



The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 25th April 2004
by Mark Ashton

10p

Genesis 12:1–3

The Promise-Maker

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.*

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” ’ (Genesis 12:1-3).

Introduction: The Shapeless Life

I fear it is true that for most people life is a fairly aimless wandering. What shape and structure there are in our lives are provided by the various life-stages through which we pass. Perhaps that is why that Shakespearean soliloquy is so famous:–

*‘All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages [he then works through the ages]
At first the infant, mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms . . . then the whining schoolboy . . .
the lover, sighing like a furnace . . . [and so on and so forth].*

You may remember even Elvis Presley trying to develop the theme in one of his songs (although he got rather stuck at the lover stage, I seem to recall).

So each of the stages of life has its own life-goals: passing exams, getting qualified, securing employment, finding a life-partner, establishing a home, building up a family, achieving career advancement, guaranteeing a comfortable old age. It may be that as I run through them you are thinking *Well, which do I fit into at the moment? Which are the particular goals that are controlling my life at the moment?* Because we go for the goals which each stage in life sets us. We make ourselves very busy focussing our energies and our time on those immediate goals of our present stage in life.

But we avoid the question: “Why?” What is all this for? What overarching purpose is there for my life that can lead me all the way from birth right through to death? And what if a life-stage goes wrong? If I never do pass my A Levels, get my degree, meet and marry someone I love, have a family? What if my life misfires in that sort of way at some stage? Or if I lose my health or my sanity? Or it all ends prematurely? We’ve all known the man who worked desperately hard for 40 years in order to enjoy a happy, prosperous retirement, and then died of a heart attack, or cancer, in his late 50s.

But I guess that for many of us our behaviour is still pretty much regulated by where we’ve got to in life: exams, career, romance, the demands of the family, the home, the mortgage, the retirement – whatever it

might be. And those immediate ‘stage goals’ manage to provide a sort of semblance of meaning and purpose for us. They make our lives look busy and meaningful; but they actually obscure from us (and perhaps from other people) the fact that there is no real pattern to my life at all – nothing that can give shape and direction from birth through to death, let alone tragic, premature death.

If we could just step back from these ‘stage goals’ we might see that our lives are actually a little bit shapeless – that we are just responding to the factors currently influencing us. We are not actually going anywhere at all in our lives. In fact, to be perfectly honest, we’re living like sophisticated animals. Perhaps that is a caricature, but I don’t mean it to be an unkind caricature. I have a feeling it’s not far from many of our lives.

But against that background, the Bible confronts us with an entirely different sort of way of living our lives: a pattern for human life that gives it direction and meaning; that makes sense of the whole of life. And it’s not dependent on the successful completion of a series of life stages; and it’s not even defeated by premature death. It is called the Life of Faith; and it is supremely modelled for us by the person we have just been reading about: an Old Testament figure called Abraham (as God was later to call him – at this stage in his life he was called Abram). I want to consider just those first three verses in Genesis chapter 12. And there are three points which we shall cover.

(1) God’s Call (12:1)

‘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.’ We don’t know exactly how that call came to Abraham. But we do know that God’s call goes out to everyone. Psalm 19 tells us that *‘¹The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. ²Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.’* We cannot contemplate the natural world without hearing the voice of God. Atheism has done its best to drown out that voice; but what poor alternative explanations it has offered for the intricacy, the complexity and the grandeur of the natural order! The scientific method encourages us to adopt the best available hypothesis or explanation for the phenomena we encounter. Now, while there remains much that puzzles us in our natural world, Creation is far the best explanation for it! What alternative grand unifying theories are there?

The New Testament tells us that after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, *‘God commands all people everywhere to repent’* (Acts 17:30b). You might not be aware of that particular verse from the New Testament, but it includes you (I take it you and I are part of ‘all people everywhere’, and so we are commanded to repent). Those two truths about God: of His existence, and His moral demands upon us to live good lives (we are accountable for how we live our lives) – those two truths are apparent to everyone. I want to suggest that there is nobody present who has not heard God’s call. I have never yet met a person who wasn’t aware in some sense that there is a God; and in some sense that we are morally accountable people. That’s the call of God to you and me.

I’ve met plenty of people who don’t want to hear that. I tried not to hear it myself for the first 20 years of my life. But God’s call does come to us all. As you are here, it is coming to you even as I speak now. And it is a call to let go.

(2) ... to let go ...

Look again at the verse: *‘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.’* When we human beings live our lives without God, it is not as though we leave His place in our lives empty. If nature abhors a vacuum, so does human nature. We won’t allow a void to control our lives. So Abram was a worshipper of other gods when the living God’s call came quite unexpectedly to him. And in telling him to leave his country, his people and his father’s household, God was telling Abram to leave the gods of his homeland behind as well. God’s call is always a call to let go of what we have put in the place of God.

For most of us, I guess, that is ourselves. We've tried to run our own lives as if there were no God, as if they belonged to us in a way they patently don't. Which of us chose to be born? And few, if any, of us will choose to die. Our lives come to us and are taken from us at the will of Another. They aren't actually our own. But how resentful we are when that other Person, our Creator God, asks us to move over and let Him take the driving seat in our lives! And yet have we really done that good a job behind the steering wheel of our own lives? I wonder if I can't see the odd bump and scrape on the paintwork of the car of your life (I'm speaking figuratively, of course. I'm not casting aspersions on your driving ability!)? Other people we've scratched and damaged back down the road, relationships we've spoiled, opportunities for good that we've not taken – that we've turned instead to selfishness, self-aggrandisement. The times we've lost the route and not gone to the places we should have gone to, and failed to reach goals we should have reached. Maybe even a few points on our licences where we've rushed into things a lot too fast – and trampled over other people on the way. I guess many of us would look back with quite a bit of regret at the people we've hurt, the good we've failed to do, the selfishness that is the record of our lives; our complacency about that and our indifference and rebellion to the will of God.

So when God asks us to let go, He is asking to take the guilt out of our lives, as well as asking for control over our lives. All the guilt and the sin that I carry for having ignored God and refused His rule over me are not easy things to let go of. But God has provided us with a Person who will take them for us: Someone who will take that out of my life and, as it were, move into the driving seat and make so much better a job of driving the car of my life than I have managed to make for myself.

I once heard a rather poor joke about a man who was habitually crippled with worry. He was always anxious and nervous about his finances, about his family, about his health and about the state of the world. And one day a friend of his met him and found him happy and cheerful and light-hearted. The friend said, "What's happened to you then?" "Oh," said the worrier, "I've employed a man to do all my worrying for me! Every single little bit of it: tax, health, crime, the lot. He does it all." "Wow!" said the friend "That's really great! What do you pay him for that?" "Oh," he said, "I think it's about £600 a week." "Whaaaat!" Said the friend, "£600 a week? How on earth do you afford it?" "Well," said the guy, "I don't know. It's his worry, not mine."

Chance would be a fine thing, wouldn't it? But, you know, there is a Person behind this universe who stretches out His arms to you and to me and says, "I want to take all those things out of your life that at the moment are so grievous and so painful and that give you so much guilt, because I took the punishment for you, in your place, and I can take over your life and live it in the way that it ought to be lived."

(3) ... and to accept ...

God's call is to let go and to accept – not something, but Someone. Just look again at those verses, and those promises that God made: '*...go to the land I will show you...*' That's the first of them, He's going to show him the land to live in. And then God says to 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" ' (Genesis 12:1-3).

Those promises were not believable in themselves. Abram was elderly; his wife was sterile. The New Testament tells us that Abraham trusted the Person making the promises. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says Abraham was fully persuaded that God had power to what He had promised (Romans 4:21). The writer of The Letter to the Hebrews says, '*...Abraham...considered him faithful who had made the promise*' (Hebrews 11:11). Abraham never did actually inherit the land during his own life. He did not leave a great nation behind him – he left just one son. There was no sign of all the nations on earth being blessed through him. But he believed God; and in God's own time and way, in Jesus, all these promises have come true – when God's Son died for human sin on the cross and rose again for our salvation. This gathering even here

now is part of God's fulfilment of the promises He made to Abraham.

Do you realise that there is nothing you have to do in order to become a Christian? There is Someone you have to trust – Someone who has done it for you, whose word to you is a promise of blessing: a promise of a relationship with God. Have you ever been at a meal with friends in a restaurant and you get to the end and you start to discuss the bill, and one of the party says, “Don't worry. I've done it. I've paid for you all.” And you realise that he has: out of the kindness of his heart he's picked up the tab. You can trust him. There's nothing more to do – except just to say, “Thank you”.

Well, there is nothing more to do to achieve our salvation – except to accept it. You don't have to turn over a new leaf to become acceptable to God. You can turn over every new leaf you can find in Cambridge this springtime, and you won't be acceptable to God. Not on your own merits. I could never be acceptable to God – but God has accepted me because Somebody else paid the price for me. There is a Person waiting to meet you. Maybe you would be a bit excited if somebody said to you, “There's somebody here who wants to meet you.” Does that come to you as a surprise, that there is Somebody who wants to meet you (if you're not yet a Christian and you don't yet know God)? I can say that with absolute certainty. The God Who made this promise to Abraham and Who is speaking tonight is a God longing to meet you – stretching out arms of love to welcome you back into relationship with Himself, because it's all been done: it's all been dealt with by Jesus.

There may be one or two folks here for whom this is a very, very important day. If you would like me to explain to you for just a few minutes straight after this service, with a chance for you to ask questions, do stay while your friends have their tea or coffee.

And maybe you'll find then that life no longer is a stage: and you and I no longer have to play the part of each successive life-stage, strutting and fretting our hour upon the stage and then being heard no more – no longer a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury but signifying nothing (to go back to Shakespeare, where we began). But our hope is not in Shakespeare, but in the Promise-making God who dealt with Abraham and who longs to deal with you today.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)