

# Genesis 12:1-9, 14:1-14

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Preacher: R Turnbull

[ 0 : 00 ] Let's pray as we begin. Gracious Lord and Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have been with us this day. We thank you Lord for this day, which is your day. And Lord, we pray as we come now to look at your word that you will fill us with all wisdom, guide us Lord to understand your word correctly.

And we pray Lord for your guidance and your presence this day and every day. Amen. Well, thank you for returning to worship this evening. And thank you again for your welcome. And for those of you I've been able to chat to, thank you for your friendliness and openness.

I must admit, when I first got to know Paul a bit and I discovered he was the minister of the International Presbyterian Church Ealing, you see a little bit of me, forgive me, a little bit of me thought, well, it's a bit arrogant, isn't it?

You know, it's sort of, you know, it's Ealing, you know. And I thought, well, you know, okay, never mind. You know, I'm sure that their renown goes far and wide.

Well, I can assure you, I'm not sure about the international bit. I'm sure it goes wide internationally. It definitely goes wide across the country. And I said, well, I'm sure you're going to go to the international church Ealing. And I said, well, I'm sure you're going to go to the international church Ealing.

[ 1 : 33 ] And I said, yeah. She says, are you giving some talks on work? And I said, yes, I am. She says, well, one of my co-workers, I said, how do you know her? How did you know, Rebecca?

Well, she says, one of my co-workers here in Exeter has just come into the office and said, is this your dad doing these talks at the IPC in Ealing? So your fame at least extends to Exeter.

But one of the challenges you do have when you are a church that tends to select readings from which to preach, and you probably do series on a sort of ongoing basis and so on, is how to make sure that we have a proper diet.

A proper diet of the different types of material in the scriptures. And it's important because doctrinally, we need to understand how to handle the whole of God's word.

And we don't actually interpret God's word in the scriptures in exactly the same way. We do so in relation to the material that we are dealing with.

[ 2 : 47 ] I simply mean by that, if you're reading a piece of poetry, you wouldn't interpret it exactly the same way as you're reading a piece of history or if you're reading a letter. I wasn't wanting to suggest there's doctrinal differences that come out.

It's just that we approach it in a slightly different way. And increasingly, it seems to me, we find it rather difficult to properly understand the Old Testament narrative.

And largely, I think it's because we're not well taught, we're not helped to understand this material, its nature, and its importance.

And I hope this evening, by preaching from Genesis, I can just help, just contribute to providing that framework.

I used to say to my students at Wycliffe, you know, the reason we need a well-taught ministry is that we need a well-taught people of God.

[ 3 : 48 ] And if we don't have a well-taught people of God, we will not be able to bring the gospel effectively to this land. And what is more, even within the life of the church, it is the people of God being well-taught that holds the ministers and others to the account of the scriptures.

You need a well-taught minister who teaches the congregation to be a well-taught congregation who then take the word of God out. So do pray for your minister. Pray for Paul and Claire and their family, having spent many years training ministers.

It's not easy. It's tough. I mean, let's face it, he's got to deal with you lot. You know, pray for your minister. Pray for your minister and his family. Encourage them, support them as best as you can. So, Genesis. Genesis, of course, is foundational to our understanding of God and his purposes. I was, um, interesting, um, I was chatting with a friend of mine who, um, is a committed Christian. And, um, I mean, I'm hesitating because, I mean, he would quite openly say he was a liberal Christian. Um, so, I mean, you know, you, you understand why I'm hesitating around there. [ 5 : 12 ] But his faith, there's faith, there's definitely faith. But he's not been well-taught. And he said to me, why do you, why do you evangelicals build so much?

He was talking about human sexuality. Why do you evangelicals build so much and obscure verses in Leviticus? I mean, he means, you know, the do not lie, a man with a man. And I said, well, I don't. He said, oh, you do. I said, no, I don't. I said, if you want to know where I build my doctrine of human sexuality from, it's from the beginning of Genesis.

Because in the beginning of Genesis, we see set out for us, not difficult, obscure verses that can be ripped out of context. What we see set out for us is the basic framework and plan of God's purpose and God's intention for all people for all time.

And in these 50 chapters of Genesis, we find those principles, the creation mandates they are often referred to. And we also find characters, don't we, who form the bedrock of the story of God and his people.

[ 6 : 23 ] From Abraham, who we're going to look at today, through to Joseph. And it's a wonderful interlocking, really, of the gifts of God for all people in his grace, the gift of work, enterprise, commerce, markets, and the calling of individuals into the purposes of God.

We see God's promises, the obedient response, and the sealing of the promise in the divine covenant. The beginning verses, verses, the beginning chapters of Genesis.

And in fact, the story of Genesis is foundational and central to our understanding of the theological framework of the whole of Scripture.

And Abraham, we often don't really know how to handle it. Abraham is one of the truly foundational characters, is he not, of the Old Testament, from whom we learn a great deal about the nature of God and about our own relationship with the Almighty.

And one of the interesting characteristics of the study of the Bible is to observe when God speaks and what are the consequences. Because, you see, if it is God who is speaking, then we need to listen.

[ 7 : 45 ] If it is God who is speaking, it is not our appropriate response to say, hang on a minute, God. I mean, my wife says to me, you know, well, if you did it the first time, I wouldn't have needed to ask you two or three.

Any other men sort of understand that? You know, if you just did it the first time, I wouldn't have needed to keep asking. But if God is speaking, if we really believe he's God, we won't say, wait a minute, I'll do it later.

We'll come back to that as we go. Observing in this passage, God speaking and what the consequences are. And in Genesis 12, we see God speaking, we see God promising, and we see God appearing.

God speaking, God promising, and God appearing. Three key actions, powerful reminders to us that we are dealing with an active and living God.

And then we will see in chapter 17, those promises are sealed in the covenant. The reason I've chosen, I mean, we could have tried to read the chapters in between, but the reason I've chosen chapter 12 and then chapter 17 is we can get some of the foundational framework from chapter 12.

[ 9 : 03 ] And then we see in chapter 17 how those promises of God and the promises of God's people are sealed in an everlasting covenant. If it's everlasting, it means it doesn't expire.

If it's everlasting, it means in some way it's applicable to us today. And so what we're going to try and do is unpack a little bit those promises of God and how they are sealed for us today effectively in our hearts and lives.

So, chapter 12, verse 1, we read that the Lord said to Abraham, Abraham, go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

Fairly straightforward sort of verse, you would have thought. Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. Let's just see what's going on in this verse.

First, God speaks. It doesn't say God had a vague thought. It doesn't say God sort of left hanging the possibility that Abraham might do something.

[10:27] It doesn't say let's all think about this together, sit in a circle, look at each other in the eyes, pass a pebble around and see what we're meant to do.

God spoke. Seriously, folks, I've been a Christian for 40 years and when I realise the significance of God speaking, I still quake.

And I realise how often I ignore, how often I am the vacillator, how often I'm the one who says, wait a minute, I'll come back to you, God. Leave it with me.

I'll call you, he called me. This is God speaking and I still, after 40 years of being a Christian, when I realise the significance of who it is who speaks, I can tell you, I've made enough mess-ups in my life still to quake, still to quake before the Lord.

And as God spoke at the creation, so here, the beginning really of the whole history of redemption, God speaks. God speaks at almost all of the significant moments in scripture.

[11:44] We've already got God speaking at the creation, now God speaking here in the call of Abraham. Now, we know just from the verses that come before chapter 12 that God has already in fact called Abraham to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldeans in order to go to the promised land of Canaan.

And now, having settled in Haran, Abraham and his family leave to continue their journey. You kind of think God might give us a rest.

But no, God has a purpose. And it's crucial to our Christian lives, to our Christian discipleship, that we have some handle upon the purposes of God for our church, our people, our nation, and our lives.

So, God speaks. Secondly, look at the three things that Abraham is asked to forsake. It ties in exactly with what Paul was doing a few moments ago in the hand of faith.

Go from your country. Go from your kindred, your people, your family.

[13:06] Go from your father's house. You're being asked there, Abraham's being asked to leave country, family, and home.

Remember what I just said a few minutes ago about quaking in my boots when I realise it's God speaking. I'd find that really difficult, God saying that sort of thing to me. Go from your country, go from your family, go from your home.

Abraham is being asked to forsake all in the hand of faith. His country, his people, his wider family. It's a reminder that God's claim upon us is exclusive.

God's claim upon us is exclusive. We are his doulos, his servant, or his slave. God expects sacrifice. He is the divine master.

Lord, call me to minister in the nice, comfortable country suburbs of name your favourite city. Or call me to minister in a village of ten people who I can happily share the gospel with, but also have lots of nice dinner parties, garden parties, do some hunting and shooting and fishing, write my books or whatever it is.

[14:26] Unfortunately, it doesn't work like that. God expects sacrifice. His claim upon us is exclusive. He calls us in exactly the same way he called Abraham.

And for Abraham, he called him to leave his country, his family, and his home. I'm not saying that's God's call for every single one of us. The issue is the priority of that call.

So do not underestimate the nature of the call of God upon our lives. It is this forsaking everything, country, people, even family.

Happiest days of my ministerial life were when I was a minister, the Church of England in Basingstoke. We brought our family up there.

It was a fantastic setting to bring up a family. We were blessed by God in the Church with growth and lots of good things.

[15:27] And when the time came that I was appointed to my next post, which was to be principal of Wycliffe Hall in Oxford, once it was signed and sealed, I came home, I came into the house, I had a bottle of champagne in my hand, I told my family what had happened and my children burst into tears.

They didn't want to be taken from the familiar. They didn't want to go somewhere alien to them. They didn't want to leave their friends.

And I understand that. We all understand that. But as Christians we need to remember that the call of God on our lives is exclusive.

It means forsaking everything. And this explains the response not just of Abraham but of thousands of people down the centuries who have surrendered everything for the call of Christ.

Just leave ahead for a moment to verse 4. I'll come back to verses 2 and 3. So Abraham went.

Now, forgive me for laboring this point slightly.

[16:35] the Lord in verse 1 said to Abraham go and in verse 4 Abraham went. We put all sorts of conditions, don't we, between the go and the went.

We find all sorts of reasons not to do what God calls us to do. And there's a basic principle here.

The Lord called and Abraham obeyed.

But note however that God speaking is accompanied by God's promises. God doesn't just shout random things at us. God has a purpose.

And here we see not only God speaking but God promising. God may expect of us many things. He may demand of us sacrifice and service. But he does not leave us bereft.

God doesn't abandon us. God sends us with promises. And in verses 2 and 3 of Genesis 12 I managed to count seven promises in those two verses.

[17:39] First the promise of inheritance. That through Abraham a great nation will emerge. That is of course the nation of Israel.

Second the blessing the promise of personal blessing upon Abraham. I will make you a great

nation. I will bless you. Thirdly the promise of the greatness of the name of Abraham.

I will bless you and make your name great. Fourth the promise not only that Abraham will be blessed but will be a blessing to others. Fifth the promise of blessing upon those that bless and the cursing six of those that curse Abraham.

And then seventh that in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Now that's rather interesting isn't it? That God has not put seven excuses between the go and the went.

He's put seven promises. And maybe when God calls us to go wherever that go may be maybe what we need to look for is not the excuses but the promises that come with it.

[18:48] God between the go and the went has put seven promises. And we move from the specific the blessing of Israel to the general the blessing of all nations.

We move from the personal I will bless you to the communal all peoples will be blessed. What marvellous promises to match such exacting demands.

The demand may be exclusive. The demand may involve sacrifice but God will never abandon us and never leave us bereft of his promises.

A reminder in the New Testament isn't there in Matthew 28 20 where the promise is that I will be with you always even to the very end of the age.

Jesus promises I will be with you always even to the very end of the age. And I used to often say to my own congregation that promise isn't life will be a rose garden.

[19:58] The promise is he will never leave us. It goes all the way back to Abraham. Anyway the story continues in verses 4 to 6 with Abraham's journey into Canaan.

We have the God who has spoken and the God who has promised. And now we have the God who appears. effectively to confirm or to seal the promise.

In verse 7 we read the Lord appeared to Abraham and said to your offspring I will give this land.

Speak promise appear. Abraham said to Abraham was promised.

Abraham himself was not to see the fulfillment of this promise but his offspring would. What did Abraham do in response?

[21:02] God has spoken God has promised God has appeared thank you very much God I'll now go and order a take away Abraham worshipped. Abraham effectively fell to his knees and worshipped the Lord our God.

How do we know that? That's the meaning of he built there an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him. From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent and there and with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east and there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord.

We sometimes underestimate the importance of worship. We sometimes underestimate the importance of simply coming to the Lord to give thanks and to worship him, to call upon his name.

But it makes utter logical sense if we believe it's God who's spoken, God who has promised, God who has appeared, my Lord and my saviour. I give you thanks and praise.

So Abraham's dedication to God has not declined one iota. He offers up to him the worship which is due and rededicates himself to his service.

[ 22 : 19 ] Now I just want to leap ahead now and turn us over to chapter 17 where we see the idea of the sealing of the promise being reinforced in the idea of a covenant.

This is not the first appearance in scripture as a covenant but it is a particular it's not actually the first appearance of covenant even to Abraham but it's the sealing of the covenant that has been settled with Abraham.

And it's important for us today particularly in the reformed tradition that we sit in where covenant is actually quite an important doctrinal concept.

And what we see here is a series of promises from God a response of acceptance and obedience from Abraham and a seal to the covenant in the idea of circumcision.

In that covenant with God and his people we see encapsulated our own relationship with God sealed not with circumcision but with the blood of Christ shed on the cross.

[ 23 : 24 ] So the covenant remains as powerful as everlasting as eternal today but it's not a covenant sealed by circumcision a physical act it's a covenant sealed by the sacrifice of Christ the shedding of Christ's blood on the cross.

So chapter 17 verse 1 when Abraham was 99 years old the Lord appeared to Abraham. Now the problem sometimes of reading scripture is timescales can get sort of squashed into a chapter or half a chapter whereas quite often the description that the Bible is taking us to is spread over quite a long period of time.

But we have here God appearing again to Abraham in a significant way and a dramatic appearance and the form of these appearances are usually quite similar striking intervention often involving God speaking in an authoritative way.

Look at the statement here when Abraham was 99 years old the Lord appeared to Abraham and said to him I am God almighty. Wasn't just in case he'd forgotten there was a long gap between some of these theophanies they're often called in the sort of academic literature the appearance of God God making himself known and it is God just saying to Abraham do not forget who I am I am God almighty God establishing who he is and through the drama of his appearance establishing his authority to speak as God and God then gives Abraham an instruction which demands from Abraham not a functional response do this do that but a spiritual one walk with me and you and be blameless

God was 99 years old the Lord appeared to Abraham and said to him I am God and this time he doesn't say go and Abraham went he gives a spiritual injunction walk before me and be blameless he doesn't mean take physical steps like Abraham has been doing in his trek first from Earl of the Chaldeans and then towards the promised land he means walk with me spiritually be before me Abraham I am your God you are my people walk before me and be blameless spiritual demand what God requires from his servants is spiritual faithfulness and obedience you may remember this morning when I was speaking this morning I drew the distinction between or rather

[ 26 : 37 ] I challenged the distinction that is often drawn between well the Bible says this but pastorally we will do that and I pointed out that if the Bible says this it cannot possibly be faithful to pastorally do something else and to pastorally do this only makes sense if that's what the Bible teaches exactly the same here walk before me follow me love me worship me obey me not somebody else not something else live the way I call you to live be blameless live the way I call you to live that I may make my covenant between me and you and may multiply you greatly so there's a promise a promise of faithfulness a promise that we are to love the

Lord our God and to keep his commands we are to walk in his ways and remember his mighty deeds we are to be holy before him and in return the Lord will not forget or abandon his people he will not abandon his covenant so in other words we're dealing here not so much with a relationship of law but one of grace God expects us to love him and he will bless us well what does all this mean for us today now another way of understanding how the Old Testament functions is to realise that the Old Testament is built upon three pillars the land the law and the temple those were the three central pillars of the Old Testament and what God is doing with the people of Israel in these Old Testament covenants is setting the scene for how these physical attributes will be transformed into the spiritual so the land will not just be that occupied by the ethnic people of

Israel but will become a spiritual nation spread across all geographic and ethnic divisions the law will not just be the list of the Ten Commandments but will be written on our hearts Romans 3 the temple will not just be a physical place of worship but will be replaced by the worship of Christ in our heart in spirit and in truth so can you see each we're taking each of the pillars of the Old Testament and in Christ they're being transformed into spiritual realities for the Lord's people so the land and the ethnic people of Israel becomes the Christian church of all people who belong to Jesus the law becomes not simply the written law but the law that is written on our hearts the temple becomes not just the physical place where we worship but the worship of Christ in our hearts now in the light of that the characteristics of the covenant make more sense so in verse 7 of chapter 17 we're told I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring after you this is not a set of promises which will wax and wane like the moon it is not just personal to Abraham but between me and you and your offspring after you the land too verse 8 will be given as an everlasting possession and I will be their God now verses 9 to 14 we see the sealing of the covenant through circumcision why do we not circumcise today says here in the scriptures the covenant of circumcision God's promise is sealed through circumcision so why do we not circumcise today primarily because the physical promises of the covenant have indeed been transformed into spiritual realities with

Christ and the spiritual reality of relationship with God through his grace has been made possible through the death of Christ on the cross and so the sealing of that spiritual covenant is in the blood of Christ shed for us that's why we don't circumcise because the physical reality of the sealing of the promise has been sealed in blood by Christ well we need to finish the Lord spoke the Lord promised the Lord appeared the Lord spoke Abraham obeyed the Lord promised Abraham trusted the Lord appeared Abraham worshipped and rededicated himself all in the timing of God so in Abraham and the covenants we see the establishing in history with God's people of

[ 32 : 36 ] Israel what will in Christ become spiritual truths for all God's people like the people of old we are told to obey the Lord's commands like the people of old we are to receive his promise a promise established long ago but now available to all through faith in Jesus Christ let's pray together