

Blessed to be a Blessing

Genesis 14:17-24

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George Müller, who some of you may have heard of, cared for thousands of orphans in Bristol in the nineteenth century and set up lots of schools that I think taught over 100,000 children in that time, to such a large extent that he was accused of raising the poor above their natural station in British life. So, he was a Christian. He did not have anything, but he chose blessing, and was a blessing.

So, the reading from the Old Testament today finishes off the first part of Abraham's story. He had been chosen by God to be blessed, and to bring blessing. I was talking to a friend of mine on a sailing cruise, which I do, about this talk. And he said to me, 'the thing about Abraham is how his life was shaped.' If you follow it through, you can see how he changed, how he failed, and how he grew in his understanding of God. So, we see how the blessing starts to be released.

So, this shaping by God: God is so patient with us. He sticks by us and he wants to involve us in his project. So today I thought we could do a bit of a whistle-stop tour of the story to date, which culminates in this meeting with Melchizedek. Through this we will see how this 'shaping' has happened, and we will see the significance of some of what happened with the interaction with Melchizedek.

Before we get into that though, I thought we would just briefly touch on what blessing means. In our culture, I think when people say, 'Oh, bless', it is often a term of endearment or something that is nice, like a puppy or a newborn baby or something. But in the Bible, and particularly here in Abram's story, blessing means life and abundance and seed and safety and security. And we can have that blessing, when we trust God. Not seizing blessing on our own terms, trying to work good in our own wisdom, but by trusting God. **And if you are here and you follow Jesus, you are blessed. That is just a status that you have.**

So, this whistle-stop tour, and elements will come out, and I was thinking a bit like a 'spiritual blessing toolkit', or wisdom. We are going to cover a number of areas, but do not worry, it is not going to be really long.

1) Leaving a land to go to a land

Abram came from Babylon, a city that translated literally means 'oven' or 'fire'. So, a difficult place. God calls Abraham to leave that land, to go to a land that God will reveal to his eyes. And we saw some of that in the Hebrews verse as well. To be a blessing, we have to respond to God's call to come out of this world and go to a new land. As followers of Jesus, this land is the kingdom of God, inaugurated and breaking into the now, whilst we lean into the future when it will fully come: this eternal land.

This might mean physically going somewhere else, like Abraham did, or I think it mostly means for us coming out of the culture and values and worldview which we are immersed in all the time and being born again. Born again, because of Jesus. Abraham was called out to be a blessing and so are all of you. And it takes our whole self and our conversion of our imaginations. **In God's kingdom, for example, there is no self-reliance. We are meant to lean on each other in loving, self-giving relationships. In God's kingdom, status does not come from job titles and money and wealth, but by being a servant.** This is so different to our culture.

You might notice in this part of this, Abraham's story starts with God speaking a word. You might want God to speak a word to you, maybe for the first time perhaps, or afresh. That could be something to ask for today. And the thing about it, and also with Abraham, is God knows what we are like, but he calls us to go to a new land anyway.

So, tool one, to be a blessing, is we have to leave a land to go to a land, an undiscovered country that God will reveal to your eyes. And bear in mind, Abram was in his seventies when this happened. So age is not an issue. And we need to respond with our whole self.

2) Do not be snaky

As the story goes on, there is a famine in Egypt. Abram and Sarai go to Egypt. Abram looks at Sarai and he thinks she is beautiful, good to his eyes. And he is afraid of what the Egyptians might do. So, he concocts a plan and he tells Sarai to say that she is his sister.

We might think, what is the big deal about that? The big deal is that it is sinful. But what Abraham is thinking about is that then he controls who she will marry. He is thinking he can gain influence and property. It will go well for Abraham with this scheme. But he is exposing Sarai to significant risk to herself. You might notice in this part of Genesis, she does not say anything. She does not get any say in the matter. It is not a very flattering portrait of Abram. He was not trusting God, but looking to create good on his own terms.

Now the Egyptians see Sarai, and they think, 'Yes, she is beautiful'. She is good to their eyes. If you are tracking with the Bible to this point, there is a kind of 'Eden-melody' going on here. These Hebrew words are resonating with earlier parts of the biblical story. The Hebrew words of looking at the tree, of knowing good and bad, and seeing that it looks good, are the same words used when Abraham was talking about Sarai and the Egyptians. And the Hebrew word for taking the apple is the same word for what happens next. The Egyptians 'take' Sarai, *that* kind of taking.

In the story, there are some roles the people are taking. Sarai is like the tree of knowing good and bad. The Egyptians are almost like Adam and Eve, characters who are taking when they should not. And there is a snake in this passage who is lying and deceiving and manipulating and abusing human beings. That snake is Abraham himself, the chosen one of God. He is lying and manipulating. He is failing here.

There is an ugliness when Christians lie and deceive and act ungraciously. There is a book I read, it is called 'Rwanda, The Land That God Forgot?' It is written by a lady called Meg Guillebaud, who is the aunt of Simon Guillebaud, whom you might know. She went to Rwanda after the 1990s genocide because her family had been committed to be missionaries there for decades. She met some of the surviving Christians. There was a pastor who said to her that almost when the Holy Spirit left someone who had experienced revival, they were the worst of the worst of the killers. **We must resist dehumanising other human beings, which is so tempting in our culture, which is so quick to label people negatively or scapegoat people for our problems.** I was thinking how much our contemporary political life revels in doing just that.

So, Abraham gains wealth by his deception and exposure of Sarai to risk. It is tough to think about here in our economic system, how we interact with it, but maybe that is for another day. That is quite a big topic. But this is a very honest portrait of our human failings. God has blessed, and yet one behaves like the snake. The good news is that Jesus absorbs our failings and gives us life. So, do not be snaky.

3) Sharing together the blessing that God gives

Abram and Sarai leave Egypt. They return to Canaan with all the property that the Egyptians had given them, including an Egyptian slave girl called Hagar, who will come back in the story later. These ill-gotten gains cause difficulties with Lot, his nephew. They have got too much stuff. They cannot work out how to live together. They are in dispute. The family breaks up.

Lot goes to a city called Sodom, and it will not go well for him there. For a start, the king of Sodom is called Berah in Hebrew, and that means 'in evil'. So, 'in evil' is the king, so that is probably not a good place to go. But it seems Eden-like, so he is going there anyway.

Property and wealth can cause divisions in families. My father and his sister were estranged for decades because of the way my grandmother left property in her will. They never really resolved that. It is very sad.

The early church was marked by being a fellowship of difference, of different people being one in Christ. We must grow and be like this and live together as one family and share God's blessing and work out how to do that together.

It is great that we mentioned the Rock Project today. Our sharing made a beautiful building. Little things like the wiring are so much better than what it was. It is much more accessible. You can see the beauty of the stone and the floor. But not only that, the way this building has become a blessing to Weston. I was thinking about Jo and how they do Small Saints here with about thirty toddlers who come and their families. We could not anticipate that that would happen. But that is how the blessing from our sharing is bringing such life and abundance.

So, **being the blessing is being united in Christ and sharing the blessing with each other.** That is the third tool in the blessing toolkit. Learn how to share the blessing with each other as one family.

4) Knowing your citizenship

After Lot left and went down to Sodom, God speaks to Abram, and God covenants with Abram to give him and the offspring the land for ever. This for ever promise starts a theme in the Bible which culminates in the city in Revelation coming down to the new heavens and the new earth.

Abraham is called to live in this eternal land and to be outside the cities of man where Lot went. The cities can look quite Eden-like in how they appear. But Abram goes up to the hills and lives by some sacred trees.

We here are citizens of God's kingdom, God's city. Not the city that Cain built, or that Nimrod built, which is Babylon. The letter to the Hebrews, shows what Abraham was looking to, what he was pointing to, which was the city of God to come. For fans of the early church fathers, Augustine spoke about the contrast between the cities of man and the city of God and how we have to come out of the cities of man.

Your citizenship, spiritually, is not really as a citizen of Bath, or England, or Britain, or any other nationality. Be wary of anyone who aligns the ways of Christ with human cities or human nations. We are a living temple and can be a blessing to all nations. This was the promise to Abram. **God can and wants us to be Eden to Bath and the UK, to bring life and peace and safety and security and sharing, even with our enemies.** We are the city on the hill, the light to all nations.

So, this tool, wisdom in the blessing toolbox, is rise to your calling to be a citizen of the city on the hill, God's city, which is being built spiritually in our midst.

5) Go for a walk

After giving the promise to Abram about the eternal land, God tells Abram to go for a walk about that land. The Hebrew here, the going for the walk, is the same as when God walks around the Garden of Eden. To be a blessing, we need to go for regular walks with God.

This could be walking around the hills of Bath or boating down a river. It could be tending your garden. It could be reading a good book or listening to music. It could involve meditating on the Bible. All these things are about involving God in these activities and being present physically in the moment.

My wife, Sarah, she is an inspiration to me. She encourages me to go out for exercise, which I am not really that much of a fan of. But anyway, I drag myself out. What I find is I drag myself out not really wanting to do it. I am on my own, but regularly I meet God. It is just weird the way it happens. So go for walkabouts with God.

6) Embody God's name, don't look to make a name for yourself

Abram and Lot went their separate ways. There was then a big battle and four eastern kings made war with five Canaanite kings, with nations slaughtering each other. The Canaanite kings were defeated. Some ran to the hills. Some fell in tar pits (not nice). The four eastern kings took plunder and captured people, including Lot, because the king of Sodom was defeated.

While all this was going on, contrast with Abram, on a hill, by some sacred trees, living in peace and safety. Interestingly, with some Canaanite allies, he is being the blessing to them. This is again touching on the city on the hill. We can be a blessing to our city and nation. **Anyone can be part of our church family, like the Canaanites that were there with Abram in the hills. No Jew, no Gentile, no slave nor free, no male and female, all are one in Christ.**

Going back to this, Abram hears about Lot's capture, how he rescues him, and then we come, you will be pleased to know, to the passage today. Abraham comes to this valley which is near this place called Salem, which is the future Jerusalem, and Salem means peace. He meets two kings, in evil, the king of Sodom who was defeated in that battle, and a king called Melchizedek, my king is righteous. That is what that means.

Melchizedek gives food and wine, in contrast to in evil, who wants to take. Abram has grown since his time in Egypt, particularly in relation to property. King 'In-evil' offers him plunder if he can keep the people. But Abraham's relationship with property is now quite different. He refuses it because he does not want it known that the king of Sodom has made him rich. He is now acknowledging God as his true king.

Melchizedek also gives Abraham some further insight into God's blessing. It was God who helped defeat those kings and rescue those people. It was not in Abram's strength, and it was not in Abram's name. When God tasks us to do good things, **we must not look to make our name great, however tempting it is in a culture which is all about that, all about performance.** We should resist celebrity and status and remain a humble servant. Choose to be a blessing and not to make your name great.

Here at the end of this section of Abraham's life, we see him sharing mutually in blessing and abundance with the priest king of righteousness, who foreshadows Jesus as the ultimate priest king.

So here are the tools in the blessing toolbox. Leave a land to go to a land which God will reveal to your eyes. Do not be snaky. Be united in Jesus and share the blessing. Know your citizenship. Go on regular walkabouts with God in whatever way that means for you. And it is in his name that the tasks that you do in life work. God is making it happen.

You are all chosen by God as a blessing, as heirs of Abram. This is your status. God sticks by us and is patient. So, choose the blessing.



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