

Salvation History: An (Un)Expected Journey

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Today's scripture reading is found in Genesis 11 and Genesis 12. Please follow along in your bulletins as we share these passages with you.

This is the account of Terah's family line. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot.

While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans in the land of his birth. Abram and Nahor both married.

The name of Abram's wife was Sarai and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milcah and Ishka.

Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive. Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram.

[1 : 05] And together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haram, they settled there. Terah lived 205 years and he died in Haran.

In Genesis 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. 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.

So Abram went as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 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.

[2 : 06] And they arrived there. Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Morai at Shechem. At the time, the Canaanites were in the land.

The Lord appeared to Abram and said, To your offspring I will give this land. So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. From there he went on towards the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and I on the east.

There he built an altar to the Lord and called the name of the Lord. Then Abram set out and continued toward Negev. This is the reading of God's word.

Good morning, Watermark. My name is Mike, and I'm helping here at the church with the ministry to university students.

And if you're new here or maybe some of you have been traveling the past few weeks and you have missed out, let me just get you up to speed with what we have been looking at and what we have been studying at the church here.

[3 : 11] For the past few months, we've been walking through the first few chapters of the Bible. We looked at the creation story, and then we looked at the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, and then we talked about Noah and the flood, and last week we talked about the Tower of Babel.

So all the chapters that we have looked at so far, they all had to do with how humanity, how we, broke our relationship with God and how we reached for greatness, for our own greatness, and how humanity turns their back on God, on this journey to putting me in the center.

Now, to illustrate to you this reaching for greatness of humanity, I don't have to go back too far, being a German, I only have to go back about one week. It was the Champions League final in London, but I don't want to start a church hooligan war, and so my Dutch and British friends here are getting a little antsy, and my American friends, I don't want to bore you with more soccer analogies that I like to use.

So I'll tell you a different story. I'll tell you a story, a tale of three German villagers, who after a hard day of work, they would usually get together, and these three villagers would then talk about their

day.

Now, last week, Chris Thornton shared with us about the Tower of Babel, and he talked about how some people like to talk about how great they are, and how they exaggerate, and exactly that, what Chris described, happened with these three people, these three villagers, and one who used to be a fisherman.

[4 : 37] And this fisherman did exactly, every time he came back, he said, today I caught a fish, and it was so big. But, we have a deal, a way of dealing with that kind of attitude in Germany.

So every time this guy came up, they got a little angry, the other two, and so next time he came up, right when he wanted to start telling about his day, they stopped him in his tracks, and they pulled out a pair of handcuffs, and put the handcuffs on his hands, and he looked a little confused and said, don't worry, just tell us about your day.

And they were all with a big smile standing there. And so he said, yeah, yeah, today I was out, and I was fishing, and you won't believe, I caught a fish, and it has eyes that big.

Anyway, so it shows like it's just in us. The stories of Genesis that we have studied so far have told that story of how this striving for our own greatness is just something that humanity is, it's just in our nature, and we look for our glory, not for God's glory.

But then as I'm also reading through these chapters in Genesis, and hear these stories of the Tower of Babel, and so on, I sometimes find it very hard to place myself in these grand stories.

[5 : 51] Like seriously, when you hear about Adam and Eve, and Noah, and the Babylonians, like do you find it easy to just think, yeah, I could be right there. This is just kind of like my life. And then automatically, like think of like, how does it relate to me?

I don't. And I mean, there are these bigger than life characters that grow like 200, 300 years old, and they built like gigantic boats in deserts just because God told them, and they play hoops with angels, and not that, but you know what I mean?

Like it's just these out of like real life kind of experiences. It's like these bigger than life characters, and today we look at Abraham. And Abraham is one other of these bigger than life characters.

So today, as we look at his story, I want to see how can we actually relate to that? How can we place us in that story? Where am I in that story? Where are you in that story?

And what does it have to do with us as a church? I personally, I did not grow up in a church. I actually did not grow up Christian. So for the first 23 years of my life, the Bible and all these stories, they didn't really have a lot of meaning for me, for my journey, and Adam and Eve, they were actually on the same level with Hansel and Gretel.

[7 : 01] Like they were fairytale characters. I did not think they had anything to do besides like a moral teaching of, I don't know, some fairytale story. I simply lived my life, the normal life.

I had a job in banking. I wanted to start my business one day, make money, enjoy my life, just what normal people do. And I could care less about what life lessons Noah had for me.

And so in August 2000, that started to shift. That's when I became a Christian. And I started to engage with these stories and I tried to see how these stories in the Bible relate to my life and how they actually tell a story that has something to do with me.

Actually, two years into my Christian journey, that desire had grown so much that I actually decided to study a master's in theology instead of continuing my business career. At the time when I went to Bible college, I did not think about becoming a pastor.

I actually wanted to go to see how it relates to my life and I just felt this urge to learn and grow. And so my friends would ask me, so are you like in banking?

[8 : 10] Like what are you doing? Like studying theology, going to Bible college? And I said, I'm thinking about becoming a consultant for business ethics. That was the best way that I felt like I could make sense of these things and maybe it was also because I couldn't make sense of that.

It was just, there was this calling that I couldn't resist and that I knew I had to do this. And so I went to seminary and growing up in Germany and then going to seminary in the States has been quite an interesting experience.

So especially when you have not grown up in like Sunday school culture and so compared to all my classmates, who most of them came from the American Bible Belt, that was a totally new world for me.

My worst class in seminary ever was the introduction to Christian scriptures because I had to memorize and repeat in the exams who was the son of who from the tribe.

I couldn't even pronounce. And all around me were these like Sunday school raised people that like in the exam would sing like a What Are My Kids song. And they remembered like all these names and yeah, I was four years old when I learned that.

[9 : 18] But for me, I had no contact with these stories. And so it all reminded me that kind of, you know, this Bible story, I did not find my place in God's history.

I did not connect with this history that he was telling. And I'm sure you here today may feel the same way depending on how you grew up. You may not. You know, when you hear this Bible passage and thanks to the readers going through all these names, you may feel like, I don't connect.

I don't know. I don't get this. Like all these strange Old Testament names. And so as we go and now look at the story of Abraham, so how do we not view him as this like superhero of the Christian faith, this out of the, you know, out of real life kind of character?

So I hope that when we go on this journey that we can relate to him. So let's have a look at the text and see what it has to say to us today. So the text in your bulletin starts with a genealogy.

It's telling who is the son of who and from which tribe and all these complicated names. And if we are honest, most of us, if you do read the Bible, you may just skip that part.

[10 : 30] At least I have never heard anybody to say Genesis 11, 27, 32 when someone asks you for your favorite Bible verse. It just seems to have no meaning, no content. It's just a list of random names and you just go over it.

But I want to see whether we can actually make some sense of even the genealogy. And so here are some things that I want to highlight. First, the passage in chapter 11 begins with, this is the account of.

And if you have gone through your Genesis devotional or study book, we have the study book that we prepared for the church to go through. So you can pick up a copy outside if you haven't done that yet. But there's a devotional and a study guide.

And so if you have gone through that already, then you will see that this is not the first time that this phrase, this is the account of, appears. Actually, it has happened like six times, I think, to this point. So, one of the times that it appears was in chapter 10. And it also started with the same construct introducing the family tree of Noah. So when we see a family tree, this tree seems to introduce something of significance or rather someone that if someone's history is recorded, there must be something that comes out of that story, out of that family that we should pay close attention to.

[11 : 50] And so here in this text, it's the family tree of terror that's introduced. And so the text continues introducing his sons. And then like in Adam's family tree or Noah's family tree, we also hear find the family tree with three sons.

And here the son that we will hear a lot about is Abram, who will later be called Abraham. Another thing that we may easily skip over when we don't read that genealogy is in verse 29, we hear about Nehar, Milka, Ishka, and in these names we actually see that the whole tribe has become idolatrous.

The names actually refer to the cult of moon worship. So the clan after scattered from last week's story has been scattered throughout the land and they started to embrace the surrounding cultures. So the generations had passed and people had made their home. Tara's family had made a home in this foreign culture. So the genealogy not only introduces that someone significant is coming or something significant is about to happen, but also that there were certain circumstances that something had gone wrong and God is beginning to intervene and speak into it.

And thirdly, as we read this introduction, there's also something to learn from what is not being said. Nothing that introduces Abraham indicates that he was anyone special.

[13 : 15] He's not introduced as a bigger-than-life character with some special merits, no amazing achievements, no reason for why God would call him specifically. It is a simple genealogy and not that of a great king or someone who has proven himself.

He's just not portrayed as that bigger-than-life character. In the following passage, God is calling a simple person from a broken family, from a tribe that has embraced idolatrous worship, that didn't have special achievements, and he calls him to be used by God.

So in the same way as God calls simple people, I think that's where we can find ourselves in that story because he still today uses simple people, called simple and broken people, to bring glory to himself.

So let's look at the second part of that text and let's dig a little bit deeper in that calling that we find in chapter 12. The chapter starts with God interacting with Adam and it's the first time since the time of Noah when God had established the covenant that there's a recorded conversation or some kind of dialogue between God and his people.

And I'm sure you have studied all your genealogies very carefully and the numbers and then you have all figured out that it's about 400 years from Noah till now. So for 400 years there has been somewhat of a silence, nothing that God has revealed is so significant that it would be mentioned in the scriptures.

[14 : 44] And so in verse 1 he says, Now we said we want to look at Abraham as a real person and I think this is one of these situations where that gets a little difficult because we start to read these things and God said to Abraham and it gets tough because suddenly he starts to sound unreal.

Like he has this like dialogue going on with God and they are like good bodies and what do we do with that when it says God said? Was it a vision?

Was it like a voice from heaven? The text doesn't say it but I do want to point out that from we gather this is the first time that Abraham has such a clear encounter with the true and living God. Something that is so out of the ordinary for him that it changes his tracks and is significant in his story. And so this encounter is something that that I think when we relate it to our situation we have to kind of understand what is it that it takes for us to change our direction.

The encounter is enough for Abraham to take God by his word and I mean what is being said is quite significant. it's to leave his people to leave his tribe to leave his family and to do that like what would it take for us to do that?

[16 : 15] What kind of encounter would that take for us? When I think about my life I had several encounters with God that I would say were significant in my story that I would record about my story but there was never like an audible voice from heaven.

Like one of the first times that I would say in my life I have seen like a significant change of direction in my life was when God called me into following Christ when I was 23. But it was not that something happened right away but there were certain moments certain questions that I had but then in August 2000 I had this encounter with God when I was in Egypt where I just was reading about his story and I could not not follow him and it's something I cannot explain but if I would write my story this would be something I would say God said to me come follow me and I had the same thing when I decided to go to seminary it's not like oh yeah and then I had this dialogue with God I said what do you think should I go to seminary should I be in banking and I think it's pretty good I go to seminary but it was something where as I started walking my journey with God he started to talk to me through people through his word and there was this tension building up inside of me that I could not not do and so there again if I would write my story

I would say and God spoke to me that I should leave my stuff behind and go to seminary it happened to me again like seven years ago when I decided to come to Hong Kong it was never on my radar but suddenly God opened a door and everything pushed me to that journey four years ago I wanted to quit my time in Hong Kong and God used so many ways that I could not not do this so these are the circumstances where I would say okay this is where God spoke to me so when you look at the scripture passage you see Abraham having this conversation with God is he a bigger than life character or are there moments in your life where you would say this is a time in my life where I have seen God calling me where I have seen God interacting with me and if you are here and you think I don't really know where that could be found in my life then maybe it's like the time before Abraham had this first encounter that there is something building up towards something where God is speaking so what kind of encounter would it take for us to drastically change direction in our life what kind of

God says to you would it take for you to make such a significant life change that you may leave Hong Kong your country your family your relationships and take a drastic turn in your life I want to look at verses 2 and 3 and see kind of what kind of encounter Abraham had with God here so God says to pack his stuff up or leave his place and then he says I will make you 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 what strikes me about this passage is first of all that it's not a blessing I mean all these blessings that God promises they are not things that Abraham ever asked for but it started with God reaching out to Abraham it's not like

Abraham was on his knees asking to God if you're real come show up and tell me how you want to use my life or bless my business but when I look at my life that's often how I look for God to show up how God fits in my plan and my life story but here it says that he comes up and he says I will I will I will I will so God comes with a very clear plan and calls him into following this this plan is something else that is so easily to be missed and we could read through this two verses so quickly but actually there are scholars that suggest that you could divide the Bible right at these verses that you could basically say chapters 1 to 11 could be the first half of the scripture and everything else from chapter 12 on from this this calling could be the rest let me explain what is so significant here so up to this point the story has been about how things are falling apart it's how something that was created for good has now gone on a journey but this is a journey of destruction things are falling apart and we have seen humanity breaking with that relationship with God we have looked into the results of Adam and Eve's rebellion and them being banned from the garden we have seen the flood bringing creation to the brink of destruction and we have also seen last week how humanity now was scattered all over the world but here we see a turning point in human history while up to this point things have been falling apart and humanity is moving further and further away from God here we see

[21 : 43] God calling Abraham to be the father of a people who would make his name great as a beginning point of a movement back towards him the beginning of a journey to restore all these broken things I mentioned before how it was difficult in seminary for me to relate to this great story that God is writing but I thought okay this is like biblical studies once I learn all these terminologies that's okay but oh theology maybe that's something that may work better for me like a lot of German writers and German theologians maybe that gives me an advantage so one day I was in theology class and one of my professors started talking and he wanted to use a well known German theological term which is called Heilsgeschichte Now I had never heard of that term in my life in German and so he pronounced it and he wanted to see whether it's correct and I looked at him very confused and so he tried to pronounce it over and over again and all the classmates were looking at him and thinking he has a really bad German pronunciation

I was sitting oh my gosh I have no clue what the word even means so after class I went home and I had to do that quite a bit so I had to look up kind of like okay what's the translation what does it even mean so I looked up this term and so the term is called salvation history it's a term that was coined in the 19th century if you ever want to read German theology stop in the 19th century don't go into the 20th century just a disclaimer there's just a lot of dodgy stuff we came up with afterwards so 19th century salvation history is the term and the definition is salvation history refers to all redemptive activity of God with human history to effect his eternal saving intentions so salvation history views all events in human history especially those recorded in the scripture as arranged toward bringing about God's plan of saving his people everything from the beginning and end of history is arranged to bring about God's plan of saving people let me put that into some kind of real life example any fans of

CSI here CSI is a TV show I'm sure some of you have watched it it's an American TV show and it follows a crime scene investigation team as they search for evidence to resolve murders basically so every time it follows pretty much the same format some kind of murder happens and then as something goes wrong about two minutes into the show the crime scene investigation team shows up at the murder scene and they're starting to try to figure out what's going on so the rest of the show is them trying to put the pieces back together that at the end of the show that things are being resolved they have solved the puzzle and justice can be served now there's something pretty frustrating when you want to watch CSI and you turn on in minute three because you have just missed out on the crime now they do an okay job as kind of like revisiting that but it can be kind of like take a long time to even like put together the piece of okay what just happened here like they are trying to figure something out but I don't know what it is and this is how I felt about salvation history that I jumped in into that story of God having missed the beginning having missed like most of it and feeling like okay where am I in this and so this is the journey of salvation history and trying to figure out where we put in so as we look into

Genesis chapter 12 we see the starting point of the crime being resolved the greatest crime being an offense to God the relationship with humanity breaking and now God introduces his rescuing plan his way of restoring things of bringing justice bringing restoration to that which is broken as God invites Abraham on this journey to bring restoration I think it's really interesting because it's not

like he goes to Abraham and says hey I want you to have a really prosperous life for yourself or you know I want to bless your plan but it's about Abraham leaving his plan behind and there will be a greater blessing the blessing of taking part in God's plan of salvation history the history of salvation starting here continues from one person to a tribe to a nation and we just had a team from Israel returning that went to that nation and so 30 of us went to Israel to the nation of Israel where God promised a nation to be haunted thousands of years ago in this promise and they came back and one of the spots they visited there was the place where Jesus was baptized in Luke 3 and you can look it up in your Bible or I will read it to you in Luke 3 verse 21 and I want to just read this to you it starts saying when all the people were being baptized

Jesus was baptized too and as he was praying heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove and a voice came from heaven you are my son whom I love with you I am well pleased now Jesus himself was about 30 years old when he began his ministry he was the son so it was thought of Joseph the son of Heli the son of Methad the son of Levi the son of Melchi the son of Janai the son of Joseph and for 10 verses generation after generation the sons and the sons and the sons are listed till in verse 34 it says the son of Jacob the son of Isaac the son of Abraham the son of Terah and it continues through the generations we have seen today and the son of Noah and finally in Luke 3 verse 38 it says the son of Thess the son of Adam the son of God and as I'm reading through this genealogy I'm in awe of God's plan and I I said that to him preparing for this is the first time that I've tried through a genealogy just seeing

[27 : 57] God's plan of salvation being worked out and spanning generation after generation it's an unbelievable pointer to God's salvation history that he invites us into a story that is bigger than any story any human being could ever write it spends from the beginning of time to the end of time this is the story of a covenant established with Abraham that finds its climax in Christ coming and being crucified and bringing redemption to all inviting us to his ultimate goal in heaven and making peace and reconciliation with creation and so we see this promise in this chapter then fulfilled and all people on earth will be blessed through you this blessing spends on to all of us here today and seeing the grand scale of God what God is saying here to Abraham that the promise he is calling him into going over generation and generation it just blows my mind you start to look at your own story and you see that selfishness and it calls you to humility about how

I approach my life that I feel like okay I want you to bring about my plan but one day all of us will see God and we'll see the big picture of his plan of salvation spanning through all generations and we will stand there with our chapter our accomplishments the plans that we have carried out and the question will be did they have any part in God's plan how do they fit into the salvation history and let me encourage you as a church that what this text says is something I see all around in this body of believers I see it in the love and care that you show to the ICM kids and how you invite them into God's redemptive work and I see it in the way the community was built here for people to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the St. Barnabas ministry to the homeless to the elderly homes in the area

I see it through the guys that have served in the university ministry faithfully and mentored young guys that are lost on their journey and I've seen it everywhere I walk in this church when people leave their own plans behind their own goals and they put them under God's great plan of salvation history so I want to close with this final part of the scripture that we have here so as Abram went as the Lord had told him it says that Abram traveled through the land as far as the side of the great tree of Merah at Shechem at that time the Canaanites were in the land the Lord appeared to Abram and said to your offspring I will give this land so he built an altar there to the Lord who appeared to him from there he went toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tents with Bethel on the west and I on the east there he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord and then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev so what the text leaves us with as a reminder is that Abram sets on this journey to join in into that great story of God that he built an altar on the way as a reminder that it's not about his glory but about God's glory and so I think about this day when we will stand in front of God and we look at our story and we realize that it's more worth to have a line or even a footnote in the great story of God than having written a great book that brings glory to us we pray Father as we just see your word and as we see your salvation history and your plan we just send it off how you carry out your plan from the beginning of time to the end how you in control even if we don't feel like it and so today we pray that we would hear you speak in whatever way it takes for us to leave our ways behind our dreams behind our plans behind to follow you to join in

your great story to see that this is all about your history of saving everything and redeeming everything to yourself and we thank you that we see that in you coming to this world and that in your dying on the cross you have shown the greatest sign of what it means for you to lay down everything to redeem us that your plan is about redeeming us and pray this in Christ's name and that will fight