



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Hope Restored Genesis 11:27-12:3

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Last Sunday we looked at the story of the Tower of Babel and we saw there how humanity's sin problem progressed. Sin increased; humanity's rebellion against God became worse and worse until all knowledge of God was eventually lost. We saw how the tower—the ziggurat or stairway to heaven—that these people built shows how lost they were in paganism. They know longer knew their Creator and began to worship gods and goddesses of their own making, god's whom they could manipulate and control through their offerings and their worship.

The picture Genesis gives us is one of hopelessness. We see sin everywhere, we know that God offers redemption, but we also see that because these people have lost the knowledge of God they have no access to the redemption he offers. We see the same situation all around us today: sinners with no knowledge of God and with no hope for redemption stumbling around in spiritual darkness. Of course, no one wants to admit their hopelessness; no one wants to admit that they're lost. And yet the unending drift from *this* pagan philosophy to *that* pagan philosophy, the constant desire to do good, even to the point of the absurd causes we see people taking up today, all point to the desire for atonement and reconciliation. Deep down we all know that there is a God. And, too, deep down we all know that we've sinned against him. But without knowledge of him, all we can do is guess at what might save us from his wrath.

Let me read a few lines from a prayer that has come down to us from one

ancient Sumerian man. He was suffering in life and he assumed it was because of some sin he'd committed, but with no knowledge of God, he had no idea what his sin was; he didn't even know which god he had offended. His prayer dramatically expresses his hopelessness.

"May the god who is not known be quieted toward me;
May the goddess who is not known be quieted toward me....

The transgressions which I have committed, indeed I do not know....
The forbidden thing which I have eaten, indeed I do not know;
The prohibited (place) on which I have set my foot, indeed I do not know....
When the goddess was angry with me, she made me become ill.
The god whom I know or do not know has oppressed me;
The goddess whom I know or do not know has placed suffering on me.
Although I am constantly looking for help, no one takes me by the hand;
When I weep they do not come to my side.

I utter laments, but no one hears me;
I am troubled; I am overwhelmed; I can not see....
Man is dumb; he knows nothing;
Mankind, everyone that exists,— what does he know?
Whether he is committing sin or doing good, he does not even know.¹

This man's plea is sad, it's pathetic, it's hopeless, and it's filled with despair. This is our spiritual lot without the knowledge of God.

And yet in the midst of humanity's loss of the knowledge of God, we saw last week that the line of Shem continued through this despair and brings us to the birth of Abram and in Abram God offers hope as he reveals himself again to human beings. Look now at Genesis 11:27-30:

Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram,

¹ "Prayer to Every God" in James B. Prichard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd Ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 391-392.

Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

As much as this is the family through whom God is going to work and bring hope and redemption to his people, it doesn't seem to start off very well. Terah and his family lived in Ur, one of the major centres for the cult of the moon god, Sin. We know from the beginning that these are people just as steeped in paganism as the people who built the Tower of Babel. The names of the two women here suggest as much. Abram's wife Sarai, is probably named after Sharratu, the moon God's wife or "queen". Milcah is almost certainly named after Ishtar, the moon god's daughter, whose title was *malkatu*. And, too, from the beginning, Terah's family isn't exactly portrayed as blessed. One of his sons is already dead before the story even gets started and we're told that Abram's wife, Sarai, is barren and childless. If there was anything in that culture that spoke of desperation and a lack of blessing by the gods, it was childlessness. Not only does Abram have no sons to carry on his name and posterity, he has no one to care for him in his old age. Worse, as we'll find out later, Sarai is actually Abram's half-sister. For the Israelites living in light of God's law, this was an incestuous relationship. Everything about the way the storyteller presents Abram here points to him being a spiritual and familial dead end.

Now look at verse 31. Maybe it's not as bad as we think.

Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth

together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan...

This is a good sign. The text doesn't say what prompted Terah to leave his home and family, but he does and he doesn't just pick up to go any old place; he picks up and heads to Canaan. Even though we don't know why he's headed to Canaan, for the Israelites hearing this for the first time, this was a good sign. Canaan was the Promised Land. Maybe Terah's headed there to leave his paganism behind—*way* behind, considering that if Ur is where we think it is, Canaan was 1000-1500 kilometres away, depending on the route he took. And yet that's not what happens:

... but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran.

For reasons we don't know, Terah took a detour and ended up in Haran. Interestingly, Haran was another centre for worship of the moon god. Instead of settling in "God's Country", if you will, Terah settled back into paganism and died in paganism. The good news is that God won't let Abram stay settled in his paganism. After Terah's death we're told that God spoke to Abram. The ESV translates the passage as "the LORD said to Abram," but it would better rendered as "the LORD *had* said to Abram." The point isn't that God is just now speaking, but that God had already spoken to Abram and that until his father died, Abram had been hesitant or slow to respond. Again, the story isn't getting off on the best foot. That said, God doesn't give up and the next three verses introduce us to the story that will play out over of the course of the Old Testament.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 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." (Genesis 12:1-3)

There's a lot packed into these three verses. First, what is God asking Abram to do? Ultimately he's asking Abram to step out and to follow him in faith. Abram didn't have a great deal of security. His family was new to Haran and didn't have long roots there. His father was dead. And he had no son to carry on his name or to care for him in his old age. In a similar situation, you and I would most likely do everything we could to dig in and build some kind of a network, a name for ourselves, a home and assets and retirement account to make ourselves more secure. God asks Abram to give all of that up. He calls him first to leave his land—his home. He calls him to leave his kindred—his family—and to give up any security he might have in his relatives. And he asks him to leave his "father's house". This was to leave his inheritance behind. For Abram "inheritance" meant more than his father's house, some old furniture, and an annuity. At the centre of an inheritance in that culture were the household gods that would have been passed on from generation to generation along with the responsibility to make offerings and to pray for the family ancestors. Inheritance wasn't just about material possessions; it was about taking his place as the family patriarch, its religious leader, and carrying on the blessing that his fathers had given.

God is asking Abram to walk away from something huge and he's asking him to do it in faith that something better will be provided. John Calvin paraphrased God's call this way: "I command thee to go forth with closed eyes, and forbid thee to inquire whither I am about to lead thee, until,

having renounced thy country, thou shalt have given thyself wholly to me."²

That's big call and it requires big faith. But God doesn't call Abram to give up anything he isn't going to replace. He calls him to leave his land, but he promises him a new land. He calls him to give up his family, but he promises to make of him a great nation. And he calls Abram to give up his inheritance, but in return promises that he will bless him and make his name great. Abram may give up the security of his clan and family, but in return God promises to take care of Abram himself. In fact, not only will he bless Abram, but through Abram God will bring blessing to the entire world.

Now think of the Israelites hearing this at Mt. Sinai. This was their history. God had just rescued them from their Egyptian slavery. In the wilderness he met them and made them a people for himself. Going all the way back to Abram he now shows them that they are his elect and that he is working out his covenant with them. He was calling them to do big things too; he was calling this band of former slaves to cross the wilderness and invade Canaan. For them to question whether God could make this happen was just as reasonable as it would have been for Abram to ask the same sort of questions when God called him to Canaan. And yet recalling their own history was God's way of showing the Israelites that if he could overcome all the obstacles that Abram faced, he can just as easily overcome all the obstacles they faced. His call to Abram to walk in faith was a call to them to walk in faith.

But, more importantly, why did God do all of this at all? What was his purpose in establishing this covenant with Abram and why was it so

² *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), p. 344.

important for the Israelites? Think back to the poor man's prayer we started with this morning. It was a prayer to a god he didn't know to confess sins he didn't know he'd committed. When Adam and Eve sinned, God set the wheels of redemption in motion. He promised that a Saviour would come. The answer to our sin problem was and still is faith in God's provision of a Saviour. But without knowledge of God, human beings can have no knowledge of the Saviour. God's revelation of himself—his *re-revelation* of himself—was the purpose of his covenant with Abram. The Old Covenant was only indirectly about redemption. First and foremost it was about restoring the knowledge of God *so that* men and women could be redeemed. God's revelation of himself to Abram is the first covenantal step that leads to Christ. In Jesus God revealed himself to humanity as never before; Jesus is God's revelation Incarnate; Jesus is the Word made flesh. And so in Jesus the Old Covenant was consummated and fulfilled in every way. Jesus is the focal point of God's revelation of himself; in him revelation *and* redemption finally meet.

And so in covenanting with Abram, God offers to his people not only the opportunity once again to know him, but also to participate in God's revelation of himself to the rest of the world. Abram was certainly blessed by knowing God and entering into relationship with him, but, more importantly, God blessed everyone around Abram: everyone who met him, everyone who interacted with him, and everyone in history who read his story, as they saw God working with and through him. As he revealed himself to Abram, God revealed himself to the world: his character, his love, and his desire to redeem his rebellious creatures. Those who participated in the covenant became, as Jesus would put it, "salt and light" to the world.

When we understand that God's purpose with Abram was to make himself known, the terms and condition of the covenant then make sense. The covenant is God's programme for making himself known to the world. In that sense part of the covenant is unconditional: God *will* bring it about no matter what; but part of it is conditional. When God promises that all the world will be blessed through Abram and through his descendants, he means it. But the promise of land and prosperity is entirely conditional on Abram's choice to walk in faith and obedience. The good news for everyone else is that whether or not Abram and Israel walk in obedience, God will reveal himself to us through them, whether in blessing or cursing.

We'll see this programme play out through the Old Testament. Abram stepped out in faith and obedience and was blessed. In Exodus we read how God rescued his people from slavery and took them through the Red Sea on dry ground. God revealed his glory as he cared for and blessed his people who were walking in faith. At Mt. Sinai we see God expanding the covenant to include all Israel. At Sinai he revealed more of himself in the law that he gave through Moses. Through the law God revealed his character to Israel and through her to the world. We see more of God's revelation of himself in the book of Joshua as he blessed Israel's obedience. In the book of Samuel we see God's programme enter a new phase as he specifically elects David and his descendants to rule Israel. We see the world coming in awe to David and Solomon and as a result giving glory to God. Through David and his line, God reveals his kingship and his sovereignty and prepares the way for the Lord Jesus.

But as we read the story, over and over we see the blessing removed because of disobedience. When the

Israelites turned their backs on God and grumbled about him in the wilderness he left them to wander there until they had all died and postponed the promise of Canaan to the next generation. Over and over through the book of Judges we see the people turn away from God and when they do God uses the neighbouring pagans to discipline them. When David's descendants led Israel and Judah into idolatry and when they trusted in alliances with the pagan nations instead of trusting God, God allowed Israel to be utterly destroyed and the people dispersed. A century later he allowed Judah to be destroyed and the people to be led away into captivity in Babylon. He took the blessing away. And yet as the story unfolds, we see that each time the people turned back to God; each time they stepped out again in faith and obedience, God restored his blessing. Whether it was in blessing or cursing, God was continuously revealing himself, his holiness, his righteousness, his love, his mercy, and his sovereignty; he was making himself known to the nations, to the world.

Now, what does all this mean for us? Abram, first, reminds us of the importance of following God when he calls and that when he calls, he requires our all. This is the essence of faith. Jesus reiterates this in the Gospel. Matthew 10:37 is one of Jesus' hardest sayings:

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

But in St. Mark's Gospel he also assures us:

Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time,

houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29-30)

Jesus doesn't call to everyone the same way or to the same kind of ministry. When the rich young ruler asked what he had to do to be saved, Jesus told him that he needed to sell all that he had and give it to the poor if he truly wanted to be a disciple. And yet in the rest of the New Testament we read of other brothers and sisters who kept their wealth and used it to further the missionary work of men like St. Paul. Jesus calls different people to different things. We can certainly expect that he's most likely to ask us to give up those very things that keep us from trusting fully in him and that hinder us from stepping out in faith. The point is that when he calls, we need to be resolved to obey and follow. Some are even called to give up their lives for the sake of the Gospel, but Scripture reminds us that no sacrifice is made in vain. Jim Elliot was one of those who did just that; he was murdered by the very people whom he tried to evangelise. He had resolved long before to follow Christ no matter what. In his journal he wrote those now famous words: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."³

Secondly, consider that the main purpose of God's covenant with Abram was his own self-revelation to the men and women who had forgotten him. I'm not sure we think of this as often as we should. We think of Jesus, we think of salvation by grace through faith in his Cross, but we take God's revelation of himself for granted. I know we take it for granted because we all profess belief in the Gospel, but few Christians read their Bibles with any regularity or with any depth. Our Churches profess the Gospel, but the majority of preaching

that goes on in them at best only touches on the Bible tangentially; sermons are topical and have more to do with the preacher's agenda than with God's agenda in Scripture. At worst, the sermon has degraded into a form of baptised pop-psychology or self-help message. The systematic exposition of Scripture is no longer the norm.

Brothers and sisters, without a knowledge of God's revelation of himself in Scripture we can never truly know him. Without the Bible, you and I would be just like that poor Sumerian man, confessing his unknown sin to unknown gods, crossing his fingers, and hoping that he got the combination right. Abram is a reminder not to take the knowledge of God for granted; not to let revelation become something commonplace. If it were enough to know nothing more than that God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our lives he could have dropped a Gospel tract from heaven. But instead he chose to reveal himself to us in the Bible—in a book that not only records the life of Jesus and of the early Church, that not only preserves the letters of the Apostles, but that is also the detailed record of God working out his covenant promise of self-revelation in which he gives us his law and in which we see him blessing his people when they walk in faith and cursing them when they walk in disobedience. In all this we learn more than a shallow and truncated Gospel; we come to know God himself. We learn his character, we catch a glimpse of his holiness, we plumb the depths of his love, and we come to know him as Creator, as Sovereign, and as Redeemer.

Dear friends, there's as much grace in God's self-revelation as there is in the Gospel message of redemption. Jesus is the culmination of that revelation, but without the revelation that came before we could never know him, never understand his mission and

ministry, and never understand what it means to place our faith in the sacrifice he made for us. Think back to the beginning of the story: Adam walked with God; he was in relationship with his Creator. Sin destroyed that relationship. God has provided a means of redemption from sin, but redemption is not an end in itself. *The purpose of redemption is the restoration of our relationship with God.* Grace is more than "Four Spiritual Laws" or a "Get Out of Hell Free" card. Grace is about knowing God and living in fellowship with him. *To walk in God's grace is to steep ourselves in his Word as much as it is to trust in Jesus.* God has spoken. Let us listen. Let us "hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest." You and I need to immerse ourselves in the Scriptures—reading, studying, memorising, meditating—that we might truly know God and, as we come to know him, that we might carry our knowledge of him to a world that has forgotten.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, you revealed yourself to Abram that through him the world might know you. Give us grace not only to follow you in faith as Abram did, but give us a yearning for your Word and a yearning to know you as you have revealed yourself in its pages. Deepen our knowledge of you that our faith might be strengthened and that we might better proclaim you to the world. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

³ Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1958).