

Prayer

Father in heaven, it is an amazing privilege that we have been included in the blessing you gave to Abraham through our faith in Jesus Christ. We pray now that you would teach us how we ought to trust in you so that your purpose would be fulfilled in our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Introduction

Ann Robinson once famously insulted our Welsh friends by rudely asking, "What are they for?" Well, I hope you won't be insulted if I ask you this morning, what are you for? What is your purpose on earth? Because God surely has purposes for his people.

We saw last week that God had promised Abram a blessing, and sent him on a mission to bring that would see that blessing flow out to all the world. And we saw that Jesus inherited this promise, and he inherited the mission too. Now, as Jesus' church, we share in the blessing, and we have a great purpose: to bless the world, and bring others to share in this blessing.

How each of us plays our part in this mission will vary, but it's worth asking this morning, how can we fulfil our part in God's plan? How can we maximise our potential of being a blessing and bringing others into the blessing of God?

Well, the answer this passage seems to give us is to 'Let go and let God'. That doesn't mean we're to go into passive recipient mode – couch potato Christianity! – but that we should trust *God* to fulfil his purposes in us as we actively serve him. So let's have a look at this chapter, beginning with verses 1-7, where we find we're to:

Trust the God of the Blessing – vv. 1-7

In chapter 12, you may remember, God promised Abram a land, a nation and his blessing. Abram went to the promised land of Canaan, but then drifted from God's ways in Egypt. But now, as he heads back to Canaan, Abram appears chastened. Look at verse: "And he journeyed on from the Negeb as far as Bethel to the place where *his tent had been at the beginning*, between Bethel and Ai, to the place *where he had made an altar at the first*. And there Abram called upon the name of the Lord."

The author is repeating to make the point that Abram is going back to a better place spiritually. Back to the places he'd had the promise confirmed to him and responded in worship.

But what is it he's turning his back on? What is he repenting of? Well, in Egypt he was driven by fear: fear of famine, fear of Pharaoh. And that fear had made him take matters into his own hands. He would abandon moral scruple in order to get that blessing.

But now God's shown him that he is the one who gives the blessing. He's going back to the place where he received the promise, back to the God of the Blessing, to trust in him.

And it's worth noticing just how trustworthy God has been to Abram. These verses keep underscoring God's generosity. Look at verse 2: "Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold." And the blessing has overflowed to others. Verse 5: "And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents". In fact, God's blessing was so great, it became a bit of a problem. Verse 6: "so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together" and their ranch hands started arguing.

This God who had made the promise is generous through and through. Like a stick of rock, wherever you cut, it's the same message. God wasn't just generous with his words, but unwilling to deliver. Perhaps Abram had wondered if God promised blessing, but had another face hidden that couldn't be trusted. But now he saw the blessing was genuine. Fear will drive us to make bad choices, to take sinful routes, to rely on ourselves instead of God. But God is completely trustworthy, and Abram was learning to trust the God of the blessing.

When we were looking for a job in our last year at Holy Trinity, we looked at various possibilities, but the only thing definitely coming up was our leaving date. We had a date when the new curate would be moving into our house. He couldn't make it any later than that, or his family would have nowhere to live. It started to look like we'd be out of a house and a job. I think there was a temptation there to fear. Perhaps to take any job that came along, even if it didn't seem right. But God provided this opening. In the end, it was agreed for us to come to St Andrew's only about 2 weeks before our leaving date. In that time, the diocese managed to buy a house for us and we moved. I left the old house only 2 hours before the new curate arrived. The same God who had put us on this mission provided for us all we needed. He is as generous as his word.

As you think about fulfilling your purpose, making choices to achieve godly ambitions, is there a temptation to give in to fear rather than faith? Even to do wrong in order to get to the right place? Perhaps to boast inappropriately of your work or downgrade others, to keep up your chances of promotion. To join in with unkind in order to be in with the boss. To let your church commitments slip in order to get ahead elsewhere? Let's learn from Abram's mistakes, and trust that God will fulfil his purpose for you. Trust the God of the blessing. Let's move on:

Choose the God of the Blessing – vv. 8-13

There is a couple called Mulvany & Rogers who produce bespoke miniature replicas of real houses to order. The owner of a house in Chelsea once asked them to produce a copy of their house as a surprise for his wife. It was a superb work of craftsmanship, copying every detail, even down to the cracks in the flagstones. The man later split up with his wife, but insisted he keep the model. "There was no contest over the children," says Susie Rogers, one of the creators, "but they were fighting over our house."

If people will fight over miniature houses, putting them even before members of their family, how much more over real property? A solicitor told me recently that they have often seen families break up after the death of the parents due to fighting over the estate.

So his words from verse 8 are remarkable. Verse 8: “Then Abram said to Lot, ‘Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.’” Abram’s had a genuine change of heart. In the previous chapter, he set very little store by his relationship with his wife, as long as he could make a profit. But now he puts his nephew before his wallet.

Why does Abram make this offer? Well the answer comes out as we look at the contrast between the two men. Lot trusted what his eyes told him, but Abram trusted the Lord.

Verse 10: “Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar.” But his eyes weren’t to be relied upon. Verse 13 tells us that Lot’s choice was to live amongst very wicked people. People who were soon to be destroyed.

But Abram went to the promised land. The contrast is brought out in verse 12: “Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley, and moved his tent as far as Sodom.”

But this story isn’t just a warning to do thorough research before making business decisions. It’s about Abram’s faith. Lot looked left and right and chose what pleased his eyes. But Abram looked *up* and chose what pleased the Lord. Lot wanted to get the gift, but Abram wanted the Giver. He had discovered that God was the only one who could bring about the promised blessing, and that God would ensure he brought about the promised blessing. So, instead of muscling his nephew out of the way, he trusted God to make it happen. He let go and let God.

Now this doesn’t mean being a couch potato Christian. Rather, it’s a great example for us as we work out our ambitions. We may have a very good desire, to use our gifts to the full in a career, to provide for our families, to have money to give to others, to establish a work in the church that builds it up. But if we aren’t trusting in God to fulfil his purpose in us, then our ambition is simply sin. That was the choice Jesus faced in his life: to try and establish his kingdom by his own strength, as the crowd and even Peter wanted him to do, or to go to the cross trusting God to establish it through him.

How are you approaching your ambitions and your choices in life? What do you want more – to get your desires or to know God? As Lot found out, you can’t have the gift without the giver. It’s a sad truth that the man who loved the miniature house more than his household has since gone blind and can no longer see it. It’s a tragic illustration of the truth of Lot’s story. But if we choose God first of all, he can take care of the rest. He himself will be ambitious on our behalf. He is the one who will fulfil his purposes for us. Choose the God of the blessing. Let’s look on at the last verses:

Serve the God of the Blessing – vv. 14-18

These verses are all about the results of Abram's choice. God responds to Abram's faith with a lovely confirmation of his promise. Verse 14: "the Lord said to Abram, after Lord had separated from him, "Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northwards and southwards and eastwards and westwards, for all the land that you can see I will give to you and to your offspring for ever." There is a place near Bethel apparently where you can stand and see Mount Hermon in the north, the Dead Sea in the south, the Mediterranean in the west and Transjordan in the east. Abram gave up trying to grab the land, and it was handed to him on a plate, along with the countless descendants of verse 16.

And look at the contrast of results between Abram and Lot. The land Abram was to go to was his forever, whereas Lot's was soon facing destruction. Abram's descendants would be like the dust of the earth, whereas Lot's have become dust. And what I particularly want to draw to your attention, Lot went to Sodom and became conformed to the world, but in verse 18 we see Abram transforming a little bit of the land.

Verse 18: "Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron". This was almost certainly a religious site, chosen for its heaven-reaching trees. But the author goes on, "and there he built an altar to the Lord."

You see, God's blessing on Abram wasn't just a big meal ticket, whose purpose was to make him rich. It wasn't actually about *Abram* at all. It was God's plan for rescuing his world from the curse of judgement upon it and returning it to God's blessing. It was about God's Rule and God's glory being restored to his world.

Isn't that what God has achieved in Jesus? Jesus, the heir of the promise, gave up his life and was blessed with eternal life in the promised land – the new creation. Through him, God's established his kingdom, he's delivered the world of the power of sin and death and judgement and everything will be made once again for his glory.

So, we shouldn't just assume that our ambitions are God's purposes for us. Rather, we should make God's purposes our ambition, and serve the God of the Blessing.

It may be that God's purposes for us aren't very glamorous. Changing nappies, providing for ourselves and our families, being a good worker, a faithful friend, a servant to Jesus' church.

Think of someone like Susannah Wesley, mother of John and Charles Wesley. Doesn't seem like much, changing all those nappies, putting food on the table, reading the Bible each day with them. She could see no great fruit at the time. But what a great effect it had on them, and on this country and the world. In a very real way she was the mother of the great evangelical revival of the 18th Century in this country.

But whether our work is great or mundane, God's purposes are enduring. If we have God's purposes as our ambitions, we'll never need to look back with regret, we'll have done what we were made for. Let's pray