

“Coming to Terms”
 Sermon for 14 July 2019
 Texts: Genesis 12:1-3 and Gen. 3 and Isaiah 43

Coming to terms with the promises of God (Gen. 12:1-3) first requires that we either deal with his word, or we are dealt with by his word. How is this word to Abram “ordained of God as *absolutely necessary* for the spiritual and eternal good of those who are ‘hearing’ it today? Absolutely necessary . . . for my good? Absolutely. For the word of God is living and active. . . it is not a dead word, lifeless, on the page 44 of my bible! Today it is shot into my heart—just as it was shot into Abram’s heart on day one of this revelation. Neither sense is to overshadow the other because it is living and active forever. Always and absolutely. For us, God is yet the author, Christ is still the subject matter, and eternal life, full and true life is the end, the goal, the objective. Christ came that we may have life, and life abundantly.

In just that fashion, or manner this divine word has come today to you,
 to us. Beautiful and amazing, always and absolutely.
 But only if you are prepared to receive.

Here’s something Abram did not know when the voice of the Lord spoke the word of the Lord to him that day. He did not know that the state of *vital piety* was actually at risk. It was in danger—both in him and in the world itself. And Abram in-so-far-as he was the embodiment of that *vital piety* was in danger of being boiled alive—like the hapless frog in the pot of warming waters. He was blissfully happy, oblivious—yes, impervious, or dead to his very critical danger. God did not wait until the last vestige of vital piety was exterminated. God didn’t even wait for the frog to be boiled to death. **And now the Lord said, “Go forth—or Come out (!) from your country—your relatives, your father’s house. . . come out of all that you’ve settled into socially, culturally, economically because what you have settled for is destroying you. Come out of this way of death (which you have embraced as your way of life!) and come into the way of life *you were born-again to live*. Because you may never have heard the phrase “vital piety” before I will define it for you. Vital piety is “living faith” and it is expressed by sincere worship as undertaken by believers. (But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. Hebrews 11:6) And now hear Gen. 12:1-3:**

**Now the Lord said—
 “Go forth [or Go for yourself] from your country,
 And from your relatives
 And from your father’s house,
 To the land which I will show you;**

Here, after the briefest of introductions, is a command, followed three blessings of, shall we say, a lesser degree. [Barnes] “The promise (to Abram) corresponds to the command. If he is to lose much by his exile, he will also gain in the end. The promise contains a lower and higher blessing. The lower blessing has three parts: **“First, I will make of thee a great nation.”** This will compensate for the loss of his country. The nation to which he had hitherto belonged was fast sinking into polytheism and idolatry. To escape from it and its defiling influence was itself a benefit; but to be made himself

the head of a chosen nation was a double blessing. Secondly, "**And bless thee.**" The place of his birth and kindred was the scene of all his past earthly joys. But the Lord will make up the loss to him in a purer and safer scene of temporal prosperity. Thirdly, "**And make thy name great.**" This was to compensate him for his father's house. He was to be the patriarch of a new house, on account of which he would be known and venerated all over the world." It does not dilute the significance of this "word" to Abram for us appropriate these promises to our Christian setting and context. We shall be blessed with a large following, a nation of those we have blessed and led to the Lord. We, too, shall be blessed with significance, meaning and purpose as we answer our call! And God will **make or name great** as his beloved servants—we shall be exalted in the church (**amongst that great crowd of witnesses**).

Now **the land** piece is neither the Promised Land, or Israel, as it was to Abram; but it is answered by Jesus' saying in Mark 10:28-31: **28 Peter began to say to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You."** Rather like Abram if I do say so myself! **29 Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, 30 if not] but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in [at this time** rather than in the present age], **houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last, first."**

**2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;**

The higher blessing is expressed in these remarkable terms: "**And be thou a blessing.**" He is to be not merely a subject of blessing, but a medium of blessing to others. It is more blessed to give than to receive (as Jesus teaches—and we, as Christians must never forget that we are here to serve, to give to bless, too. ***What we have to give far exceeds our blessings and benefits.***) And the Lord here confers on Abram the delightful prerogative of dispensing good to others. The next verse expands this higher element of the divine promise. "I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee." ***Here the Lord identifies the cause of Abram with his own***, and declares him to be essentially connected with the weal or woe of all who come into contact with him. "And blessed in thee shall be all the families of the ground." [Here the sense is that of the **cursed ground—in and through Abram, the curse is to be reversed**. Or, perhaps, better, the curse is to be actually removed and the original blessing restored.] The ground was cursed for the sake of Adam, who fell by transgression. But now shall the ground again participate in the blessing. "In thee." In Abram is this blessing laid up as a treasure hid in a field to be realized in due time. "All the families" of mankind shall ultimately enter into the enjoyment of this unbounded blessing." ***We are called like Abram to become a "dispensary of blessing."***

Genesis 12:1a-c express as it were a call to repentance which parallels the abrupt "calling out" at beginning of Jesus' ministry (Mark 1:14-15): **Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel (the good news) of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled. and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.** And, in John 1:39. the even more cryptic and briefer call reads:

Come and you will see. Abram's repentance entailed leaving the error, polytheism, idolatry, moral corruption and apostasy of Ur and Harran. And then responding to the promise of 12:1d **To the Land which I will show you** through believing God. **The Land** in Abram's call and the **Kingdom of God** are corresponding parts of two invitations to what is essentially the same cause (the *extension of God's blessing to the ends of the earth*)!

A further parallel (between Chaldean apostasy and that of Jerusalem in Jesus' day) lies in Jesus' indictment of the Jewish leadership for their piddling around with religious stuff—ceremonial cleanliness and ritual (**the traditions of men**) when weightier issues were at risk (truth, saving faith and the blessing of the nations): 1. they were teaching as *the Law* what in actuality were religious innovations, or again, mere **traditions of man**—and the burden of all these excessive “commandments,” together with works righteousness, was burdensome to the Jews. It was both a form of bondage and religious oppression. Abram was chosen of God, a spiritual leader among men. However, Jesus was the Chosen One of God—the Messiah. Abram was chosen in time, but Christ was chosen before time—even before time was created.”

**3 And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses [or, reviles] you I will curse
[or, bind under a curse].
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”**

[Resume Barnes' Notes]“Thus, when the Lord saw *fit to select a man to preserve vital piety* on the earth and be the head of a race suited to be the **depository of a revelation of mercy**, he at the same time designed that this step should be the means of effectually **recalling the sin-enthralled world to the knowledge and love of himself**. [Imagine the history of Israel as a vault in which the written records of God's interventions are stored.] The race was twice already since the fall put upon its probation—once under the promise of victory to the seed of the woman, and again under the covenant with Noah. In each of these cases, notwithstanding the growing light of revelation and accumulating evidence of the divine forbearance, the race had apostatized from the God of mercy, with lamentably few known exceptions. Yet, undeterred by the gathering tokens of this second apostasy, and after **reiterated practical demonstration to all people** of the debasing, demoralizing effect of sin, the Lord, with calm determination of purpose, sets about another step in the great process of removing the curse of sin, dispensing the blessing of pardon, and eventually drawing all the nations to accept of his mercy [redemption history!]. **The special call of Abram contemplates the [universal] calling of the Gentiles as its final issue**, and is therefore to be regarded as one link in a series of wonderful events by which the legal obstacles to the divine mercy are to be taken out of the way, and the Spirit of the Lord is to prevail with still more and more of men to return to God.

It is clear that the choice of Abram (Why a Hebrew, or a Jew of all people?) is just as offensive to some the contemporary temperament as Jesus' choice of a Good Samaritan, a Samaritan adulteress, a turn-coat Jewish tax collector, a Gentile demoniac (once delivered!), a Syrophoenician woman, various beggars, thieves, street thugs and Antifa-like Galilean fishermen as followers and kingdom workers. If you question the

last category, imagine what it would be like for Jesus to mount a Down-east gospel campaign and recruiting Maine lobstermen.

I think you catch the comparison. Why is Abram's selection offensive? Is it too much to suggest that Abram might share in the offense of the Incarnation? Anti-Semitism aside, some unbelievers think it quite beneath God to take on human flesh. Others can't wrap their minds around the infinite and eternal Godhead choosing to work through the common, profane and earthly things to secure his high, noble and heavenly objectives—but that is precisely what God's intervening in human history must entail. Jesus' incarnation is the perfect fulfillment of divine intervention.

[Barnes] "It is sometimes inadvertently said that the Old Testament is narrow and exclusive, while the New Testament is broad and catholic in its spirit.

This is a mistake. The Old and New Testaments are *of one mind on this matter*. Many are called, and few chosen. This is the common doctrine of the New as well as of the Old. They are both equally catholic in proclaiming the gospel to all. The covenant with Adam and with Noah is still valid and sure to all who return to God; and the call of Abram is expressly said to be a means of extending blessing to all the families of man. The New Testament does not aim at anything more than this; it merely hails the approaching accomplishment of the same gracious end. They both concur also in limiting salvation to the few who repent and believe the gospel. Even when Abram was called there were a few who still trusted in the God of mercy. According to the chronology of the Masoretic text, Heber was still alive, Melchizedek was contemporary with Abram, Job was probably later, and many other now unknown witnesses for God were doubtless to be found, down to the time of the exodus, outside the chosen family." [And for those who need to hear it: Abram was the head of a new race, a special nation of priests. This was new. Jesus also presents a new beginning—those who enter his kingdom are **new creatures in Christ**, a new society comprised of one new race—all brethren.]

***"God marks the first symptoms of decaying piety (in persons, in cultures).
He does not wait until it has died out before he calls Abram.***

He proceeds in a leisurely, deliberate manner with his eternal purpose of mercy, and hence, a single heir of promise suffices for three generations, until the set time comes for the chosen family and the chosen nation. Universalism, then, in the sense of the offer of mercy to man, is the rule of the Old and the New Testament. Particularism in the acceptance of it is the accident of the time. The call of Abram is a special expedient for providing a salvation that may be offered to all the families of the earth."

God's Typical Method of Instruction

"In all God's teachings *the near and the sensible* come before the far and the conceivable, the present and the earthly before the eternal and the heavenly. Thus, Abram's immediate acts of self-denial are leaving his country, his birthplace, his home. The promise to him is to be made a great nation, be blessed, and have a great name in the new land which the Lord would show him. This is unspeakably enhanced by his being made a blessing to all nations.

God pursues this mode of teaching for several (four) important reasons:

Firstly, the sensible and the present are *intelligible to those who are taught*. The Great Teacher begins with the known, and leads the mind forward to the unknown. If he had begun with things too high, too deep, or too far for the range of Abram's mental vision, he would not have come into relation with Abram's mind.

It is superfluous to say that he might have enlarged Abram's view in proportion to the grandeur of the conceptions to be revealed. On the same principle he might have made Abram cognizant of all present and all developed truth. On the same principle he might have developed all things in an instant of time, and so have had done with creation and providence at once.

Incidentally, good science actually proceeds in this same manner—building on what's observable and demonstrable—and so advancing.

Secondly, the sensible and the present are the types of the future and the conceivable; similarly, the land is the type of the better land; the earthly nation of the spiritual nation; the temporal blessing of the eternal blessing; the earthly greatness of the name of the heavenly. And let us not suppose that we are arrived at the end of all knowledge.

*We pride ourselves on our advances in spiritual knowledge beyond the age of Abram. But even we may be in the very **infancy** of mental development.* There may be a land, a nation, a blessing, a great name, of which our present realizations or conceptions are but the prototypes. Any other supposition would be a large abatement from the infinite sweetness of hope's overflowing cup.

Thirdly, these things which God now promises are the *immediate* form of his bounty, the very gifts he begins at this moment to bestow. As if God has his gift to Abram ready in his hand in a tangible form, He points to it and says, This is what thou presently need; this I give thee now, with my blessing and favor. But

Fourthly, these present gifts are the earnest and the germ of all temporal and eternal blessing. Man is a growing thing, whether as an individual or a race so, God graduates his benefits according to the condition and capacity of the recipients to be blessed by them.

In the first boon of his good-will is the earnest of what he will continue to bestow on those who continue to walk in his ways. And as *the present is the womb of the future*, so is the *external the symbol of the internal*, the material the shadow of the spiritual, in the order of the divine blessing. And as events unfold themselves in the history of man and conceptions in his soul within, so are doctrines gradually opened up in the Word of God, and progressively revealed to the soul by the Spirit of God.” [End Barnes Notes]

Amen