Abraham: The Call and the Compromise
Genesis 11:29-13:1

Beginning today, we're going to spend the Summer looking at Patriarchs and Matriachs - at Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, at Isaac and Rebekah, at Jacob, Rachel and Leah and finally at Joseph. And today, we're starting where it all began - with Abraham.

And the year is around 2100BC - as many years before the birth of Christ as we are after. And the place is Ur of the Chaldeans - in what would become Babylonia. A city that archeology tells us was rich, sophisticated and comfortable.

And the person is Abram - who becomes Abraham.

And most, if not all of us, share something in common with Abraham: you've moved countries. Except Abraham didn't move to go to Uni, or for his career, or even as a refugee. Abraham moved in response to a call and a promise of God. And even if you don't realise it, it's that promise that links you to Abraham even more than moving countries.

So, this morning we're going to look at three things: The Promise Made, The Promise Risked, the Promise Fulfilled.

The Promise Made
Now the Bible begins in Genesis 1 by telling us that God's work of creation began with God speaking. Genesis 1:3, 'And God said, "Let there be light."' But if you look, what our reading from chapter 12 tells us is that God's plan of new creation - of making everything wrong in the world right, and healing every hurt and spreading blessing as far as the curse is found, also begins with God speaking. Verses 1-3: 'Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, *and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*."'

So, God speaks and Abraham's got to do something. If blessing's going to come to the world, Abraham's got to act, he's got to obey. He's got to leave his country, his kindred and his father's family. And yet, if that's all we see, we totally miss the point of what's going on here.

You see look at the phase that keeps on getting repeated: 'I will…': And God says, I will show you, I will make of you, I will bless you, and I will bless those who bless you and I will curse those who don't. Now, whether it's the Five Pillars or Islam, or the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism, or any number of books you can pick up in the airport bookshop like the 12 Rules for Life, other religions or self-help authors tell you, if you and the world are to be made better, if you and the world are to be all you and it should be, you need to obey, you need to do, and here's your to-do list. Here are the 5, 8, 12 things you need to do.

But that's not the message of the Bible. In fact, it's the opposite, because God's plan to bless the world and heal all hurts and right all wrongs is not a list of things that Abraham, or you and I must do - it's a promise of what God is going to do.

But to be a part of that Abraham has to trust and obey. Look again at v1: "Go from your country… to the land that I will show you." That's his only map. That's all he's got to go on. Abram, you've got to leave your homeland and go to another land. Now, if God said that to you, what would your

natural, entirely understandable response be? Probably something like, 'Sure God, but where? I mean, I'd rather it not be Germany, but tell me, and I'll go.' But if that was Abraham's response it's as if God replies - 'You want to know where to go? Well, I'll tell you later. I'll show you when you get there.' And so God's call on Abraham is a call to trust - a call to swap the known for the unknown, the familiar for the unfamiliar, and trust God that he knows what he's doing.

You see, if God is to do his work of blessing through Abraham, Abraham has to say goodbye to the normal, to what he knew. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, 'And he [Abraham] went out, *not knowing where he was going*' (Heb 11:8). And there's a sense in which, if God is to work through any of our lives, if we're to genuinely be a blessing to others, we also have to say goodbye to the life we think is normal, to the life we're used to - not necessarily to our homes or countries like Abraham, but to our comfort or security or the well-ordered life of the familiar. It's what the disciples experienced as they were mending their fishing nets on the beach one day - a day just like any other day, until Jesus came along and said, 'follow me' and the gospels tell us they left their nets and boats - their lives as they knew them - and followed him.

And so, like Abraham, if we're to be a part of God's work in extending and spreading blessing in a world that needs it, we may also have to say goodbye to nicely ordered lives, or to some pleasure we live for, or some prejudice we hold. Because whenever God calls you to join his work there's always a leaving behind of something, whether it's some sin or some security. There's always a letting go of something, whether it's unforgiveness or comfort.

And yet, as Abraham packed up and left, there would have been one huge question ringing like a bell in his heart. Because in v2 God says "And I will make of you a great nation" but the defining issue in Abraham's life was not that he was living a comfortable life, surrounded by friends and family, it was that he had no family - no family of his own. Because, chapter 11:30, 'Sarai was barren; she had no child.'

And any couple who has struggled with infertility knows how that can become an all-consuming issue. But if that's true today, what would it have been like in theirs, when to be childless was to have failed, failed to secure your future, failed to have passed on the name, and worst of all it was to have offended the gods. And here is God promising to make from Abraham a great nation, when all along his wife is infertile. And Abraham must be thinking, 'if only.'

You see, when God promises to make Abraham's name great, and to give him a land , Abraham could have achieved either or both of those on his own. If he worked hard, invested wisely, built up his business portfolio, he could have made his own name great. If he played his cards right, and built alliances and formed and trained his own private militia, he could gain himself a land. But the one thing he could not do was make of himself a great nation - because his wife was barren. And he was 75. And he'd given up the hope of children years ago.

And so it's not just that God announces his plan to bless the world it will be all be his doing; and it's not just that Abraham must leave the safety of the known for the unknown; it's that God is going to to bring hope out of hopelessness and life out of death. And from a barren woman God is going to bring a nation, and what Abraham and Sarah could never do - God will do. But if they're going to see that happen, they're going to have to trust him.

Think how that might be true for you. Maybe you're facing a situation that seems hopeless, or one that requires you to step into the unknown, or one that you know you cannot fix on your own, and

here is God telling you ‘trust me. I’m the God of the barren. The God who brings life in place of death, blessing in place of curse.’ Or maybe you’re not yet a Christian, but you know enough to know you should become one, but to do so means saying goodbye to things you might want to hold on to, to stepping into the unknown, to recognising - like Abraham - you cannot do this on your own - and you’re debating - should I do it or not? Well, God is saying to you, trust me.

And if there was any hesitation in Abraham’s heart, God tells him something to help him come to a decision: v3, “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse.” And in Abraham’s time, if a king made a covenant with a local chieftain or people group he’d conquered, the covenant would stipulate ‘from now on we share the same friends and the same enemies.’

And here is God saying to Abraham - 'and I will do the same with you. From now on, I’m going to be your king, and you’re under my protection: any enemy of yours will be an enemy of mine and any friend of yours will be a friend of mine.’ And so, in the end, this isn’t Abraham saying goodbye to security and the protection of home. He’s exchanging it for a far better one. And so to trust God is not a leap into a dark void, it’s a leap into safe arms. Verse 3 again, and “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abraham is going to be blessed to be a blessing. And from Abraham and through Abraham the blessing of God is going to come in ways that extend way beyond Abraham.

And yet, despite all these promises, when Abraham arrives in Canaan, things do not turn out as he or we might have expected. Verse 10, ‘Now there was a famine in the land.’

The Promise Risked

So, Abraham has obeyed God. He’s said goodbye to the familiarity of home, and the security of what he knew, and he’s in Canaan and, v7, ‘The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.”’ So here he is, right where God wants him to be, in the middle of the land of promise, and there’s a famine. He’d have been forgiven for thinking, ‘Let me just get this right God, you’ve told me to leave everything and come here, and you’ve made all these promises, and it ends with a famine?’ You see, you can be exactly where God want’s you to be, you can be walking in obedience to him, you can be the heir of incredible promises, and your crops aren’t growing and the ground is parched and cracked, and the cupboard is empty and it seems like everything is falling apart.

Verse 10, ‘So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.’ And heading to Egypt to get food may have been the best and wisest thing to do. And we’re told Abraham went to sojourn there - this was only ever meant to be a short stay. And yet, Canaan’s the land of promise, not Egypt, and when he gets to Egypt it’s there that things begin to unravel. You see, in Canaan he risked going hungry, but in Egypt it’s his character and his integrity that’s at risk.

Verses 11-13: ‘When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, “I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.”’

Now, Abraham’s not exactly lying, because Sarah was his half-sister, but at the very best he’s being deceitful. And while pharaohs and kings *were* always looking to add beautiful women to their harems, Abraham’s willing to put his wife in danger to save himself from danger, because when he says, “that it may go well *with me*” it's clear he’s only thinking of one person.

And so, while God has promised to make a nation from Abraham, so no ultimate harm can befall him, it's not God's words that are governing Abraham's heart at the moment. It's the thought of what others *could* do to him. And so the man who moved out in faith has moved from faith to fear.

But in doing so, it's not just his character or his integrity he's put at risk. It's not even just his wife he's put in danger. Humanly speaking, it's God's promise he's risking. Verses 14-15, 'When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house.' And so Sarai, Abraham's wife - the one through whom God promises to build a nation and bless the world, is in the house - and potentially the arms - of another man.

But of course Abraham is amply rewarded for letting his so-called sister go. Verse 16, 'And for her sake, he [Pharaoh] dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.' Imagine how someone might take that as justification for their behaviour - 'I know I told a white lie, I know some legalistic person could accuse me of moral or ethical or spiritual compromise, but look at the fruit. My paper got published, I got that job, or that girl, or my reputation is growing. This must be the blessing of God.'

And so in fleeing one danger - famine, Abraham has put himself at risk of far greater dangers. And the desire to be a part of God's blessing is at risk of being derailed by hunger, fear and riches.

Think how that might work for us. It's unlikely to be hunger for food that makes you compromise ethically, but it might be a hunger - a desire - for something other than food - like a romantic relationship or recognition or experiences. And it doesn't need to be fear of famine or fear of Pharaoh - but it could be fear of missing out, or fear of failure, or fear of what others think of you. And it doesn't have to be the riches of cattle and camels, but it could be the riches of a better paid job or a more prestigious position. And like Abraham, desires and fears and wealth can cause us to compromise and risk something of far greater value.

But while Abraham may have lost sight of the promise, God hasn't. Verse 17, 'But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.' And Pharaoh cannot get her out of his house quickly enough. And as a result, chapter 13:1, 'Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb' and Abraham is back in Canaan.

You see, Abraham's story isn't just one of faith, it's also one where we see Abraham fail. Because the Bible isn't an account of perfect people, getting everything right every time. It's about how God takes the barren and makes them mothers, how he takes the cowardly and makes them conquerors, how he takes the weak and makes them strong. But it's also about how he takes the fallen and makes them faithful, and gives them a future.

Because ultimately, the story of Abraham is not about Abraham. It's about his offspring.

The Promise Fulfilled

Go back to v3, where God says to Abraham, "and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." And that's a promise Abraham did not live to see fulfilled. In fact, it would be hundreds of years before even his descendants would inherit the land. And even then, far from becoming a blessing to other nations, the people of Israel ended up exiled in other nations. Instead, the apostle Paul picks up this promise to Abraham, and in Galatians 3 says, 'And the Scripture, foreseeing that

God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith' (v8-9). Because the promise to Abraham was always pointing forward to the *ultimate* offspring of Abraham, to Christ, his seed.

Because like Abraham, Christ also left the comfort of his Heavenly Father's house and the security of his own country and came to live among us as a stranger in a foreign land. And while here Abraham put his wife at risk to save himself, Christ put himself at risk to save us. And more than risk himself, at the cross he gave himself. And here God promises that whoever dishonours Abraham God will curse, what he doesn't say is that at the cross his own Son will take that curse, the curse for all those who have dishonoured God and failed to heed his promises.

And here Abraham is blessed with possessions, despite his sin. But at the cross, for our sin, Christ was stripped of every possession that we might be blessed with things of greater worth than money.

And here, God promises to bring life and blessing from a barren couple. But there's nothing more barren than the grave: because no life or blessing ever came from there; until God raised Jesus from the dead. And out of death he brought life, and out of hopelessness he brought hope, because the weakness of the cross is the power of God.

The power of God for the blessing of the world. Because through Christ's death and resurrection and through his ascension and pouring out of the Spirit, the blessing of Abraham has been turned outward to the nations. As Jesus says to the disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:18-19). Followers of Jesus who know that we are saved and justified by what Christ has done - the 'I will and I have done' of God - not by the 'I've gotta do' lists of religion or self-help. Followers of Jesus who know that just like Abraham, we've failed to live as we should, but to whom God has shown mercy and grace and blessed us.

And blessed us to be a blessing. Because any genuine encounter with God's grace - and his promises fulfilled in Christ, will lead us to take that same grace to others. As Jesus said to the disciples after his resurrection, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21).

So this week, take time to ponder how Christ left his comfort for you, and look for opportunities to step out of your comfort zone and share that grace with others. It might be by welcoming a newcomer, or engaging with a neighbour. It might be forgiving one who's hurt you or encouraging one who needs it. It might be trusting God when it feels like you're in a famine and staying steadfast for the sake of those you love. And if you're not yet a Christian, maybe it's time to put your faith in what Christ has done for you and step into the future, however uncertain that might look.

Whatever it is, through Christ you have become a partaker in God's promise to Abraham. So, thank God, trust Christ, and share the blessing.