

SUNDAY, APRIL 18, 2010

Sunday, April 18, 2010: Traveling Mercy

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Genesis 12: 1 – 9.

I. Introduction.

The Book of Genesis is the first book of the Bible. The name, Genesis, means “the beginning. That’s a fitting name for the book which begins our Bible. It is also a fitting name for a book that describes the beginning of all history.

Genesis begins at the very beginning. It tells us the story of creation and how God created the first human beings. In the beginning, there was nothing. God spoke, and something was created out of nothing.

The story of creation tells us that the world got off to a very good start. After each act of creation, God said, “It is good.” God created everything, and it was all good.

But, it didn’t take long for human beings to mess things up. The first story after creation is the story of how the first humans fell into sin. These created beings were expelled from God’s paradise on earth to eek out a survival by working the land.

Sin very quickly escalated from simple disobedience to sibling rivalry to outright murder, when Cain killed his brother Abel. Individual sin escalated even further to systemic evil spread across all of creation. In fact, the sins of the world were so great that God sent a flood to destroy the earth while rescuing Noah and his family to start over. God sent judgment to the earth, but gave the human race a second chance.

How did humanity respond to God’s second chance? Well, it’s not pretty. Human beings continued on their destructive path until the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. The people wanted to be like God. They wanted to build a tower so large that it would give them direct access to God’s presence in Heaven. So, we read about God’s judgment for the third time. God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. God sent a flood to destroy creation. God separated the peoples of the earth with different languages and dispersed them all over the world.

This is the backdrop to the story of Abraham. Genesis 1 – 11, show us that the people of the earth struggled to hear and know God. There were certainly some bright spots, but most of the story is characterized by disobedience and rebellion.

The stories of Genesis 1 – 11 are general and universal stories of how God related to all of humanity at once. That changes in Genesis 12. Beginning with the story of Abraham, we see that God chooses to work with one man and his descendants in order to relate to the entire human race.

In some ways, the story of Abraham is a story of one man and his relationship with God. However, we will see in God’s words to Abraham that this is also a universal story. Instead of fighting against creation and all of humanity, God has chosen to address one man and one people group in order to reach all of creation with his love.

This is the story of how God works with specific individuals to reach everyone on earth. As such, this is not just the story of one man named Abraham. This is a story about us as well.

Read Genesis 12: 1 – 9.

A 75 year old man is hard to change. By the age of 75, most of us become set in our ways. We know what we like. We know what we don't like. We have retired from day to day work. And, now we find things to do that are meaningful to us. We volunteer at the church. We work in the garden. We play with our grandchildren. We go fishing. We read books. We generally do things that we find enjoyable. This is not the story of Abraham.

When Abram was 75 years old, he heard the voice of God. God called Abram to take a great risk of faith and move to a strange new land. This was not the first time Abram had moved to a new land. As a child and young man, Abram lived with his father, Terah, in the city of Ur. More than likely this is modern day Baghdad in Iraq. For some reason—and the Bible does not tell us why—Terah moved his family from Ur to Haran. They settled in Haran and established a comfortable home.

We know Abram better as Abraham. But, here the Bible calls him Abram, because God had not yet changed his name.

II. 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."

God's first words to Abram are stark and unsettling. There is very little subtlety in the word "Leave." God does not want Abram to remain where he is.

Notice how specific God was with Abram: "Leave your country...Leave your people...Leave your father's household." There is a progression from the largest community to the smallest community.

Country is the largest community that defines who Abram is. The country was the region of the world near modern day Turkey. We don't know how long Abram had lived in this country, but it was probably long enough to become settled.

People is a smaller community and probably refers to Abram's extended family. In my case, it would be a reference to the Pittman family. As far as I know, most of my relatives live in Northeast Mississippi. Family was an important defining characteristic of ancient people. Families often lived in clans or even entire villages. The men would find a wife from another family and bring her back to his family land to live.

Father's household is the most specific community God mentions. These were the people nearest and dearest to Abram's heart. Abram had a father who was 145 years old and one remaining brother.

It is difficult to find a modern equivalent for what God asked of Abram. God called Abram to leave the three things that defined his identity. This was not normal in the ancient world. But Abram had to make a choice. What was the most important thing to Abram? Did he love God more than his country, his people and his household?

This is an important question for us as well. What do we love more than God? It is possible that

country, family and household stand in the way of our obedience. But, a much more modern day distraction is our wealth or our possessions.

This is the theme of the familiar story of the Rich Young Ruler. One day, a man came to Jesus and said, "Quick! How can I inherit eternal life?" Jesus calmly reminded the young man of the commandments, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother." The young man insisted that he had kept all these commandments. Then Jesus said, "One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor...Then come follow me." The man walked away sad, because he had great wealth. (Mark 10: 17 – 31)

Jesus cut right to the heart of the matter. There was something this man loved more than he loved God. He wanted to hang on to his own security.

This is exactly what God asked Abram to leave. Abram had a very secure life at 75. He loved his country. He loved his people. He loved his father's household. They gave him a sense of safety. Everything was very comfortable for Abram. But, God didn't want Abram to be comfortable. God wanted Abram to be obedient.

We see this better in the last part of verse one. God told Abram to leave everything he knew and go to "the land I will show you." In other words, Abram had never seen this new land before. He didn't know the people, the customs or even the language. It was unseen and unknown. But, it was God's plan for Abram's life.

Abram knew something that you and I struggle with. We like things that are secure and comfortable and certain. We will make a move if there are guarantees. But Abram demonstrates that the unseen future is better than what we can see if we trust God with the future. An unknown land is better than a comfortable and secure land, if we trust God. Faith always involves an element of risk.

Don't get carried away here. I am not suggesting that you walk out of church and resign from your jobs, sell your homes and move to a new place. Abram heard God's call. God's call is what separates risk from faith.

III. Verses 2 – 3 ... "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."

God made three promises to Abram. If Abram was willing to step out in faith...If Abram was willing to put God ahead of all security...Then, God would take care of Abram.

"I will make you into a great nation..." This is a strange promise. Genesis 11 tells us that 75 year old Abram had a 65 year old wife named Sarai. For some reason, they had lived their entire married life with no children. Now, God is telling this aged, childless couple that one day they would be the ancestors of a great nation.

"I will make your name great..." Name in the Bible is usually a reference to a person's character. We can make a case that it also refers to a person's reputation. If this refers to reputation, then we can see how impossible it seemed to Abram. Perhaps he would have a good reputation among his own

people—if he never left Haran. But, how could a 75 year old start over in a foreign culture and gain a good reputation in the years he had left? Reputation is hard to come by. It takes time to build a reputation.

“I will bless others through you...” This is the third time God has spoken of blessings to Abram. In the first two cases, it seems that God is referring to physical blessings. Abram’s descendants would become a great nation, therefore Abram would one day have children. Abram’s reputation would become widely known; therefore it is reasonable to think he would accumulate possessions and wealth. But, here God seems to refer more to spiritual blessings. Abram’s life would be a blessing to others. In fact, Abram would be a blessing to “all peoples on earth.”

This is what faith is all about. On one hand, God made promises to Abram that seemed impossible. On the other hand, God told Abram that his purpose in life was to serve other people.

Ultimately, faith is trusting God’s promises more than the reality around you. If Abram looked at his reality, he would never have believed he would become the father of a great nation. If Abram focused on reality, he would never have believed that his name and reputation would be known all over the world. But, Abram believed the promises more than the reality.

What kind of promises has God made to you? I can think of a couple of great promises. First, God has promised to be with us. Perhaps this is why Abram was so willing to do what God commanded, because he knew God would be with him. Of course, it does not always seem like God is there. We still live in a world of pain, disappointment, cancer, divorce, death and evil. But, God is with us. Faith is believing that God is here, even when the circumstances are ungodly.

Second, God has promised a better life to all who believe. It’s hard to imagine the world getting better. After all, the world is not becoming a better place. The world is a scary place to live. We live with the fear of terrorism and war. We feel threatened by non-believers and the growth rate of Islam. We feel isolated in the way our values are ignored and even ridiculed by the media. But...One day...One day, we will no longer live in a world like this. One day, we will enter into eternal life and the presence of God in Heaven. This is the better life God has promised. Faith is believing that one day none of this will matter. One day, all this world will pass away.

Until that day, we are to live as Abram lived. We are to be a blessing to the rest of the world. We are to take care of the physical needs around us. We are to take care of the spiritual needs around us. Our greatest blessing is the love God has shown us. It is our job to show that same love to “all peoples on earth”—not all Jews, not all Christians, not all Baptists, not all white people...All Peoples.

IV. Verses 4 – 5 ... So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Verse 4 is a turning point for the entire Bible. When Abram heard God’s call, he obeyed. Notice that God did all the talking and Abram did all the obeying.

Sometimes we think God might be talking to us and we decide the best thing to do is to talk to God. We argue with God. We debate the merits of God’s word to us. We wonder out loud whether it was

really God speaking. We pull out a sheet of paper and do a cost-benefits analysis. Does this really make sense at this point in my life? What will my friends think about me? What will my family think about me?

This is the best way to demonstrate faith in God: Obedience. There was no covenant between God and Abram—at least not yet. There was no Law—at least not yet. There was no clearly defined way to worship God—at least not yet. The only way Abram could demonstrate faith was to hear God and to obey.

V. Conclusion.

Abram obeyed God by embarking on a journey of 400 miles. He left all his security behind him and stepped into the great unknown.

Faith is never the destination. Heaven is the destination. Faith is the journey. It is leaving the known for the unknown. It is leaving the certain for the uncertain. It is trusting God's promises more than the reality around us. It is hearing God and obeying.

Lord, give us faith for the journey...Give us traveling mercy.