

“A Sign of Hope
in the Midst of Judgment”
Sermon for 30 June 2019
Texts: Genesis 12:1-9 and Galatians 3:5-16

If Scripture is like a golden epistle sent to us from God, and his intention to bless, enrich, direct and improve us is sufficient cause to trust the message enough to ask: so why does God wish to speak to me about the promises to Abram recorded in Genesis 12? In a word: hope. God wishes to instill in us such hope that we become hopeful people. Hopeful people inspire other people to want that hope—to become hopeful themselves. So, I have three main points this morning: 1. to describe our hope in judgment; 2. to expose to our view the instructional method of the Torah; and 3. to evoke praise and thanksgiving because our God supplies the Spirit who opens our ears, creates awareness and transforms us into so great a blessing.

Friends, what will become of those who are strangers to Scripture? Who do not profit from God’s speech as recorded in Scripture? For if Scripture is a “golden epistle” and we are the recipients, does it not behoove us to read it, and not just read it lightly, but to read it repeatedly with seriousness, eagerness, reverence and frequency—as we would our own father’s last will and testament?! If we treat it as the later, we will come into a better, clearer sense of the scope and contents of our inheritance.

Get out of here. Go forth from your country (your birthplace) and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. (v.1) In terms of chronology, some view this call, summons to vacate, as a repetition of an earlier call (notice the terms of the summons—**birthplace, kindred and your father’s house**—all of which were situated in Ur, of the Chaldeans (in Mesopotamia) initially and not in the sister city to Ur, Harran, in northwestern Babylonia. So Abram responded to the call by setting forth from Ur. Terah, (Gen. 11:31) who was still living, finding dwelling and pasturage in Harran, chose to remain on the east side of the Euphrates *and never crossed the Jordan into Canaan*. But Abram did—he and all their portable wealth, and people that they had acquired. And if we take this as *a religious revival*, a permissible perspective but possible only, the **people acquired could be both slaves purchased and proselytes—people drawn to Abram’s example of faith**. Too large a crowd to slip unnoticed into a foreign city, and one who would more suitably settle in open places, marked by natural features (an oak, a hill, or a valley).

So, to the judgment that has Abram in Ur is the judgment which follows that of Noah’s generation; it results from the Tower of Babel—by which people were dispersed, and their tongues were confounded. Abram speaks Hebrew as a descendant of Eber, of the tribe of Shem. It has been some 420 years since God has spoken to man as he did to Noah. This time of silence is similar to that which followed Malachi and preceded the rebirth of prophecy with Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. There is no recorded word from the Lord. That does not mean that God was absent, or disengaged from our world—his activity is recorded in the table of generations. However, there is not much there. The call to Abram is, without question, the single most important event in the history of the Old Testament—it is the point of origin of the Jewish race (as Hebrews descended from Abram) as well as this “hope out of judgment.” For us, however, it is legitimate to ask: why is God speaking this word to us at this point in time.

I. And my response is, God is speaking hope to us in our own time of judgment. He would not be speaking that hope to us if we didn't need it.

Wherein does our neediness lie? Perhaps we are insensitive, in some measure, to our times, or our situation. We are deaf, as it were, to our time of judgement. We think it ordinary, or normal—*just the way things are*. We are numbed to the degraded state of mankind—not just the atmosphere, or environment we are pretty aware of degradation in those spheres. I have in mind the abject illness of our culture, our social setting. Abram was called out of an idolatrous population. He was hemmed in by pagans, polytheists, and unbelievers. Come out of that faithless and perverse generation is God's summons to Abram—and we, being in an analogous setting, are likewise called—summoned out of that and into a relationship with the one true, living God.

How does that happen? God supplies the Spirit who opens our ears and so we hear the word of the Lord with opened ears. Like Abram, we hear from God. With Abram it appears to have happened in a vacuum—out of the blue. This day we hear God through the Scriptures as read, as engaged. A word of hope spoken into judgment. Biblically speaking, this is the third time God has spoken hope into judgment. First, in the judgment God brought on Adam and Eve after their rebellion, God said to Eve: **Satan's offspring will bruise the heel of your seed, but your seed shall bruise his head.** Happily we see that sin will not have the last word, nor will evil triumph in the end. ***That is hope indeed.*** Then in the second judgment brought upon the wicked, violent world in The Flood, Noah was our word of hope. He was raised up to redeem a remnant of mankind from destruction—along with all living things! The Ark was a vessel of hope through which we were delivered. The seed of Even and the Ark of Noah both signify that God wins! At this point, we should be recognizing a pattern—it is a pattern, or a form of Torah teaching. It is Hebraic and it is the string on which the Old Testament narrative is strung—holding, as it were, all together. Or, perhaps clearer, the Torah teaching exposes the order, and purpose of revelation to view—now we “see” what we have been “hearing.”

II. However, something is yet missing and this is my second point: the Torah packaging. According to the “Torah teaching,” things come in three's. So where is the third ***hope in judgment?*** Ah, right here in front of us: the call of Abram is the third instance of hope in judgment that we are anticipating, or, looking for. Abram is the hope in the midst of the judgment of dispersal and the confounding of language what describes his situation in Ur of the Chaldeans precisely. So, God is saying, Look, hope in judgment takes the form of *hope out of judgment*. I am entering into the hopelessness of the human mess and bringing hope out of it—good out of evil, light out of darkness. That is my divine way.

The Torah was very familiar to Paul. In Galatians 3: 7 Paul shifts onto the Scripture what we ascribed in Genesis to Torah teaching. When he writes: **And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify[a] the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying,**

“In you shall all (lit. *the families of the earth*) the nations be blessed.”

This thread of continuity, between Old and New Testaments, should not be lost on us but acknowledged and celebrated. Note also, in one of the many sublime touches of

Scripture, the word for *earth* in ***families of the earth*** is exactly the same word as used in Gen. 3:9 **cursed is the earth because of you** (Adam) signifying that the curse of the earth in Adam is being lifted through the seed of Abraham in the end. *Again, God wins!* Having introduced you to one Torah lesson (the threefold hope in judgment), there is yet a second in Genesis 12. Abraham visits three places: Shechem (Sychar-where Jacob's well is, where foreign gods are put away), Ai/Bethel (sanctuary, **God is in this place and I did not know it**—and the first site of conquest!) and the Negev, the dessert in the south) on his initial pilgrimage through Canaan. So, these same three places are later visited by his grandson Jacob. This instructional method, emphasizing these three places, has a pay out when we come to the Conquest of the Promised Land—Joshua goes to the same three places. Of course he does. It only makes obvious sense inside the framework of the Torah teaching! There is divine order, in governance and providence entailed *expressed by this order*—from the beginning.

The *blessing of Abraham* does fit the above pattern: he is the “hope” of the nations dispersed under the judgment of Babel¹. However, the full significance of “the blessing” is harder to discern.

That is why we need, and have, Paul's help in interpreting the blessing. And in particular, we need Gal. 3:5-16 (ESV) to set this forth for us as we listen in on what Paul is teaching (reinforcing?) to the Galatians:

5 Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— 6 just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

**7 Know then that it is *those of faith who are the sons of Abraham*. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify [a] the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying,
“In you shall all the nations be blessed.”**

9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. 10 For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” 11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” [b] 12 But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— 14 so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit [c] *through faith*.

15 To give a human example, brothers: [d] even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. 16 Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one², “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.³

¹ God's gift of salvation in the midst of judgment! Namely, the scattering and the confounding of tongues.

² This is the only occurrence of this “one offspring”/ Christ in the New Testament!

³ Footnotes:

This passage is Paul's second appeal to the Galatians (in chapter 3) to remind them that "salvation is by grace"; means that we are saved by receiving the gospel (of salvation) by faith (through hearing). In a parallel sense to Abraham's **believing God** (Gen. 15:6), when we believe God for the gospel, it is **reckoned to us as "righteousness."** All who have saving faith are sons of Abraham, and therefore members of his great household/family. Abraham's "greater family" is ***the recompense Abraham receives for leaving his earthly family behind***⁴, in obedience to God's command, in anticipation **the promise** of a greater, spiritual family yet to appear! We, the church, are, together with all the saints, it; we are that great nation, Christ's kingdom.

Paul explicated the scripture to the Galatians and, as an object lesson, I am expounding the scriptures (both Galatians and, through Galatians, Genesis to you). I say object lesson because we have heard that scripture interprets scripture *and now we have seen it done*. Not only that but we have an interpretation with apostolic authority behind it. So, pastoral authority built on apostolic authority founded on scriptural authority—which is the word of God itself—it doesn't get more certain than that.

Abram's call (**Come out!**) represents another new beginning⁵—the hope of a return to God's original plan of blessing mankind—remember, everything God created in the beginning was **good**, or **very good**—all blessing, all pure and morally right. Again, it is just like Noah in the Flood, and just like the promise of a conquering seed to Eve. Abraham is that chosen seed, and father to that chosen seed, both. Gen. 12:7 reads **And to your offspring (your seed) I will give this land**. He is the first of the redeemed humanity! In Jacob's prophetic poem (Gen. 49) we are told the promise seed will go down the line of Judah (all the way to Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem)—he (Jesus) will be king of kings: **The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; unto him shall be the obedience of the peoples** (v.10). And in verse 25 expresses a threefold blessing—in case we are missing that.

Note this: Paul has **the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith— those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith**. (vv.7-8). And as if this in itself were not fabulous enough, Paul also says **the Scripture preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham by the promises made to Abraham**. He means explicitly the promises conveyed in Gen. 12:2: **I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a great blessing**. It follows more generally, in Paul's mind, that those who are of faith are also blessed as Abraham is blessed—yes, they are **justified by faith, counted**

a. Galatians 3:8 Or **count righteous**; also verses 11, 24

b. Galatians 3:11 Or **The one who by faith is righteous will live**

c. Galatians 3:14 Greek **receive the promise of the Spirit**

d. Galatians 3:15 Or **brothers and sisters**

⁴ See Mark 10:28-30 Jesus states our greater reward explicitly.

⁵ What is your "call?" Is it not "Come out, and be separated unto me? Cling to Me and be forever mine? Perhaps, unbelievers around you are barnacles (needing to be scraped from the hull) because they impede your progress and injure others? Removed and left behind.

righteous—and are a blessing *when they share the gospel message*, too, as he is a blessing by sharing his faith.

III. I come now to my third point: God supplies the Spirit who opens our ears, creates awareness and transforms us into so great a blessing. This is a reiteration of some of the above, but I want to break it down thusly:

- God supplies the Spirit who opens (heals) our ears
- The Spirit creates within us a sense of who we are and where we are
- And God calls us out, by faith, transforming us into sons of Abraham/brothers and sisters in Christ—the one great family.

Ephesians 2:8-9 **For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.** Yes, this is true. But from Gen. 12:1-3 the how is supplemented by the purpose, the why: ***we are blessed by God, in God to become God's blessing to all the peoples of the earth.***

1 Peter 3:8-9 (NASB)

8 To sum up (Finally), all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; 9 not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.

When we come to verse 3, the shoe drops and we see now that these promises to Abraham are replicated in the promises of Jesus—this is what we should expect. It should be no surprise. The promises are what we know—so they belong to us! What we need to do, as a result, is trust in those promises so as to make our way ahead by faith into the future unknown—which belongs, thankfully, to God alone.

Amen