraham anticipated nothing more from God than a literal, physical fulfillment of the land promise. We know that Abraham was more spiritually perceptive than that. He knew that earthly Canaan was not the full extent of the inheritance he would receive from God. We know that Abraham saw Canaan as simply the down payment of a much greater inheritance that he would receive in eternity. Canaan was but a token of God's fatherly favor; a foreshadowing sign or symbol of a more spectacular dwelling place that he and all his true descendants would inherit one day as their eternal home. Look at what we read concerning Abraham's expectation in Hebrews 11. In verse 8 we read that when Abraham went to Canaan, "he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:8-10). Later in Hebrews 11, we read that Abraham and all the patriarchs of the Old Testament regarded themselves as "strangers and pilgrims on the earth." Their whole life was spent "seeking a homeland," which means that they understood that their true homeland was not to be found in this present world. It was to be found in that "heavenly country," which their hearts longed to behold (Heb. 11:13-15).

What this tells us is that the promise of the land has a two stage fulfillment in Scripture. On the one hand, it is fulfilled literally in the Old Testament--especially when Joshua brings the Jews into Canaan to settle there. But there is a final fulfillment of this promise that looks beyond this present world to the world to come. Just as a tithe is a sign or token that everything we have belongs to God; so the land of Canaan was a sign or token to Abraham that everything

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God had would be his someday. He would come one day come into an unimaginably rich inheritance, for he would inherit the whole world as a dwelling place. That's what we read in Romans 4:13, isn't it? God promised to Abraham the world as his inheritance: "For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith." The promise of Canaan was itself the promise given to Abraham that he would inherit the world; but that promise was in "seed form" in Genesis 12, and would only be developed more clearly with the passage of time. In Christ, the promise of Canaan has been shown to be a promise concerning the inheritance of the whole world.

J. R. Williamson sums it up this way: "Abraham expected and longed for a fulfillment of this promise that could not happen in this sin-cursed world. He looked for land, to be sure, but a land renewed and recreated by God, a city fashioned by His own hands, in which Abraham and his spiritual see could truly dwell forever. Abraham looked for a land that had no wars with neighboring tribes or kings, no pollution and corruption in its inhabitants, no thorns and weeds, no sickness and death. When we hope expectantly for the place Jesus promised to prepare for us, we are experiencing the same longing that Abraham felt in his heart."

B. The Promises of the Seed--

The second category of promise that God gives to Abraham concerns the promise of a seed or offspring. Now, we don't see the word "seed" in Genesis 12, but God is clearly referring to Abraham's seed when he speaks of making Abraham into a "great nation." God repeats this promise to Abraham in chapter 13, telling him that his descendants will be "as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered" (Gen. 13:16). Then, in Genesis 15, he tells Abraham that his descendants will be as "the stars of heaven" for multitude.

As with the promise of the land, this promise of God making Abraham into a great nation also has a two stage fulfillment in Scripture. This first stage concerns the multiplying of Abraham's physical descendants until they become a great nation of people united by the same blood line. The apostle Paul calls this nation "Israel according to the flesh," because it consists of all ethnic Jews.

We see the initial fulfillment of this promise to Abraham when the twelve sons of Jacob, along with their families, move to the land of Egypt to escape the

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ravaging effects of a famine. In Egypt, the Jews multiplied greatly, so that when we come to the book of Exodus, we read that "the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them" (Exodus 1:7). The Jews became so prolific, in fact, that the Pharaoh of Egypt became scared of their large numbers and tried to eliminate them through slave labor and the organized genocide of their baby boys. His plans failed, however, for the physical progeny of Abraham continued to multiply and grow. Later on, before entering the land of promise, Moses would announce to the Jews how God had fulfilled His promise to Abraham by multiplying his seed, just as he foretold in Genesis 12. In Deuteronomy 10:22, Moses told the Jews, "Your fathers went down to Egypt with seventy persons, and now the Lord your God has made you as the stars of heaven in multitude."

The second stage in the fulfillment of God's promise concerning the spiritual progeny God gives to Abraham. As history progresses, it becomes clear that not all of Abraham's physical descendants will be reckoned to be his "seed" in an ultimate sense; only those who share Abraham's faith can hope to inherit with him the blessings of God. That becomes apparent when the first generation of Jews who leave Egypt fail to enter the land of promise because of their unbelief. Of that generation, only two, Joshua and Caleb trust God implicitly when He says He says that He will bring into the land of Canaan and establish them there. They alone are strengthened to enter the promised land, therefore, while all the rest of the Jews die in the wilderness. This development shows that not all Abraham's physical descendants are counted as his true seed ultimately, but only those who are of faith. These are a chosen remnant of believers within the chosen nation, and that believing remnant is regarded as the true "Israel of God."

When Jesus appears on earth, a further development takes place in the concept of the seed. The apostolic writers come to see that in Christ, all of God's promises are fulfilled, since He is the heir of all of God's blessings. He is the heir of the land promise, for example, since He inherits the whole earth as His possession. If all the promises to Abraham are fulfilled in Christ, however, that can mean only one thing-- namely, that Christ is the ultimate "seed of Abraham" to whom the promises were pointing all along.

This development leads to a further revelation that comes when the gospel of Christ is sent forth into all the world after the Day of Pentecost, and multitudes of Gentiles begin to enter the church. It becomes apparent that Abraham's seed can no longer be conceived in narrowly ethnic terms, for all who trust in Christ,

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regardless of their ethnicity, are joined to Christ, and are therefore co-heirs with Christ of the blessing of Abraham. Consequently, believing Jews and believing Gentiles must now be seen together as forming the true Israel of God. That is why Paul tells the believers of Galatia, both Jew and Gentile, "If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:26-29). The concept of Abraham's seed has indeed undergone a remarkable transformation; for now, with the coming of Christ, its full meaning is unveiled. Christ Himself, along with all those who are Christ's constitute the true seed of Abraham. They alone constitute the "great nation" promised to Abraham, in an ultimate sense.

III. The Promises of Blessing

The third category of promise that Abraham received concerned the blessing of God. God promised to bless Abraham and to make Him a blessing to others. Moreover, he promised to bless all the families of the earth in Abraham.

The initial fulfillment of this promise takes place during Abraham's own life, as he receives abundant blessing in the land of promise to which God sends him, and as he becomes a blessing to others. God's blessing on Abraham is seen in the godly wife that the Lord gave him. Sarah is held up before women in the Bible as a model of faith, because she trusted God and was submissive to her husband. Abraham was also blessed with material abundance in Canaan. God blessed him there with abundant livestock, even though he dwelt all his days in tents like a wandering nomad.

The main blessing on Abraham's life, however, was the abundant spiritual blessing that God poured out upon Him. As J. R. Williamson says, "Abraham was blessed in that he lived a life of obedience and faithfulness to God, and had a holy fear of Him. Additionally, he was a man of faith who took God at his word and who held tightly to God's promises." Through his faith, Abraham was enabled to conceive a son in his old age. He was enabled to remain faithful to God, despite all the pagan influences that surrounded him in the land of Canaan.

Moreover, throughout his life, Abraham became a source of blessing to others. He was a man of peace, who was unwilling to dispute with his nephew Lot about which part of the land each would have for the purpose of raising his flocks and herds. He conceded to Lot the well watered plain of the Jordan, which was a particularly choice spot, while he himself went elsewhere. By treating Lot

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respectfully in this way, Abraham blessed him. Later on, he acted to rescue Lot from danger, when Lot was taken captive by certain Canaanite kings in battle. Abraham also interceded for the people of Sodom when he learned of God's purpose to destroy that city. So in many ways, Abraham showed that he was a source of blessing to others.

Throughout the rest of the Bible, we see the blessing of Abraham resting on those who are counted as Abraham's spiritual descendants. We see that blessing resting on Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. We see it resting on the faithful remnant of Judah during the dark days of the Babylonian captivity. In the Babylon, Daniel and his three friends not only experienced the blessing of God; as they sought to serve Him faithfully there, they also brought blessing on their captors.

The climactic fulfillment of God's promise of blessing comes in this present gospel era, however, as people all over the world receive abundant spiritual blessing through the preaching of the gospel. As the gospel goes forth to every nation, and Christ is lifted up in preaching and received by faith, multitudes are ushered out of darkness into light. They are brought into the kingdom of God by the miracle of the new birth. They are justified, then progressively sanctified--made holy in their life-- through faith in the Savior. All this comes in fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham so long ago when he said to him, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gal. 12:3).

What I hope you have seen thus far this morning, is that the promises that God gave to Abraham were really big promises, with many layers of meaning. We see in the unfolding narrative of Scripture a progressive movement in the fulfillment of these promises, beginning with a narrow ethnic fulfillment to the Jews alone and progressing to a world-wide fulfillment involving believers from every race, tribe, tongue and nation on earth-- both Jews and Gentiles.

No doubt, Abraham's understanding of how these promises would be fulfilled was quite limited, in comparison with ours. Yet we have seen that Abraham realized that there was something more to the promises of a land and a seed and a blessing than meets the eye. He saw in the promise of Canaan the pledge of an even greater inheritance-- the promise a heavenly country. He saw in the promise of a seed the hope of a coming Redeemer. We know that he saw this because Jesus said to his fellow Jews, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56).

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At what moment in his life did Abraham foresee the day of Christ and rejoice in it? We are not told in Scripture, but I believe that it was likely that day on Mt. Moriah when he offered up Isaac as a sacrifice, and God provided a ram to offer as a burnt offering in the place of his son. You can imagine Abraham's joy as he beheld that ram in the thicket! The life of his son was spared through God's provision, and I believe that God may very well have used that incident to impress on Abraham the means by which He would later spare sinners from eternal judgment-- through the provision of a substitute.

Likewise, Abraham saw in the promise of blessing the promise of hope for the entire world. All nations would be blessed in him and in his seed. That was God's promise. Abraham knew that these promises from God were really big promises; and no doubt, to receive such big promises, he needed a big faith.

Why was a big faith required? For one thing, because of the age at which Abraham received these promises. Keep in mind that Abraham was seventy-five years old when God spoke to him. Imagine being told at seventy-five years old that you are going to become the father of a great nation. Your youthful vigor is past and your wife's womb is as barren as it has ever been, but God tells you that you are going to become a great nation. Imagine, moreover, that you are told that in the land to which you are going, you will be blessed and a blessing to others, despite the fact that you will likely never see your homeland, your father's household, or your relatives ever again.

From a human standpoint, it would be easy to stumble at these promises by viewing them with a spirit of skepticism and unbelief. After all, they seem so contrary to the natural course of event. If Abraham was old and Sarah was barren, how could he possibly become the father of a great nation? If he left his country and his father's household to a distant land he had never seen before, how could he be sure that he would find blessing there? No doubt, he would have to face many trials and difficulties. He was bound to run into xenophobia and open hostility from the people among whom he would dwell. He might even run the risk of being attacked by marauders who might murder him and take his wife and whatever was his. How could he know with unqualified assurance that his going forth to this unknown land would result in abundant blessing for himself and others? How could he know that in that land, he would become a great nation? These were overwhelmingly great promises, and it required a great faith to lay hold of them. But that is just what Abraham demonstrated, by surrendering all that he had and all that he was to the Lord, so as to go forth in obedience to his command. We read in verses 4 and 5: "So

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Abram departed as the Lord had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother's son, and all their possession they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan."

How was Abraham able to do that? The promises given to him were so amazing, he must have been tempted to stumble at them in unbelief. But he did not stumble, and the reason he did not is because he refused to confine his vision to the realm of the earthly and temporal. He refused to look only at what was visible in the natural sphere; rather, he fixed his gaze firmly on the Lord and His divine attributes. In that way, he was strengthened to do what he could never have done in his own strength.

What do I mean when I say Abraham fixed his gaze firmly on the Lord? Well, he chose to focus on the invisible perfections of God's character, rather than on his own imperfections. For example:

1) He chose to focus on God's grace, rather than on his own merits-- Had Abraham reflected on the character of his own works, he would have had little reason to believe that God would pour out blessing on him. After all, he had been an idolater, a worshipper of the moon god Nannar. His life was sullied with sinful practices based on pagan superstition, fleshly indulgence and unbelief. What reason did he have to believe that God would be favorable to him and bless him so abundantly? None at all, except for the promise of God; and the interesting thing about that promise is that it was entirely gracious. God did not promise to do these things for Abraham if he first measured up to some standard of righteousness that God put before him. God didn't set before him the Ten Commandments and say, "Do this, and live." The Ten Commandments would not be given for many centuries. All God set before him was an unconditional declaration about what He in his mercy and compassion would do for Abraham. Abraham believed God, and through faith, he was enabled to obey God. As Jill Masters puts it, "He did not try to justify himself, or reform his life, trying to prove to God that he could earn his way He simply listened to God and obeyed His instructions." He turned away from any focus on his own works, and trusted wholly in the grace of God from which God's promise flowed.

If we would be blessed with Abraham, we must follow his example of self-despairing trust in the grace of God. We must confess that our sins have put us hopelessly beyond the possibility of being saved by our works, and receive by

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faith the promise of the gospel that in Jesus Christ, there is the free forgiveness of sins, the gift of righteousness and eternal life.

2) Second, he chose to focus on God's strength, rather than on his own weakness-- Had Abraham focused on his age, the weakness of his body and the barrenness womb, instead of on the power of God, he would never have left Haran in obedience to Gods' command. He would never have conceived a child and never have become the blessing that he became to the world. But Abraham did not look at himself, he looked at God. He did not consider his own insufficiency, but God's all-sufficiency. As Paul affirms in Romans 4, Abraham considered God "who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did. . .and not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised, He was also able to perform."

If we are going to be blessed with Abraham, we must walk in total dependence on God's all-sufficiency, just as Abraham did. We must be assured in our heart that God's strength is magnified in our weakness, and for that reason, we can do all things that God calls us to do through Christ who strengthens us.

3) Finally, he chose to focus on God's trustworthiness and dependability, rather than his own deviousness and fickleness--

Abraham knew that God, being perfect in all his attributes, cannot lie. Although Abraham himself, as a fallen sinner, was perfectly capable of lying and did so on more than one occasion, as we will see later, he knew that God was totally unlike himself in this respect. God cannot lie. Therefore, His Word cannot be trusted implicitly. Moreover, God is dependable; we can count on Him always to be there in our hour of need. He will never abandon us nor forsake us, and He will always fulfill His promises to us, though we may not have the slightest idea how He will do so.

It was by focusing on God in this way, and the attributes of His glorious character, that Abraham was filled with strength to go forth in obedience to the Lord's command to the land of Canaan. He was able to set high his sails, pull up anchor and cast off from the shore into the open sea of an unknown future. He didn't need to know everything the future held, or how God would fulfill all of these marvelous promises. He only needed to know that God was with Him and

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would be faithful to fulfill in His life every wonderful purpose he had for Abraham. As the saying goes, Abraham did not need to know the future, he only needed to know who held the future in His hand. And that was the God of all grace who had revealed Himself to Abraham.

Are you facing some difficult situation at this present time in your life that is filling you with anxiety and fear? Do you wonder what the future holds? Remember God's dealings with Abraham; and remember that through faith in Christ, you are an heir of the very promises God gave to Abraham. God has prepared for you a land for your inheritance and is planning to take you there. He has promised to bless you throughout your life and to make you a blessing. And he has promised to do all these things for you through the Seed of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.