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## THE PROMISED ONE | THE PROMISED SON

December 7, 2025

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Let me begin by asking you an essential question. What kind of a book is the Bible? Some people might say the Bible is nothing more than a book of myth, saga, or religious folklore. That we should read it the same way that we might read Homer's "Iliad" or "The Epic of Gilgamesh" — its value is simply poetic or symbolic. Others might say the Bible is a book of history. It is the historical record of one particular people's evolving experience and understanding of God, and therefore its value is historical or cultural. And there are others who would say the Bible is essentially a book of ethics. It's a moral handbook. It presents a host of characters who provide us with both positive and negative examples for how to live. It's like Aesop's Fables, and therefore its value lies in its ethics.

What should we say to all of this? Well certainly the Bible includes poetry and history and morals. But at the end of the day, the Bible is not a book of myth, it's not merely a book of history, and it's not a book of ethics. The Bible is a book of Christ. Though the Bible was written over the course of 1500 years in multiple languages by all different types and kinds of people, the Bible tells one long unfolding story — one story that is ultimately written by God through a variety of different human authors. And this one long unfolding story centers on his Son. The problem is that if you do not see this overarching storyline in the Bible, well then you cut the heart out of the Bible and you forfeit its power, because the purpose of this one long unfolding story is to lead you to an altogether different form of life, which can only be found in Jesus Christ.

So during this Advent season, we are going to consider how Jesus fulfills all the ancient promises in the Scriptures. Today we focus on a place in this story where God's rescue of the world takes a decisive turn. It's the call of Abram — or as he's later known, Abraham, the father of a multitude. So I'd like us to look at God's promise to Abram, and I'd like us to consider: 1) *what this promise means to Abram*, 2) *what this promise means to Jesus*, and 3) *what this promise means to us*.

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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."

<sup>4</sup>So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

*Genesis 12:1-4*

## Background

This passage represents one of the most important turning points in the history of the world. But in order to understand why, I need to provide you with a little background and context. At this point in the Book of Genesis, God has waited to see how human beings will respond to his love and grace three times. He waits after he first creates human beings, he waits after humanity falls into sin and misery, and he waits again after the flood. He waits and he sees three times, but every time human beings turn away from God and persist in their sin. All three times, they choose rebellion.

For example, in the immediately preceding chapter, Genesis 11, we read that humanity tried to build a life completely apart from God with no reference to God. They said to themselves, let's make a city and a tower with its top in the heavens. And why do they want to do this? Because they want to make a great name for themselves. They're trying to build a life, a society that is altogether apart from and independent from God. They want to make their name great. But God can't allow them to continue to rebel and wander farther and farther away from him, so he frustrates their plans, he confuses their language, and he scatters them over the face of the earth.

So God's been waiting and seeing how human beings will respond, and so far nothing has worked. And so now God resolves to do something completely new. Now God is going to introduce a completely different kind of life. He's going to initiate an entirely different way of being a human being by forming a people to himself, by forming a people for himself, and it all begins with this one man named Abram. Now what I want you to see is that this new kind of life that he initiates through Abram is available to us all, because this was the original promise: that he would bless Abram, so that through Abram all the families of the earth might be blessed, so that we might find favor with God.

## What This Promise Means to Abraham

So let's consider more closely God's interaction with Abram: 1) *the call*, 2) *the command*, and 3) *the promise*.

### The Call

First, the call. It's important to note that when the call comes into Abram's life, he's not looking for God. He's not seeking God. He's not expecting God. In fact, Abram is simply a pagan man living in a pagan world from a family that worshiped other gods. We know that Abram lived in Ur of the Chaldeans, located on the Euphrates River in what is now considered southern Iraq, and archeologists have discovered that Ur of the Chaldeans was an important center for the worship of the Moon. In fact, the name of Abram's father, Tara, meant Moon.

So at this point in the story in Genesis, the knowledge of the one true God has completely disappeared. Because of humanity's persistent sin and rebellion, there is not a single living soul on the earth who knows the one true God. And there's Abram, living in Ur of the Chaldeans, worshiping the Moon. But then in the midst of all this darkness, God speaks, and there's hope again.

Without notice, without any kind of advanced warning, out of nowhere, by sheer grace, God calls Abram. And this is always how God's call comes into any of our lives. It is always an undeserved gift. Abram didn't deserve it. He wasn't looking for it. It comes into his life at God's initiative. God is always the one who makes the first move toward us when we are not even cognizant of his existence or his care for us. And so the call comes into Abram's life, and it changes everything forever.

That call is even more emphatic in the original Hebrew language. Effectively, God says to Abram, "Go. You. Get out. Leave. Leave your country. Leave your father's household. Leave your kindred and go. Go where? I'll tell you later. Go to the land that I will show you." So God speaks to Abram. He singles him out. He unsettles him. He disturbs him. He gets his attention. And that is the way that God still works.

Now, God doesn't necessarily speak to us in an audible voice. For one reason, he doesn't need to! Because now he's given us his Word — the one thing that Abram at that point did not have. But one way or another, God speaks to us. It could be through his Scriptures. It could be that one day you read the Bible, and all of a sudden words that have never meant anything to you before suddenly strike you in the heart.

He might speak to you through his Word. He could speak to you through a sermon. He could speak to you through a conversation. He could speak to you through an important life event, a birth, a death, something that shatters your preexisting idea of how the world works. Or perhaps God might speak to you through a trying circumstance. It could be an accident, an illness, a relational breakup, a business failure, some kind of great disappointment. It could be anything. And whether gradually or suddenly, it really doesn't matter. One way or another, God gets your attention. He disturbs you, he unsettles you, and then he whispers to you in that call that there is another way of life available to you if you would only take it.

I think that it's especially important for us to hear this during Advent when so many people are longing for another kind of life, a different kind of life. So much of the time, we expect Christmas to be merry and bright. But real life doesn't always match up with our idolized version of it. And when that happens, it might leave us feeling even more disappointed, even more depressed, or perhaps even more cynical.

A number of years ago, there was a very well-known pop singer who wrote an incredibly depressing Christmas song. I won't tell you who this person is to protect the not-so-innocent. This song was rather crude, but at least this artist was voicing her pain. And when she was later interviewed and asked, "Why did you write this song?" she said, "I wrote this depressing Christmas song because one moment I felt so utterly alone, even when I was in a house full of family and friends." And she talks about how childhood memories of Christmas and unrealized expectations for Christmas can make you that much more aware of what you're missing: a sense of love or connection or stability.

For so many people, the holidays can be especially stressful because family gatherings force us to confront strained relationships or unresolved conflict, or perhaps those gatherings make us that much more acutely aware of the depth of our loss when we have to stare at that empty seat at the dining room table. See, for

many of us, rather than it being the happiest season of the year, Christmas can be the hardest. And that's why the call of God matters, because the call comes in the middle of our darkest moments and breaks through the darkness.

So now, perhaps more than ever, we need to know that there is another kind of life available to us that is not dependent upon our circumstances. There is a kind of life that provides a sense of meaning and joy and purpose that doesn't fade but that actually grows under pressure, and that's the kind of life that we need. So once God gets your attention, what happens next matters more than anything. This is what makes all the difference.

### **The Command**

Notice that this call is accompanied by a command. "Go. Get out. Leave." God calls Abram to separate himself from both his country and his family. In many ways these two things form the very basis of our identity. Who we are as human beings is determined in many ways by our family, by our genetic makeup, and by our home or our social location. But God calls Abram to make this radical break with the past so that God might provide him with a new identity.

You see, that's what the Bible means by repentance. To repent simply means to think again or to change your course. If you suddenly realize that there is no solid, firm foundation to your life, then the only thing left to do is to rip up the floorboards of your life and start again. You admit your foolishness, you admit your failure, you admit your pride, you admit your rebellion against God, and then by sheer grace, he not only offers you his forgiveness and his love, but he adopts you into his family and gives you a new identity that is founded and centered on him.

### **The Promise**

To leave everything that we have once known would be a terrifying prospect if it weren't for the promise. So God calls Abram to leave his old identity behind, but he's not asking him to then step out into some empty void. No, the command is followed by the promise. And so look at what God promises.

At Babel people were trying to make their own name great. But here God promises Abram, "I will make your name great." And therefore, what we realize here is that God is going to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. He's going to give us a true identity, a real foundation, that can stand the test of time and withstand any circumstance.

That's the fundamental difference between someone who is and someone who is not yet a Christian. You see, apart from God, we try to achieve some kind of greatness on our own through our own efforts, but a Christian is someone who receives greatness as a gift of God's grace by being adopted into his family — by becoming his own. What that shows us then is that this yearning, this desire, this longing for greatness that we all have is not misplaced; it's simply misdirected. We're looking for it in the wrong place. True greatness is not something that we achieve for ourselves. True greatness is something that we receive as a gift from God.

So look at these two promises that Abram receives. God tells them, look, if you leave your country and your family, you're going to receive another — not just 10 or 100 or 1000 but a million times over. Look at the promise of land. He says, "Leave your country and go to the land that I will show you." And look at the promise of family. "Leave your kindred and your father's house and I will make you a great nation. I will bless you so that in you, all the families of the Earth shall be blessed." So Abraham receives two promises: the promise of land and the promise of posterity, or literally the Hebrew word is the promise of "a seed."

### **What This Promise Means to Jesus**

So God is in the business of making a new humanity and a new creation through his promise to Abram, which brings me to my second point. We've considered what this promise means for Abram, but now let's turn and focus on what this promise means for Jesus. God makes these astounding promises, but what you need to realize is that none of these promises were fulfilled in Abram's lifetime, and therefore they had to point beyond themselves. This is part of the overarching storyline of the Bible that doesn't end with Abram but extends far past him.

So God makes these astounding promises — he says that Abram will receive land — but do you realize that when Abram eventually makes it into the land of promise, into Canaan, he doesn't actually settle down there, he doesn't own any property, and he doesn't have his own home? We're told that he lives in a tent. His whole life he lives in a tent. Abram, in the land of Canaan, is a pilgrim. He's a stranger. He's an exile. And by the end of his life, he only owned one single thing in Canaan. Do you know what it was? A cave. That's all he is able to purchase. He purchases a cave from the Hittites. Why? So that he has a place to bury his wife Sarah when she dies. So he receives this promise of land, but all he has at the end is a tent and a tomb.

Or consider the promise of a seed. When he's promised many descendants, Abram, at that time, has no children at all. And we just read that he was 75 years old when the promise came to him. And then it's not fulfilled right away. As the years go by, Abraham begins to wonder, how is God going to do this? Did I hear him wrong? Is he really going to fulfill this promise?

And in this remarkable moment, one night God tells Abram, I want you to step outside of your tent and look up at the night sky. God says, Abram, count the stars if you're able. Have you ever tried to count the stars? You get to 5, 6, 7, and then you lose track of which ones you've already counted. So you can just picture Abraham trying to count the stars. 3, 5, 6, and then he gives up. It's impossible. Who can count the stars? And God says, exactly. Exactly! He doubles down on the promise. Your descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Your descendants will be as numerous as the sand on the seashore. But do you realize that despite this great promise, by the time Abraham dies, he doesn't have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky? He's only got one. Only one legitimate son, Isaac: the child of promise.

So how do we make sense of all this? On the one hand, yes, it's true, there is a literal historical fulfillment of these promises. Eventually, down through the generations,



Abraham's descendants do move into the land of Canaan. But even that doesn't go far enough. There is a deeper gospel fulfillment to all of these promises.

So consider first the deeper fulfillment of this promise of a seed. The true seed of Abram through whom God will bless all the families of the Earth is not Isaac; it's Jesus. The apostle Paul explains in Galatians 3:16, "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his seed" — "seed" in the singular. It doesn't say, and to "seeds" plural, referring to many, but to one. And to your "seed," who is Christ. Jesus is the promised seed of Abraham through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed, through whom we will find favor with God.

And that's why the New Testament describes Abraham as the father of all true believers. See, it doesn't matter if you were physically descended from Abraham to get in on this blessing. As Paul goes on to say in Galatians 3:29, "If you are in Christ, if you're united to Jesus by faith, then you are Abraham's seed — heirs according to the promise." In other words, the true descendants of Abraham do not share Abraham's blood; they share Abraham's faith. His promise to make his seed as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore was not a national promise but an international promise. It was global in its scope. And the way you get in on the promise is not by sharing Abraham's blood but by sharing his faith.

When God took Abraham out and told him to look up at that night sky and to count the stars if he could, Abraham believed God. He took God at his word. He trusted his word alone, and as a result, God reckoned it to him as righteous. He considered Abraham to be in right relationship with himself, not because he had done anything, but simply because he trusted the promise that his descendants would in fact be greater than the sand on the seashore. So the way we get in on that promise is not by sharing Abraham's blood, but by sharing his faith — trusting in God's Word alone.

What you could use as an image to reflect on all this is the image of a funnel. Think of a funnel that's wide at the top and then gets increasingly narrow toward the bottom. Through the story of the Scriptures, we realize that God continues to narrow the line of promise. At first it seems as if he's undermining the very promises that he's made, but God is going through this process of selection. He's narrowing the line of promise until that promised seed narrows all the way down to the point of one little baby in a manger. This is how C.S. Lewis once put it. He said:

After the knowledge of God had been universally lost or obscured, one man from the whole earth (Abraham) is picked out. He is separated (miserably enough, we may suppose) from his natural surroundings, sent into a strange country, and made the ancestor of a nation who are to carry the knowledge of the true God. Within this nation there is further selection: some die in the desert, some remain behind in Babylon. There is further selection still. The process grows narrower and narrower, sharpens at last into one small bright point like the head of a spear. It is a Jewish girl at her prayers. All humanity (so far as concerns its redemption) has narrowed to that.

You see, once you realize that God's promise narrows all the way down, funnels all the way down to Jesus, then you need to turn that funnel upside down again, because

from Jesus, the promised seed, the circle widens now as the blessing goes out from Jesus to all the families of the earth. So the promise extends now to people from every nation, from every people, from every tribe, from every language so that eventually, at the very end of the Bible, in Revelation 7, the seer John has a vision. The curtain of this world is pulled back from before his eyes. He sees things as they really are, and he glimpses the throne room of God. And what does he see? He sees a multitude of people that no one could ever count — from every nation, tribe, people, and language — gathered around the throne. And together they proclaim, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.” See, God’s promised seed is Jesus. He’s the one through whom all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

So the promise of the seed finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ and in the people of Christ. But what about the promise of the land? Again, yes, there is a literal historical fulfillment in the land of Israel, but as we see with the seed (The seed was about far more than Isaac.), so the promise of the land is about so much more than a tiny strip of real estate in the Middle East. And here’s how we know that.

Think about it this way: If the true descendants of Abraham are the ones who share Abraham’s faith, and if the promise of the land was limited to Israel, well then you would expect to read in the New Testament that if you share Abraham’s faith then you’re united to Jesus by faith, and if you’re part of God’s covenant community, well then as a Christian, you should go and live in Israel, the land of promise. But there is not a single verse in the New Testament that tells Christians to go live in Israel. Why? Because the promise of land was always meant to go far beyond Israel. Israel’s just a microcosm of what God is going to do over the whole world.

See, just as Jesus is the fulfillment of the promised seed, so Jesus is the fulfillment of the promised land. Jesus is our true home. Jesus is the place where heaven and earth meet. Jesus is the true temple. Jesus is the place where God dwells in the midst of his people. Jesus is our Emmanuel, God with us. And from the very beginning, Jesus has been on a mission to renew the whole world and to usher in a new creation. So Israel is just a microcosm of the greater promise. And do you know who understood that? Abraham. And here’s how I know.

Let me direct you to a verse you’ve probably never paid much attention to. In Romans 4:13, Paul reveals that Abraham understood the deeper gospel fulfillment of this promise, because there Paul writes, “For the promise to Abraham and his seed that he would be the heir of the world did not come through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.” See, Abraham knew that God was going to give him and his descendants the whole world. The meek shall inherit the earth. So the promise of the seed finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ and the people of Christ, and the promise of the land finds its ultimate fulfillment in a whole new world: the new creation. God is establishing a new humanity and a new creation.

## **What This Promise Means to Us**

We’ve considered what this promise means to Abram and what this promise means to Jesus, but what does this promise mean to us? Well, the thing that’s most remarkable about this is that when God issues this call to Abram, “Go. Get out. Leave. Go to the land

that I will show you. Go without knowing where you're supposed to go," despite the fact that he had so little information, so little to go on, so little understanding, so little clarity, Abraham believes. He trusts God and he obeys. Verse 4 says he went out. He left everything that was comfortable, safe, familiar, secure, and he entered into the unknown. He does not know where he's going, but he knows who is going with him, and therefore he goes.

You see, this is what the life of faith looks like. And over time — slowly, imperfectly, and yet surely — his faith grows. His faith grows with time. Now, how do I know that? Well, do you realize that there's a place in John 8 where one afternoon Jesus says that Abraham "saw my day and rejoiced in it." Somehow Jesus says that Abraham was able to look forward, down through the many centuries, and he saw Jesus' day, and he rejoiced in it. And that's what gave him the faith to keep pressing on even when he didn't know what his circumstances would bring.

But how is it that Abraham could see ahead? How did he see Jesus' day? Well, here's my best guess. The most climactic moment in Abraham's life is recorded for us in Genesis 22. We're told that God was going to test Abraham's faith. And so he tells him, Abraham, take your son — your only son, Isaac, whom you love — take him up on top of Mount Moriah and offer him as a sacrifice. Now it must have made no sense whatsoever to Abraham. Isaac was the child of promise. If Isaac died, the promise would die with him. So how could God ask him to do such a thing? And yet, if you read the text very closely, it's clear that somehow, some way, Abraham knew that both he and his son would come back down that mountain together again.

But he goes through with it. And up to the very last minute, it's not until he has raised the knife in his hand that God stops him and then provides him with a ram as a substitute. He sees that ram caught in the thicket and offers that as a sacrifice for sin instead. And in that moment, what did Abraham realize? He saw Jesus' day and rejoiced in it, because he realized that God was not going to exact a sacrifice from us to cover our sin. No, God was going to provide a sacrifice for us in order to cover our sins so that he might shower his blessing, his favor, his forgiveness upon us.

The goal was not merely to test Abraham's faith. God's goal was to inform Abraham's faith. To show him what it was that he truly believed in. To see how these promises actually would be fulfilled. Because do you know where Mount Moriah is? Up there on Mount Moriah, where he is asked to offer his son and yet is given a substitute instead, is the very same place where the temple in Jerusalem will be built, where sacrifices will be offered for sin. It's the very same ridge where the cross of Calvary will stand.

You see, he saw ahead. He saw Jesus' day and realized that God was going to make a sacrifice on his behalf so that he and all the families of the Earth might be blessed. He learns this deep, deep truth. However faintly, however dimly, he realized that this is the only way that God can offer a new kind of life to humanity.

So this Advent, God may be disturbing you. He may be speaking to you. Through his word, through his circumstance, he might be unsettling you even in the midst of disappointment, despair, or perhaps even cynicism. But in the midst of your circumstances, God is calling you even now. And he is whispering to you, "There is



another kind of life available.” But this call is accompanied by a command. “Go. Get out. Leave.” You have to separate yourself from the false foundations upon which you are building your life so that you might receive a new foundation and a new identity.

So what do you need to leave this Advent? Perhaps a bad habit, an unhealthy relationship, a destructive pattern of thought or behavior, or perhaps a self-made identity because you are trying to make your own name great rather than receiving a truly great name as a gift of God’s grace. But in order to be able to even think of following through on this command to obey — to go as Abram did — you have to hear the promise.

You’re not stepping into an empty void. You have so much more reason to trust than Abram did. Look at how little he saw, how little he understood. We have so much more, because what did God do for us? God sent his Son — his only Son, Jesus, whom he loves. And Jesus went out. He left everything that was safe and comfortable and secure and familiar. He not only left his Father’s side; he left the glories of heaven. And he didn’t just go into another land; he entered into our broken world. And unlike Abram who didn’t know what was going to happen to him, who went out not knowing where he was going, Jesus knew exactly where he was going. He knew exactly what he was going to face: poverty, rejection, suffering, and death.

The moment that Jesus entered this world, he knew that he was headed directly to the cross on Mount Moriah. And so when God looks at Abram on Mount Moriah, he can say, “Now I know.” Now, I know that you fear me, seeing that you have not withheld your one and only son. But do you realize that when we look at Mount Moriah, when we now look at the cross, now we can say, “Now I know.” Now I know that you love me, seeing that you have not withheld your one and only Son whom you love. You see, we have so much more reason to trust, and we can go out in faith.

So is the Bible a book of virtue? Is it filled with characters representing positive and negative examples for us to follow? If the Bible were a book of virtue, it would be all about you and what you need to do for God in order to try to win his favor. But no, the Bible is not a book of virtue; it is a book of Christ. The Bible is not about you and what you need to do for God; the Bible is all about Jesus and what he has done for you by sheer grace in order to shower his blessing upon you so that you might receive the favor of God.

As for Abram, so for us: We are blessed in order to be a blessing. He blesses us so that through us, he might extend his blessing to all the families of the earth, so that all of us together one day might gather around the throne of God — that we might become part of that multitude: the multitude of people that no one could ever count, more numerous than the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore. People from every tribe, nation, language who together proclaim, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb.”

So this Advent, consider how you need to go out in faith, not knowing where you’re going, but knowing who is going with you. That is the promise that was given to Abram, that is the promise that is fulfilled in Jesus, and that is the promise that is now offered to you and to me.

*Let me pray for us.*

*Father God, we thank you that even when we find ourselves in a situation where the knowledge of who you are and of your love and care for us has been lost, that even in the silence, even in the darkness, you speak and there's hope again. Lord, we pray that by your initiative and your grace, your call might break into our life. That we might hear your command to repent, to rip up the floorboards of our life and to start afresh, to build a new foundation centered on you so that we might receive your promises: a new identity, a new life. We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen.*