

“The Greatest Blessing”

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Kevin Watkins

Right now, what do you really want?

Think about that for a minute.

If you could have anything, what would that be?

Over the past few years, I have met regularly with a counselor and have done some counseling and this question keeps coming up. What is it that you want? In your work, in your marriage, as a parent, what do you want?

And while that is a straightforward question, it can be hard to answer. Big questions like this are hard to answer. My wife and I often can't decide what we want for dinner. How are we supposed to answer a big question like, What do I really want? Often my answer and others' answers are, “I don't know.” Maybe that is your answer, “I don't know.”

But for others of you, the answer to that question is super clear. I think we all have times in our lives when the answer is super clear. You are out of work or in a job you hate and you want nothing more than to have a job doing meaningful work that pays you enough to survive (and have some fun) and to work with people you like.

Maybe your daughter or son is languishing. They are struggling and all you want is for them to be free, to be healthy, and to thrive.

Or you are sick or hurt or someone you love is in the hospital. The answer to the question, “What do you want?” is clear. I want to be healed. I want my loved one to live. That is what I want. What do you want?

Well in our story today, we meet Abram and he could answer that question, “What do you really want?” in an instant.

But to understand, first, we have to go back to the end of chapter 11.

The end of chapter 11 is the genealogy of Terah. The short version is that Terah has three sons, and one of them is Abram (who will later be known as Abraham). Abram was born in present day Southern Iraq. Abram has an orphaned nephew Lot and Abram was married to Sarai. And then this in v.30

30 Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive.

Now if you are not familiar with the OT or the bible, genealogies are important. They can be exhausting to read, so and so was the father of so and so, who was the father of so and so. But if you read them carefully, you may find an alteration in the normal formula. Pay attention to that.

In particular, this genealogy is different. It ends with that line about Sarai. She was childless, she was not able to conceive.

To be barren, to be unable to have children was and still is very painful. My wife and I experienced it for 3 years and it was enormously painful. To want to be a mom, to be a dad, and to be unable to conceive can be so difficult that it can and often does lead to bitterness and resentment and even to divorce in our day. And it was equally as painful to people in antiquity. 1 Samuel 1 tells the story of Hannah and how year after year, she would go up to the house of God and pray for a child. And at one point the text says that in her deep anguish she prayed to the Lord, she poured out her soul to the Lord, and wept bitterly. She was so beside herself, that Eli the priest thought she was drunk.

Infertility can be agonizing and now imagine Sarai and Abram get married young, as people often did. And they expect to have children and then every month for a year the answer is no. Then 2 years, 3 years, and they start to lose all hope. They try every month for 25 years and after 300 tries, the answer is still no. I wonder about that difficulty, what did that do to their marriage?

Now there is more to life than having kids. You do not need to be married or have kids to have a full life with God. Jesus and the apostle Paul are two good examples. That being said, in Abram's day, having kids was eminently practical. A child, especially a son, would have been their retirement plan. Someone to take care of them when they were old. Without a child, there was no one to pass on the family name to, no one to carry on the family tradition of chocolate cake with caramel icing on your birthday, no one to bury you when you die.

For all of those reasons I think Abram would answer the question, "What do I really want?" By saying I want a child.

As a quick aside, It is not wrong or bad to desire these things. Christian author Dan Allender wrote, "Desire lies at the heart of who God made us to be, who we are at our core. Desire is both our greatest frailty and the mark of our highest beauty." This is a part of how God designed us. Now our desires can be a weakness, but also they are part of what makes us beautiful. There are other worldviews that blame desire for all the evil in the world and would say if we could empty ourselves of all desire then we would have a better, more enlightened life. But that is not what the bible says. In fact, God understands our desires and uses Abram's desire for a family to bless the whole world.

12 *The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.*

The same voice that spoke creation into being, speaks to Abram and says Go by yourself, leave your country, your people and your father and go where I show you.

Now, it has been 420 years since the last recorded conversation God had with Noah. And it is very likely that Abram worshiped the local gods or the household gods of his father's house. There is no evidence that he had any idea who the one God was.

Yet, Abram hears God. I wonder what that next conversation was like with Sarai. Abram was 75 years old. I wonder if Sarai thought something like you can't hear me when I ask you to take the trash out, but you heard from God.

I wonder what Abram's conversation with his dad was like. Dad, I love you and I don't know how to tell you this, but God spoke to me. Which god? I don't know, but I heard Him and He said I have to leave.

I am sorry dad, but I have to go.

The cost of obeying God for Abram was high. God asked him to leave his home, the safety of his friends and neighbors, to leave his dad who he loved. Imagine being 75 years old, having the rest of your life planned out in a comfortable routine and then God interrupting your life saying go to a place you have never been. I laughed this week, thinking about how if Pastor Bob was giving the sermon this week, there would definitely be several maps in his powerpoint. He would show you the 600 mile journey. But then it occurred to me Abram didn't get a map. God didn't give him one. On your own you should look up his journey, but this morning no map for us. Abram is flying blind, this is all he got for a map. How anxious would you be?

To follow God will cost us. It will cost us in time, money, our routines, our preferred way of relating to others, proximity to our extended family even. The cost to follow God was and is high.

Then God said

² *"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.*

³ *I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."*

If you trust me, God says, I will give you a family and make that family into a great big family.

Oh this is what Abram wanted more than anything in the world, a family.

God went on to say I will bless you, meaning give you good things, I will make your name great, so much so that people will say, "I hope you are blessed like Abram." God said he will give those who love Abram good things and protect him from anyone who insults him and all the families of the earth will be given a good blessing through him.

I think Abram would have said yes, if all that God promised was a family, but God didn't stop there. God again shows himself to be extravagant. And it is clear that blessings far outweigh the command.

So for as much as it cost Abram, the blessings were so much better. Just like Jesus' parable in Matthew 13:44, where he says *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field."* The command to go and leave everything he had ever known is a significant price, but it pales in comparison to the return. God promises to give him the desire of his heart. He is going to have a family and then some. His family will become a nation, his name will be great, God will protect him, and God will change the world through him.

This fall, our sermon study is finding Jesus in the Old Testament and we find Jesus right here. Starting right here, the rest of the OT is the story of how God blesses and protects this one family until the day God comes in person through this family in Jesus. Jesus is a blessing to the whole world.

Jesus is THE great blessing, the greatest gift the world has ever seen.

This is true in regards to our relationship with God. Jesus came to earth and revealed the love of God for absolutely everyone in his teaching and his life. His great love led him to the cross where he took the consequences of sin, death, and evil on himself and defeated them all. At his resurrection, he became the firstborn of a new creation where we now have a glimpse of what life will be like after our own deaths. Jesus has gone ahead of us to make a place for us that we might again be the family of God, that lives forever with Him, ruling with Him over his new creation in an everlasting community of love.

Jesus is the greatest blessing.

But that is not all, like Pastor Bob said last week, Jesus changed this world in ways we don't often think about. For the first time in history, Jesus created a community not based on nationality or family or ethnicity, but a community where people regardless of their gender, social status, age, and ethnicity were welcome. No one had ever had an idea for that kind of community until Jesus.

Because of Jesus, the first orphanages were formed as Jesus' followers remembered how Jesus welcomed little children. The first hospitals were formed as a part of monasteries because Jesus followers remembered how Jesus cared for the sick and the injured. Modern music notation was an invention of the medieval church so that worship could spread. Imagine a world with no recorded music. I don't want to. Now it is true that Christians have done great evil in the world, but as a matter of history, the abolitionist movement and the civil rights movement were largely led by followers of Jesus. Jesus has blessed the world in big and small ways. Jesus is the greatest blessing.

So the cost was high, but the blessings far outweigh the cost. Especially because this one act of trust gave us Jesus, the greatest blessing.

⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

It may be a simple point, but God has always wanted people to trust him. When people hear from God and trust him enough to do what he says, it changes the world. That same opportunity is available to us. To hear from God and do what He says is what we were made to do.

Our passage goes on to tell of Abram's trip and his tour of the land promised to his descendants. And twice on his journey, Abram stops and makes an altar to God, to worship and celebrate God.

At one point, *⁷The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land."* And Abram marks the occasion with an altar so that he can worship God. He makes a monument for himself and for others to say, "God is real. He met me here and he will give this land to my offspring." This moment with God is worth remembering. Abram wants to remember the blessings of God.

My first question this week when I read this passage was Why Abram? And the truth is the text doesn't say. As far as we can tell there is nothing special about Abram. And this turns out to be a theme in the story of God. He chooses people not based on their intellect or moral character. In fact, the New Testament calls Jesus' followers, "unschooled ordinary men." God chooses the unqualified, the outsiders to follow him so if you ever feel unqualified to be a part of the family of God, you are in good company. Abram makes a point to celebrate God choosing to bless Him and through him to bless the whole world. It was God's choice, God's idea.

Which led me to a humbling place this week. As I was reading this passage this week and especially these blessings, I felt jealous of Abram.

God, I want to have a great big family, I want to be famous and well thought of, I want you to protect me and the people I love, and I want to be a part of God changing the world. Why did you choose Abram and not me? Do you at all feel jealous of Abram, or is it just me? Maybe you are not jealous of Abram, but I imagine you do feel jealous at times.

Maybe someone gets a new car. Someone you know moves to a bigger or nicer house. Maybe it is a vacation. I want to see the Grand Canyon and hike Machu Picchu. Maybe it isn't things or places, but people. You see pictures of a girls night out or of a family reunion and there is someone missing in your life and you would love to have what they have. This may be silly, but one of the strongest feelings of jealousy I have had in my adult life was a few years ago, when we had 3 kids under the age of 5 and some friends of ours were going on a paid vacation without their kids. To have 3 days at the beach to sleep and not change diapers and sleep sounded like heaven on earth. I have rarely wanted anything more than that in my life. One other time I feel jealous is when people younger than me have success at work or hit financial milestones that I haven't yet. I am totally fine with people older than me being more successful, but it grates against my soul when people younger than me have more success. I am jealous.

When have you felt jealous? Abram is offered these amazing blessings and he doesn't want to forget. And in my moments of jealousy when reading this passage or seeing other people's success, I forget the blessings of God to me.

I have received an enormous amount of good things from God. When I feel jealous, I experience temporary amnesia and I forget how God answered my prayers for children. I have friends who love me and parents who are great role models who taught me about Jesus. My wife and I are healthy. My kids love me and are still at an age to snuggle. Not to mention, Jesus loves me. I am known and loved by God, I am forgiven and free to love God and those around me.

As we finish up, I want to invite you to remember your blessings. We do not want to just be people who listen to bible stories, we want to practice what we preach. So the invitation this week is to spend time remembering the blessings God has given you, the greatest of which is Jesus. We have Jesus, or better yet Jesus has us. We are well off, remember that and worship God this week.

This could mean being in a daily prayer, saying thank you to God for the blessings. Make a list of God's gifts to you and tell Him thank you.

Another idea is to honestly confess jealousy. In the last few days, I have been trying to name my feelings of jealousy as they come up and tell God about them.

One other idea is to practice memorizing, Romans 8:38-39. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Say these words over and over and remember Jesus is the greatest blessing in the world.

The Lord chose Abram and met him at the place of his deepest desire. God's command to Abram was costly, but the blessing far outweighed the cost. And because of Abram's act of trust, we have Jesus, the greatest blessing in the world. Thank you God. Amen.

