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GREAT PRIVILEGE, GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

Genesis 12:1-3

By

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Genesis Lesson 25

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Genesis 12:1-3

We live in a day of rampant selfism. In his book, *Habits of the Heart*, sociologist Robert Bellah and his associates interviewed a broad range of middle-class Americans to discover how they make sense of their lives. One young nurse, Sheila Larson, described her personal philosophy as "Sheilaism," explaining, "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself." (*Newsweek* [9/30/91], p. 64.) Melody Beattie, author of the best seller, *Co-Dependent No More*, sums up her philosophy in her dedication: "I dedicate this book to me." Self-help guru, John Bradshaw, says that you should say out loud and often, "I love myself. I will accept myself unconditionally" (*Healing the Shame That Binds You* [Health Communications, Inc.], p. 158).

It would be one thing if all this selfism was outside the church and stayed there. But, as you know, it has flooded into the church. Even though Melody Beattie is not a Christian, her book is sold by Christian book stores and catalogs. Many Christians view their faith as the means to personal fulfillment and happiness. The ultimate test of truth for many in the church is, "Does it bring me the good feelings and happy life I'm after? If it does, it must be true. If it results in long-term pain or hardship, forget it!" We're in the market for whatever will make self happy.

A healthy antidote to this trend is to study the calling and life of this godly man, Abram. He was living as a pagan idolater in a pagan city, Ur of the Chaldees, when God called him and made a covenant with him. Abram left familiar surroundings, family, and friends and went out by faith to an unknown destination and future. Believing the promise of God, he became the father of all who follow God. He died in faith, not having received all that God had promised, but believing that it would be so. Abram's life, and especially God's calling him, teach us that ...

God calls us to bless us and to make us
a blessing to all the nations.

Yes, thank God, His calling us involves His blessing us (although that blessing sometimes includes difficult trials). But that's only half the story. If we bottle up God's blessings for ourselves, we're missing the reason He calls us: He has called us and blessed us so that we will become His channel for blessing all the nations. As God's chosen people, we have a great privilege--God's blessing; and, a great responsibility--to be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

Verses 1-3 are symmetrical: There is a command from the Lord ("Go forth") followed by three promises: "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great." Then there is a second command, rendered as a future tense in most versions: "Be a blessing" (NASB margin), followed by three more promises: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Abram's obedience to the first command would start a chain reaction in which God would bless him so that he could fulfill the second command to be a blessing, which would result in God's further blessing.

1. Our great privilege: God calls us to bless us.

Derek Kidner observes, "The history of redemption, like that of creation, begins with God speaking: this, in a nutshell, differentiates Abram's story from his father's" (*Genesis* [IVP], p. 113). As I emphasized last week, salvation is from the Lord, not from man. Here was Abram, going about his pagan life in Ur, when God called him to a completely new way of life. God's call set Abram apart. It is God's call to us that sets us apart from our wicked world. Note three things about:

A. God's Call

(1) *God's call comes with authority.* God is the sovereign God who calls men to Himself with authority. He didn't suggest, "Abram, if you'd like a happier life, you might try moving to Canaan." He commanded, "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you." It was a command that demanded a response. Abram would have been in disobedience to the sovereign God if he had not obeyed.

In the New Testament, the word “call” or “calling” is most often used of God’s call to salvation. It is not a helpful hint for happier living. It is the authoritative command of God. When Jesus began to preach the gospel, Mark 1:15 sums up His message: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” It was the word of the King calling rebellious subjects to quit their rebellion and bow before His rightful sovereignty.

It is a command with serious consequences. If we disobey, the day is coming when the King with force will squash all rebellion and punish those who have refused to yield to Him. The gospel call isn’t a nice option if you decide that maybe Jesus can help you be happy. It is the authoritative command of the King, calling you to stop going your own way and to come under His rightful sovereignty. Once you have heard that call, as you have today, you must obey or you are in rebellion against the sovereign God.

(2) *God’s call often requires difficulty.* God’s call to Abram was not easy for Abram to follow. He was 75 years old, established in his community, and tied in closely with his extended family. God could have said, “I’ll be your God and you can stay in Ur. You have contacts here, and we’ll use those to further My purpose.” No, God told him to leave his familiar surroundings and his extended family and head off to some unknown destination. God did not even reveal at first where Abram would be going. He didn’t show him color brochures of the swimming pools and golf courses in Canaan. There’s a hint that he would face hostility: some would curse him (12:3). Travel wasn’t easy in those days. There weren’t motels and fast food restaurants along the Interstate highway. No U-Haul trucks. Abram couldn’t call home and let everyone know how life was in the new place. He had to say good-bye once and for all to his country and relatives and set out to follow God.

While God may not ask you or me literally to leave our country or our families, He does call us to separate ourselves from all that would hinder our complete commitment to Him. The word “holy” comes from a word meaning to be separate or set apart. To be holy is to be separate from sin and set apart unto God. The core of holiness, or separation, is not outward, but inward. We must break from our culture’s sinful ways of thinking. We must become

biblical thinkers who are able to evaluate our culture by the standard of God's Word.

We should evaluate the *greed* of our culture by what the Bible says about contentment and generosity. We should evaluate the *sensuality* of our culture by what the Bible says about purity and the sanctity of sex in marriage. We should evaluate our culture's obsession with *pleasure and self-centeredness* by what the Bible says about service and self-denial. Only when we think biblically about life will we act biblically and be holy people.

Sometimes a person must make a break with family, as painful as that is. Jesus said, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). He did not mean that we should despise or needlessly alienate our families. The Bible is clear that we are to honor our parents and love our families. New Christians especially need to be sensitive and respectful toward family members who oppose Christianity. But Jesus did mean that if our closest loved ones stand between us and Him, our choice is clear: We must follow Christ.

Several years ago a young man from a Sikh background, Sukhwant Singh Bhatia, attended Dallas Seminary. He was the first Sikh ever to attend that school. He came from the Punjab in India. After his conversion, he knew he needed to give up his Sikh identity by cutting his hair and beard, which had never been cut since his birth. After it was cut he says, "I was so afraid of the consequences because everyone would know what was in my heart."

Sukhwant's village expelled him. His father allowed him to visit the family twice a year with the oath that he would not mention his faith. Because of his conversion, his family is considered cursed by the community and has been cut off even from relatives. Two of his sisters converted to Christianity when they saw the change in Sukhwant. They were allowed to remain at home, but Sukhwant had to pay for their education. Today he is a pastor in New Delhi.

Most of us will not face that kind of family opposition to follow Christ. But even those from Christian homes sometimes face subtle or not-so-subtle pressure not to follow Christ fully. Some-

times parents want their children to get well-paying jobs (which excludes most Christian service). Some parents don't want their children to go to the mission field, because they want them and the grandchildren nearby. But the Lord makes it clear: If it comes to love for Him versus love for family, we must follow Him.

God's call often entails other difficulties. Remember, by God's call, I'm not referring to some special call for service that comes only to a few. I'm referring to God's call to salvation which comes to every believer. It may result in rejection or persecution. It will involve bringing all your possessions and money under His lordship. It requires obeying God's Word when it's much easier and brings more immediate pleasure to disobey. It means seeking God's will rather than your own will in every decision.

(3) *God's call requires faith in God and His Word.* The only way you can follow God's call is by taking God at His Word. We'll look more at this in our study of 12:4-9, but it is summed up in verse 4: "So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him." Abram believed what God said and acted on it. And, of course, God is always faithful to His Word of promise to those who believe and obey Him.

Perhaps you're thinking, "It's kind of scary to make a radical break from the world and to step out in faith, especially when you know you might encounter trials and hardships. How do you get such faith?"

The crucial thing with faith is not your faith, but the object of your faith. Note in our text, it was the Lord who called Abram. Note all the "I will's" that the Lord affirms to Abram: "I will show you the land; I will make you a great nation; I will bless you; I will bless those who bless you; I will curse those who curse you." This is the word of the eternal, living God, the Creator of heaven and earth! Can't you trust Him?

The apostle John wrote (1 John 5:9-12),

If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for the witness of God is this, that He has borne witness concerning His Son. The one who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the

witness that God has borne concerning His Son. And the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.

John is pointing out the obvious: We put our faith in sinful men every day. When you ate breakfast this morning, you trusted that the people who processed your food didn't inject poison into it. When you drove your car, you trusted that the mechanic fixed the brakes properly. When you go to the bank and deposit your check, you trust that the teller isn't going to take your money and abscond to Tahiti.

If you can trust such sinful people every day on things that greatly affect your life, can't you trust in the word of the living God, who has borne faithful witness concerning His Son? For over 4,000 years since Abram, God has been faithful to His covenant promises. So when He commands you to repent and believe the gospel, in spite of the difficulties you will encounter, you can trust Him because He promises repeatedly, "I will be with you." God's call is always accompanied by ...

B. God's Blessings.

When God calls us to Himself, He always supplies the grace we need to obey His call. As I said, with Abram's call there are two commands, but there are six promises of blessings.

God's first command is accompanied by three promises. First, God promised to make Abram into a great nation. That promise has been fulfilled (although not in Abram's lifetime) in the Jewish nation, of which Abram is the father. Along with this, God told Abram (12:7) that He would give the land of Canaan to his descendants. Second, God promised to bless Abram. This refers both to temporal and spiritual well-being. Third, God promised to make Abram's name great. That has certainly been fulfilled, in that Jews, Christians, and Moslems all look to Abraham as the father of their faith. His name is known worldwide to millions of people 4,000 years after he lived.

The second command is that Abram is to be a blessing. With this command are three more promises: First, God promises to bless those who bless Abram; and, second, to curse those who

curse him. This refers not only to Abram, of course, but to Abram's descendants. Anti-Semitism is dangerous business, because the person or nation which is against the Jews incurs God's judgment. While God does not approve of any form of racial prejudice, He is especially against those who are against His chosen people, and He is especially favorable to those who favor His people. Both biblical and post-biblical history bear abundant witness to this fact.

God's third promise connected with His second command is that in Abram, all the families of the earth will be blessed. This is a tremendous promise, fulfilled in the Savior, born of Abram's lineage, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is one of the greatest promises in the Bible--God's promise of a Savior for all nations (or people-groups). Apart from Abram and his seed (Christ), we who are Gentiles would have no hope. The apostle Paul referred to this verse in Galatians 3:8: "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations shall be blessed in you.'" And so here we have the good news, that Jesus Christ would be born to Abraham's descendants, and that He would save us from our sins through faith.

When God calls a person, He always gives far more than He requires. God required Abram to go forth from his country and family, but He repeatedly affirms His promises to Abram with the words, "I will ... I will" If the command is to leave everything to follow Jesus, the promise is, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life" (Mark 10:29-30). All you spend in responding to God's call, He will repay and then some.

Remember, while God gives us many blessings in this life, the main blessing is in eternity. Abram died without seeing most of these promises fulfilled. But he knew that God would make good on His Word. Abram was living for eternity, "looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb.

11:10). If you're living for this fleeting life alone, you should not become a Christian. As Paul put it, "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:19). But if God is the eternal God, then the hardships we encounter in following Him cannot compare to the glory that will follow (2 Cor. 4:17). So that is our great privilege, that God calls us to salvation in order to bless us. But we must not stop there:

2. Our great responsibility: God calls us to make us a blessing to all the nations.

"I will bless you ... and so you shall be a blessing." As I said, this is ultimately fulfilled in Abram's descendant, the Lord Jesus Christ. In Him, Abram becomes the greatest blessing anyone could be to this lost world. Since, by faith in Christ, we are Abraham's heirs, blessed with Abraham the believer (Gal. 3:7, 9), we are under obligation not to bottle up the promise, but to take it to every people group on this earth. This is our Lord's Great Commission, to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19). If you have received the blessings of God's salvation, you are under the responsibility to do all you can to be the channel of that blessing to those who have not heard.

The Book of 2 Kings records how Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, was under siege from Benhadad, the king of Aram. Things were so bad in the city that two women had to resort to eating one of their sons to survive. There were four lepers who sat at the city gate, begging for their food. Hard times are especially hard for beggars, and they were about to die. They finally concluded, "If we stay here, we'll die of famine. If we go over to the enemy camp, maybe they'll spare us. If not, we'll just die anyway." So they went over to the enemy camp.

To their surprise they discovered the camp deserted. God had struck fear in the soldiers' hearts that made them run for their lives, leaving all their belongings behind. These beggars were suddenly rich. They ate the good food, they put on the nice clothes they found, they filled their pockets and their bags with all the gold and silver they could carry. But then they were struck with guilt. They said to one another, "We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news, but we are keeping silent" (2 Kings 7:9). So they went and reported it in Samaria and shared their blessings with them.

Conclusion

God has called us to Himself and given us abundant blessings. But if we keep it to ourselves, we are not doing right. To bottle up God's blessings for ourselves is to fall into the rampant selfism of our sinful culture. If your heart is not in evangelism and missions, if you're not burdened for the lost, if you're not investing the material blessings God has entrusted to you in the work of His kingdom, then you've gotten caught up with American selfism. God calls us in salvation and blesses us so that we can be a blessing. We must set our focus on taking the good news of His salvation to all the nations.

Discussion Questions

1. Are evangelism and missions only for those so gifted, or are they the responsibility of every believer?
2. Is it wrong to present the gospel from the standpoint of, "What's in it for you?" Why/why not?
3. Agree/disagree: If you're into this life only, you should not become a Christian. Give supporting Scripture.
4. How can we reconcile a life of hardship and trials with God's blessing? Can the two co-exist? (See 2 Cor. 11:22-33.)

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