

Blessing. It's an interesting word. We use it in various ways. We might ask someone to say 'the blessing' before a meal, and someone will pray and give thanks for the food. Or we might say, "I feel so blessed!" when something good happens to us like an unexpected gift is given. We will often use the word "blessing" to describe good fortune, especially when we've received a financial benefit. Or you may have someone say, "Bless your heart!" and be an expression of compassion and concern, or be used before a criticism is given to soften the blow.

The Bible's definition of blessing is just as large and encompassing – even more so than our modern usage. The concept of blessing can be described with definitions and illustrated with stories. And when we come to the account of Abraham, his life is one that underscores a blessed life. What is a blessed life? And how can we live the blessed life?

Don't walk away from God – Alienated from Blessing (Gen. 11:1-9)

After Noah had left the ark and entered the new creation, everything was pristine. Hope. Life. Beauty. But just as soon as God had made a new earth, Noah slipped and fell into sin. His family was tainted with sin. And east they went.

As Noah's descendants moved east, further away from God's place, the people began to gather and sought to find security and fame. Instead of scattering and filling the earth with as God's image bearers, they gathered together to make a name for themselves. And when God saw their desire was to seek personal fame and security apart from him, he would not have any more. As the builders came to build a tower to reach to the heavens to give them security and fame, God confused their tongues and spread them out as they should have been doing.

Ever since the beginning, humans have been trying to find comfort, security, and fame apart from God. We try to find ways to show how great we are – our education, our generosity, our physical appearance, our intelligence – and we try to feel secure. But East of Eden, the ground is hard just like everything else. And as humans move away from God, they do not improve, but become worse.

God will not be mocked. You can walk away from God, but his blessings are not found in personal security or fame. Only God can bless. And when people walk away from God, he will scatter them and send them into exile.

Hear God's Call – Undeserved Blessings (Gen. 11:27-12:7)

But God's blessings come not to those who are deserving, but those who know they aren't. As we meet Abram, God calls him from a far away land – out of exile, back from being scattered after Babel. Abram is an idol worshiper (see Josh. 24:2). He's not deserving of blessings. But God calls him. Leave this place. Go to a land I will show you.

And three times God declares "I will..." – God will be the source of blessing. While people walked away from God at Babel and tried to find blessing, God's blessings come

to the undeserving. Who will have a great name? Not the people at Babel (Gen. 11:4); but Abram (12:1-3). He will receive a name, a land, and descendants.

In the Bible, blessings do not come to those who think they have worked hard enough, have planned enough, or tried hard enough. God's blessings come to those who are undeserving, chosen, and called by God. He loves to give his blessings to the undeserving who hear his voice and respond by trusting and obeying his voice. And this is precisely what Abram does – he trusts God's call, and he obeys by leaving his land in pursuit of following God.

Believe by Faith – Receive the Blessings (Gen. 15:1-20)

But as time passed, Abram wondered if these promises were too good to be true. Would he receive these promises from God? So he asked the Lord, “O Lord God, ...I continue to be childless....How am I to know that I shall possess [the land]?” (Gen. 15:2, 8).

And God responded by creating a new covenant. Abram brought several animals and laid them out, one half on one side, the other half on the other. Normally both parties would walk in between the parts and commit that they would uphold their word. But as the sun went down, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and God showed him that he would have many descendants. But they would experience 400 years of affliction and captivity and then emerge with great wealth. The reason God says that he will not act quickly is that he is being patient with the Amorites (Gen. 15:16), giving them many opportunities to repent.

Then, instead of both parties walking between the animal pieces, God passes through as a smoking pot and a blazing torch – just like a cloud to guide during the day and a pillar of fire by night. God would lead and guide. God alone makes the covenant. God will keep this covenant. God will make the promise come to fulfillment.

But what is amazing about this covenant is how it begins. Abram has been promised a land, descendants, and a great name. And yet he has none. But when God says, “Look at the stars – that's how many family members will come from you,” we are told that “Abram believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6).

The way that God blesses is not by doing, but by believing. It is not by doing something great, but believing someone who is great. It is not relying on what we can do, but depending upon what God can do. The blessed life comes by belief.

Devote Yourself – Marked as Blessed (Gen. 17:1-14)

But before Abram does anything, and before he has children, God tells him that he is going to have a new name. No longer will he be the father of exaltation, but he will be the father of a multitude. But Abraham and all his male descendants are to mark themselves as covenant people, devoted to the Lord.

And while this outward ceremony would be central to Abraham's family, what God desired was not the marking on skin, but the marking of the heart. It was not outward transformation that God was desiring, but inward change.

This inward transformation is what Moses understood by the circumcision of the flesh. It was to be an outward sign of an inward reality: "Circumcise your hearts, and do not be stubborn any longer" (Deut. 10:16). But humans have a way of wanting to show that they are blessed. They want to mark themselves outwardly as blessed – by some good showing in the flesh – but fail to realize that blessing needs to mark the heart by an inward transformation. Blessing isn't something that is done by some ritual, but by an inner work of God. For this reason, Moses would say, "the Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (Deut. 30:5-6; cf. Ezek. 36:25-27).

Belong to the Promise – Children of the Blessing (Gen. 21:1-7)

And then, when it seemed impossible, the one hundred year old Abraham had a son. Isaac was born as a true miracle. While Abraham had one son already from his wife's servant Hagar, the promised son was not one that was born naturally, but by supernatural birth. Yet Abraham's descendants would think that they were something special because of their race. Yet God's blessing doesn't come just because you've been born into a certain family line. Blessing comes when God does a miraculous birth in the heart. Ishmael is just as much Abraham's son, but he is not the son of blessing. The children of blessing are those in whom God miraculously works.

Trust in the Substitute – The Unexpected Blessing (Gen. 22:1-19)

The miraculous work of God to make someone his child only happens when we rely upon him fully. As Isaac grew, Abraham was told to take his son on a three day journey up Mt. Moriah and offer a sacrifice to the Lord. As the father and his one and only son head up the mountain, they have everything needed except the sacrifice. When Isaac asks where the sacrifice is, Abraham says, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (Gen. 22:8). And as Abraham prepares the sacrifice of his one and only son, the angel of the Lord stops him and provides a substitute – a ram in the thicket.

As Abraham would see, the blessing of God comes when we trust in him and rely upon his substitute. It isn't in human wisdom or planning that blessings come, but in the offering that God provides.

See the Glory of Christ – The Source of All Blessings (Eph. 1:3ff)

The account of Abraham's life is one that whispers the blessings of God. How do you receive God's blessings? How can you know the blessed life?

The New Testament tells us how we receive God's blessings and enjoy the blessed life. It isn't through gaining approval from God by our work, but depending upon the work of

another. As Paul says in Ephesians 1:3-4, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing, even as he chose us in him before the foundations of the world....”

In Christ, all of God’s promises to Abraham come to realization. Jesus is the child of promise. “The promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ” (Gal. 3:16). The blessings of Christ do not come to people because they are good enough, smart enough, were born into a Christian home, or do things like go to church. Abraham was not put in right standing with God because of what he did, but because he believed in what God did for him (READ Rom. 4:1-5). He relied upon God’s promises and God’s substitutionary sacrifice and God’s power to resurrect the dead (READ Heb. 11:17-19). And God did provide his Son, his one and only Son, as our substitute (1 Jn. 4:9-10).

Everyone who depends upon the one and only Son of God is a true child of Abraham (READ Gal. 3:7-9). those who belong to Jesus have been brought in to the family of Abraham and receive the blessings of Abraham. They receive the mark of devotion – not an outward mark, but an inward one – a changing of the heart, that comes by the Spirit (READ Rom. 2:28-29).

Today, Abraham’s name is great. His descendants are spread across the world, fruitful and multiplying. But what about the land that he was promised? In Hebrews 11:10, 16, we are told that Abraham’s descendants did inherit the land, but he was awaiting something better: “For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God....They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” And as Abraham’s family spreads out, believing in God’s promises and trusting in his substitutionary sacrifice, Paul can see how Abraham is to inherit the world (Rom. 4:13). There’s a new creation coming, and it belongs to the sons of God!

When you look up into the sky, when you see the many stars, think about God’s promise. The seed of the woman would come. And then remember this little Sunday School song:

Father Abraham had many sons, many sons had father Abraham;
And I am one of them, and so are you, so let’s all praise the Lord!

Do you want to live the blessed life? Every blessing of God is in Jesus. Trust him. Believe in him. Love him. If God did not spare his only Son, how much more will he graciously give us all things (Rom. 8:32)? Since this is true, let’s all praise the Lord!