

4 Promise Genesis 12:1-3, 17:1-8

Would you buy a used car from Nick Clegg? Look, I'm sorry, I don't get political from the pulpit very often (maybe I should), but let's face it; who is not shocked at the degree to which Nick Clegg failed to keep his promises?

You only need to type "Nick Clegg b" into Google and it will finish the sentence for you; "Nick Clegg broken promises." Ironically, last year the Lib Dems actually ran a Party Election broadcast which began with an opening shot of a sheet of paper reading "No student tuition fees – Labour" and Nick Clegg announcing, "Broken promises; there have been too many in the last few years..."

Suffice to say that the comments added to that video on Youtube are universally disappointed, condemnatory and, quite frankly, I couldn't repeat many of them in a church building.

We know and accept that governments have to take unpopular decisions, but what galls, what seems fundamentally wrong and a betrayal of trust is when someone so blatantly breaks their word and goes back on a promise. But this morning in Genesis 12 and 17 we encounter God's big promise to humanity, a promise he makes to one man; Abram, but a promise which will touch all the nations of the world – a promise which God has not broken, a promise he has kept.

And this is not some distant historical promise of no real relevance to us, rather it is fundamentally good news that to us here in Peterborough, this morning that God made it and that God kept it.

So what did God do, what did he promise?

Well, first of all God promised **blessing**. Do you remember when we looked at the Fall?

How Eve and Adam rebelled against God? How they decided that they didn't want God in control of their lives and so they allowed sin (rebellion against God) to dictate their actions? Do you remember the result?

Creation was cursed, creation had God's blessing removed from it; the snake was cursed, the woman was cursed, the man was cursed and the ground and all it produced was cursed all because of sin.

But look what God's promises here in verses 2 and 3; God is going to do something incredible, not immediately, but through Abram "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Blessing is mention five times in these two verses; God will bless, Abraham's offspring will bless, they will be blessed by others and through them all peoples on earth will be blessed.

And God says he will do this – no maybe, no possibly – God will do it!

So there is to be an overflowing of blessing in God's promise in these two verses. And that means that again we can refute that unjustified notion that the God of the Old Testament is a grumpy, nasty, vindictive and angry God. God is not – he's full of blessing. God is not happy when he's justly punishing sin – we saw that last week; he's "grieved" and his "heart is filled with pain".

What does God love to do? He loves to bless people. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you".

So, what does it mean to be blessed by God? Well, I suppose that (without going round in circles) it means the opposite of being cursed by God – it means a full, personal relationship with him and with other people. It meant to Abram wealth, prosperity, peace, long life – that was certainly an Old Testament understanding of blessing.

But as we see that promise of blessing being fulfilled, we see that it is so much more than that too and that we are wonderfully drawn into God's blessing through this promise because it is not an exclusive promise of blessing made by God to one man and a few of his descendants. Whilst it is a blessing on Abram, it then extends to those who bless him and ultimately through Abram to all peoples of the earth.

And we can see what that means by unpacking God's blessing through the other promises he makes to Abram. You see secondly God promises Abram People. In chapter 12 God promises to make Abram into a great nation, but a great nation has to at least begin with one son; you can't have grandchildren and great grandchildren without first having children, but Abram is 75 years old.

By the time we get to chapter 17 of Genesis he is 99! I know Rod Steward celebrated the birth of his eighth child this week, but he's a sprightly 66-year old in comparison. Has time passed Abram by? Has God missed that "window of opportunity"? Well, look at chapter 17 verse 2 because God says, "I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."

God keeps his promises and by chapter 21 of Genesis Isaac is born. Do you think that it is impossible for God to overturn the curse sin has brought into the world? Of course not. Want some proof, well here you are, Abram is going to be a father as he hits a hundred (with a wife well past the first flush of youth too)!

And why the change of name from Abram to Abraham? Well Abram means “exalted father”, it sounds good, but is of little use if you don’t actually have any children. No, God is the one to be exalted because he is the one who is going to bless this man with children enough to become a great nation, so “Abram” becomes simply “Abraham” which means “father of many”.

In the ancient world children were a blessing from God who would enable you to thrive and be prosperous as a family and so children who would found a great nation would be an ultimate sign of God’s blessing.

But it goes beyond just that because God promises Abram that through him and his offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.

Now, by Jesus’ day the religious leaders had forgotten this element of God’s promise; foreigners and certainly foreigners who didn’t worship God were despised and discriminated against. Being one of God’s people had become a very insular activity and the hope and anticipation of God’s judgement against the nations was pretty high in the thoughts of many Jews.

But Jesus was a Jew and he knew God’s promise to Abraham. Jesus died on the cross and rose again to eternal life not just for the Jews but for “all people’s on earth” and we saw that in our sermon at the end of January when Jesus commissioned the disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matt 28:19-20) - “go and make disciples of all nations” – not just this nation, not just your nation, but all nations.

And so Paul writes to the Galatians (an us) “Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.” (Galatians 3:6-7)

God keeps his promise; through Israel and through Jesus the perfect Jew all peoples are able to be brought into God’s blessing. So the fact that you and I are here today; redeemed by Jesus and forgiven by God goes right back to this promise in Genesis 12.

And then we come to the third of God’s promises which is of a **home land**. Now Abraham fairly quickly makes it to Canaan but you could never say it was his homeland, he was always a stranger there, a visitor, and he certainly never ruled over it.

All that comes much later (as we will see), but Abraham is confident in God’s promises, in fact in chapter 11 verse 9 of the New Testament book of Hebrews we read, “By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.”

Why were they content to do that? The next verse spells it out, “For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” – Is this the nation of Israel? The city of Jerusalem?

On the one hand, yes, but we are encouraged by the writer of Hebrews to see the big picture just as Abraham had and in verse 16 of Hebrews 11 it is spelled out for us, “they were longing for a better country— a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”

Again we see that all peoples are blessed through God's promise to Abraham and whilst the land of Canaan does become the homeland of Abraham's (fairly immediate) descendants there is an eternal dimension to this promise too because God announces that his promise is "an everlasting covenant" and as such it points us to the eternal city of God in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

So in these verses God declares his hand; he will rescue humanity – all peoples will be blessed rather than cursed and that blessing will come through the offspring of one man; Abraham.

As God's people they will become a great nation in order to draw in all nations into God's blessing and they will inherit a land through God's gracious provision pointing ahead to God's recreation of the New Heavens and the New Earth as an eternal home for all his people.

But before all this becomes too academic, too detached from us, before we look at these verses from Genesis and merely see this as an interesting footnote in our spiritual history; "Ahh yes, I am saved because of this promise made to Abraham, kept by God and fulfilled in Jesus" let me draw something to your attention of vital importance and which has practical implications for us all.

We go back to Genesis 12 verse 1, "The LORD had said to Abram, Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." After that God promised Abram blessing; the promise was contingent upon Abram's faithful action in response to God's calling.

The Bible is full of God's promises to us, but it is also full of God's call for our faithful obedience to him. Why did God keep his promise to Abraham? Hebrews 11 tells us,

“By faith [Abraham] made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country”.

Abraham trusted God and faithfully obeyed him and so God kept his promise to him and through him. Through Jesus we have been welcomed into the great nation of God’s people fathered by Abraham. God has many promises for us, but they will not be tossed out randomly like something cheap and disposable, we cannot complain that God doesn’t keep his promises to us if we, his people bought at a price, will not remain faithful to him.

These verses not only put our faith in context and show us that God planned for our rescue and salvation generations before Jesus was born in a stable and millennia before we arrived on this planet, but they also act as an example of what it means to live as God’s people – faithful obedience in the face of upheaval, trust in the face of impossible odds, commitment when the end result is beyond our sight or grasp.

Are we displaying that kind of faith in God or are we simply expecting him to drop his promises into our laps?

If our politicians fail to live up to their promises to us we are filled with indignant anger. The Good news for Christians is that, as Paul puts it, “for no matter how many promises God has made, they are Yes in Christ. (2 Corinthians 1:20) – God keeps his word, but in the light of that reality the challenge to us is to not be so hasty in our condemnation of others, but to judge our own hearts; do we deserve all that God has promised us?

Have we remained faithful to God? Have we done as he commands or do we want it all with little or no cost to ourselves?

It's a tough challenge, but it's the life Jesus calls us to when he tells us to take up our cross and its the life Abram followed as well when he was prepared to give it all up to follow God's call. His devotion is good news for us, are we prepared to live by as much faith to know the fullness of God's promises? It's something to ponder on this week.
Amen.