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Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
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A Blessing is God's Favor Freely Bestowed on His people

Genesis 12:1-9

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Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. Amen.

Before we get into our text, let's be sure to set the scene. We are in Genesis 12 which means two major things have taken place. In Genesis 6 – 10, we read of a flood which covers all the earth and how Noah and his family are delivered by God's gracious visitation. What follows in chapter 11 is the event at the Tower of Babel. As the earth is repopulated, God scatters the people into different tribes and languages. And now we come to Genesis 12, 10 generations removed from the flood, and we find this descendant of Noah, living in Haran – a city to the northeast of Canaan (modern day Palestine). Abram is his name. A name which later God will change to Abraham – meaning "father of many." (If I interchange these names, forgive me).

Genesis 12:1-9

Now the Lord had said to Abram:

*"Get out of your country,
From your family
And from your father's house,
To a land that I will show you.*

*² I will make you a great nation;
I will bless you*

*And make your name great;
And you shall be a blessing.*

*³ I will bless those who bless you,
And I will curse him who curses you;*

And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

⁴ So Abram departed as the Lord had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵ Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan. So they came to the land of Canaan. ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem, as far as the terebinth tree of Moreh. And the Canaanites were then in the land.

⁷ Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." And there he built an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. ⁸ And he moved from there to the mountain east of Bethel, and he pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; there he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. ⁹ So Abram journeyed, going on still toward the South.

There is good reason for us to define the word "blessing." In a world where the only time you hear the phrase "God bless you" is when someone sneezes, it might be good for us to know a little more about what it means to be blessed by God. The idea appears in our text when God says to Abram "I will bless you." Or more emphatically in the Hebrew: "in a blessing, I will bless you." What should Abram expect? What does it mean for God to bless His people?

Today we look for a Biblical definition of blessing. And we will work with the idea that **"A Blessing is God's Favor Freely Bestowed."** It is something freely bestowed through His gracious visitation. It is something which is experienced according to God's time and purpose. And finally, it is something which God intends to share with the world through His people.

Let us pray: Blessed are you O holy Father, for you have blessed us with every spiritual blessing; grant us your gracious favor that we might come to know what it means to receive Your blessing and that we might then share Your blessing with the world; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

1) It is something which is bestowed in God's gracious visitation

A wind was blowing. Abram was living comfortably. He had a wife, Sarai, he had a home and property. And they served other gods. Later, in the book of Joshua, the Lord will recount how this land of Abram's fathers was filled with idols. They lived in the city of Haran and they served other gods. Abram was living in the midst of sin and unbelief. Yet, this day a wind blew, and with it, the voice of the Lord spoke. You couldn't tell exactly where it came from, or where it went, but, like the wind, you knew it was there – swift with urgency, compelling Abram to move, to move away from the idols of his fathers and to follow the voice of the living God. A voice called out to Abram. A voice called Abram out.

Now the Lord had said to Abram:

*"Get out of your country,
From your family
And from your father's house,*

To a land that I will show you.
2 I will make you a great nation;
I will bless you
And make your name great;
And you shall be a blessing.
3 I will bless those who bless you,
And I will curse him who curses you;
And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

A wind was blowing. It was the LORD who spoke. Abram couldn't say where He came from, or where He went. But what he knew was, this was a God unlike any other – He spoke. And He spoke words of blessing and grace. He had a name: “the LORD” and He had chosen to visit Abram – He spoke, saying: “I will surely bless you.” Unlike the silent idols, the cold statues, the selfish demands of other gods; the LORD visited Him, spoke, and bestowed His gracious favor.

We cannot say exactly where it begins and where it ends. The Spirit moves not according to human reason, but according to God's will. Blessings don't necessarily come in a way that we can reason out, in the way we expect, and they never come in a way we deserve. Like the wind, we cannot see it. He simply makes Himself known in what we hear: “I will surely bless you.”

A blessing is when God's favor is freely bestowed in His gracious visitation.

Nicodemus just did not get it. How can a man be born again? What does this mean, “unless one is born again, He cannot enter the kingdom of God”? Nicodemus was thinking of God's blessing in the Pharisaic way of thinking. He was thinking: blessing in terms of visible, tangible, temporal things. A way that can be reasoned, deserved, or expected. This was the Pharisaic view of God's blessing. It was something known in who you were, what status you held, what accomplishments you've made, what wealth you've gained, and what group you belonged to. After all, they were born descendants of Abram. Why would Jesus speak of any other birth? They didn't get it.

Jesus responds: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:5–8)

A wind blows and God suddenly appears out of no where with grace and mercy. Who has deserved it? God visits us freely in a Spirit-filled breeze which blows through our midst. The blessing of baptism is God's gracious visitation to each of us. When that water meets His word, a voice freely bestows a blessing. God visits us with new birth, new life, a new calling. He calls us out of a land of idols and into His eternal blessing. He takes us from the stagnancy and comfort of this world and moves us onward – into a life like Abram – a life of pilgrimage – a life which is lived in God's blessing, but which also journeys toward that blessing. A wind blows with God's free favor, and in it, a voice whispers: "I will bless you."

A blessing is God freely bestowing His favor. God visits Abram and calls Him out to inherit a blessing. God visits you and calls you out to inherit a blessing. A blessing is something which is bestowed by God's gracious visitation.

2) It is something which is experienced according to God's time and purpose

Abram is a Hebrew. He is said to be the father of the Hebrew people. And the word "Hebrew" comes from our text. It is found in verse 6 when it says: "Abram passed through..." Abram would later be called "Hebrew" – a word which in his language means: "the one passing through." How fitting. After all, what word could describe the life of a Christian than the phrase: "one passing through."

Many people misunderstand what it means to be blessed by God. In Jesus day, the Pharisees, such as Nicodemus, thought of blessing in terms of prosperity – visible, tangible, earthly benefits. To be blessed by God is to them – great wealth or power, a life free from trouble. And the way to get God's blessing is to earn it. If you want His blessing you have to earn it.

But notice how the story is left hanging. Abram is always moving – he departs, he goes, he passes through, he journeys onward. Its moving, moving. He's here, he's there, and it ends with, v.9, "He journeyed, going on still toward the South." Literally the original language says: "Abram pulled up stakes and went on." He was truly, "a Hebrew." He was just passing through, always headed toward God's destination.

Hebrews 11:8–10 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

The blessing of God is not bestowed in our achievements, nor is it the experience of a life free from troubles. It is not about the cushy job, or freedom from illness. Rather than bestowing His blessing to us in our earthly experience, He bestows His blessing by faith – by motivating us to trust His promise and not our experience.

God's blessing is something bestowed according to His time and purpose. And often that purpose and time is not quite what we expect. We might suppose a blessing is when God takes away this or that trouble, and yet do we stop to realize that the blessing might be in the very trouble itself. The fullness of His blessing is not experienced in this world, but in God's destination. And that destination is the cross and the resurrection. In Christ, we find the destination of our faith – peace with God and an eternal home with Him in the New Creation. In Christ we find God's gracious favor toward us, where He bestows forgiveness and grace; where He bestows His good purpose; and where He journeys with us, calling us to His destination.

And so each one of us are Hebrews. We're here, we're there, we're in this trouble, then we're in that; but all the while, we are headed somewhere beyond – beyond the current stress; past the current anxiety, toward a peaceful destination: the New Creation. Here and there we might taste it, we might feel it; but these are just glimpses: maybe we're healed from a sickness, maybe a financial situation is cured; it is for us only a foretaste of the blessing that it to come. We pull up stakes and move on, always toward a blessing – something that is made known in God's time and God's purpose. A blessing is something known according to God's time and His purpose.

3) It is something which God shares with the world through His people

A blessing is a gift. I like getting gifts. But what I like even more is sharing them and seeing them put to good use. The worse gift is the kind that gets put up on a shelf and never used. In contrast, the greatest gifts are those I see in the house being used every day. These are great gifts, because they are being shared and put to good use.

God is at work through His people to put His blessing to good use. He bestowed a blessing on Abram, but it would not remain with him only. The story went on, and with it His blessing. "I will bless you, and you shall be a blessing." Abram would be a blessing to generations to follow and in him all the families of the earth would be blessed. It would be shared with His son Isaac. It would be shared with his grandson Jacob. Then onward, generation after generation the descendants of Abram would be carry this blessing, onward, growing, until it was culminated in One – in One descendant who would become a blessing to the whole world.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

In Christ, the blessing of Abram is shared with all the world. For His favor is not just toward one man, but toward all the families of the earth. "In you," He says, "all the tribes of the earth will be blessed." For God loves not just one person or one race or one denomination or this or that achievement; God so loved the world. He justifies the ungodly (Romans 4). His Son was sacrificed for all sin, for all people. Which means this blessing of eternal life is to you; as well as to all the world. God intends to share His blessing with the world through you.

With so many misconstrued ideas about what it means to be blessed, how important it is to put God's gift to good use. Here you have gained that precious truth, that mysterious definition we explore. In times of trouble, in stressful and difficult situation, in times of sickness or adversity – this is where God's hidden blessings are often shown forth the brightest. These are the situations where the world witnesses God's greatest blessings – faith in His promises, hope in His gracious present, love through His Son. So as you pull up stakes and move from this place in life to that, as you encounter a world confused about what it means to say, "God bless you," these are the opportunities to share God's blessing with the world.

This is why we leave each service with the benediction. The LORD bless you and keep you... This is both the gift of God's favor, and also something which goes with you and through you to the world. As you take up your calling this week – however lowly it might be or however inadequately we carry it out – mother, husband, part-time employee – and however inadequately we carry it out – nothing can change the fact that God has given His favor freely to you.

And for this reason, we bow our head. Abram constructs an altar to the living God, thereby testifying to the blessed presence of God. He bows and prays, worships and gives thanks. We can't see it, touch it, or count it, and yet we know the blessing is ours. And in worship, we welcome the world to share in that blessing.

God has Freely Bestowed His favor on His people. He has called you to it through His gracious visitation. He is making it fully known according to His time and purpose. And He is sharing it with the world through you. Let us worship and bow down, for God has blessed us.

Amen.