

Sin Answered with Greater Grace  
Pastor Larry Kroon  
Wasilla Bible Church  
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There's running through scripture a central theme; runs like a thread all the way through, start to the finish, of the biblical story. It's crucial that you grasp that thread. Otherwise, if you don't, the stories, the proverbs, the psalms, the teachings, the miracles, all the different things in the Bible just kinda become like loose beads scattered in a box. And you may be excited about 'em, you may pick one up and say, 'Wow, this is cool!', but there's no compelling cohesion to 'em. There's no sense of the driving sequence to them. But if you grasp the threads you can see how all the different stories, all the different poems, all the different proverbs, all the different miracles, all the different sayings can be strung together in an amazing, amazing story of grace. But you gotta grasp that central theme. You gotta grasp the central story line, if I wanna put it that way. And my goal today is that you will; that by the time we're done today you will have a good grip on the central story line of the scriptures. In fact, my goal is you will have it very clearly, very concretely; you could boil it down to one simple phrase. That's my target today. It's kind of an instructional goal. This is one of those lessons where I'm more concerned that you walk out of here gripping something than you walk out feeling some way. It's very important that you see something today, that you get a grip on it and understand it. It may be for some of you, as we go through this, it'll be an 'Aha!' moment and you'll say 'Whoa!' For others of you, it'll be something that the 'Aha!' will come some other time, when you see how a passage of scripture reading or something you're going through in your life connects to the story line we're going to look at today. That's where we're headed; that's our target.

And simple statement of review as we get ready to pick up on it, is where we've been the past couple weeks is basically been background. You enter those first pages of scripture and it sets the stage for the story to start. And the stage that is set in those first eleven chapters of the scriptures, Genesis chapter 1 through 11, is basically the truth, the reality that we live in a world that was once a good creation but has gone bad. It was once a grand and glorious creation over which God looked and said, 'This is good. This is very good.' But that very good creation has gone bad. It went bad at a very specific moment in time. There was an event, there was a decision, there was an action that released an evil in our world that has corrupted things ever since. Looking back to that event, the Apostle Paul describes it in this way in Romans chapter 5. He says

*Through one man's disobedience the many were made sinners.*

When Adam and Eve crossed the line from obedience into disobedience all mankind fell with them. All their descendants have been tainted with the reality of sin at the very core of our being.

How bad is that? In Genesis there's two verses that are probably the darkest verses in the whole opening of the book of the scriptures, and it's found in Genesis chapter 6. Just before we have the flood released upon the world in an act of judgment we're told that

*God saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*

God looked and said, 'Man is evil at the core.' And then the most astounding, darkest verse...it goes on to say

*The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved His heart.*

What He did at that point in time was kinda push the reset button. He sent the flood, a cataclysmic climatic change sent upon the earth. It wiped out everything except for one family. When the flood was done the climate was forever changed; geography was totally changed; but mankind had not changed. Man was still, at the very core, evil. And that's borne out as you go into the next chapters in Genesis after the flood. That's the background that simply sets the stage for what happens next.

What happens at this point is God answers the ever-increasing sin of man; God answers that ever-increasing sin with something amazing. He answers it with an even greater grace, a grace that comes into the world as a promise, a grace that is released into this creation-gone-bad with simple words. The promise is found in Genesis chapter 12, verses 1 through 3. And I'm gonna encourage you, if you have your Bibles with you, find that text. And if you are a person who marks in your Bible and likes to highlight things or put notes in the margin, this set of

verses right here should be underlined in red. This is the end of the thread that will run all the way through the rest of the Bible 'til you come to the book of Revelation. This is the thematic story line of what God is doing, and it begins with a promise. We're gonna read that promise in a second, but I wanna prepare you for the reading because when we read it there's very little detail to the situation. There's very little drama. In a culture that likes its stories to come with drama, this story will disappoint you. We are not told much about the characters involved—a man named Abram who will later be called Abraham, and his family—we are told very little about them. We know that they lived in the eastern area of the Middle East, they had been moved part way towards Palestine, and they had stopped there, and then we're gonna see that they are called to go further. We're told very little about how they were ever initially called by God to make any move. We're not told how God appeared to him or spoke to him, and we'd like to see that, but we're not told. The whole account focuses on making sure we hear the words of the promise, and that nothing distracts us from it—no character description, no dramatic event. What we need to hear and what we need to see are the words of that promise. Genesis chapter 12, we're told

*Now the LORD said to Abram,*

...the wanderer, who had grown up worshipping idols, in a family that worshipped idols, in the land of Ur of the Chaldeans. God spoke to this man, and He said

*“Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and 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 will be blessed.”*

That's the promise. There's key elements to it that are easy to quickly put up in front and highlight. One is the statement of the land to which he was going. Later that will become, as the promise is repeated and refined and renewed in Abraham's life, that will become more and more focused where that land is, and it'll be more and more focused that that's a central part of the promise, is that yes, this land will be his and his descendants'. A second part of the promise is that He will make this Abraham into a great nation. Now, implied in that, it'll become explicit as the promise is renewed in the years to follow, is that Abraham is gonna have descendants. He's gonna have children, and they are gonna become a great nation. A third part of the promise is that God will bless Abraham. God's gonna touch his life and it's gonna be a good life. Along with that, interesting, is not only will he be blessed; He says, 'You shall be a blessing. You shall be a blessing.' Other people will be touched by God's goodness through him as he makes his different decisions and goes through his different transitions, and trips, and his wandering life through the land God was showing him. He will be a blessing to people. Now, there's a contrary element to that, and it's followed up in the next line, where it says that 'Those who curse you, though, are gonna be cursed. You're gonna bless people and be a blessing to people who bless you, but I tell you what...if people treat you wrong,' God says, 'Abraham, they're gonna be cursed.' And then He comes to the final line, and this one I'm gonna highlight. He says, "*In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.*" 'In you all the peoples of the earth, every tongue, every tribe, every family will ultimately be blessed through you.' That's a word of promise.

You need to understand that those are formative words. Weddings...I enjoy weddings. I've done lots of weddings...you know, big weddings, small weddings. I've done weddings up on a mountain with like four people there; I've done weddings in big congregational settings; I've done weddings of all different sizes, shapes, some very formal, some informal. But at the core of every wedding, and this is what I tell every couple as we prepare for a wedding, at the core of every wedding...and it becomes foundational to every marriage...is fifty-four words of promise. And what I tell these couples as they prepare to get married is 'Listen, on that day I don't care how many lights there are; I don't care how much drama there is; I don't care how much music there is; I don't care how formal it is or informal it is; what's gonna make it a wedding is when you share those fifty-four words of promise—and the rest of your life will be shaped by them.

There is a power to promises that are spoken and lived with integrity. In the uttering of the words we don't sense it. In the uttering of the words we don't experience it. But when those words of promise are spoken with integrity they are formative and they shape the future. These words, spoken by our God, read on a piece of paper as we look thousands of years later...we need to understand these were formative and are formative words. They have shaped life ever since. God said, 'I will...I will...I will...' throughout here. They were His promises. The very same God who spoke when there was nothing, and all things came into being, the very same God whose word is that power, and that formative, spoke these words of promise. And they have shaped everything since. You wanna understand scripture, you need to understand this promise. But I'll go beyond that. You wanna understand human history right down to this moment, this time, this place, you need to understand this promise, because it has shaped

this moment. It's a formative, formative word of promise, spoken with power; and most amazing of all to me, spoken with grace.

Remember the background here. Remember the background. It is a good creation gone bad. Mankind has crossed the line from obedience into disobedience, sin is rampant in the world, the thoughts and intents of every heart is towards evil. By that we mean it is contrary to God, it is resistant to Him. And in this dark world that won't even turn around after the Flood, God steps forward and says, 'I will bless every people. I will, through this one man.' And that's what God is doing, and has been doing.

How do we react to that? How do you respond to that? Probably best to look at how Abraham did—with faith. It's implied when the story goes on in the very next verse and says "*So Abraham went...*" Well, there must have been some faith there. It's very explicit when we go a little further in the story and we come to Genesis chapter 15, one of my favorite stories in the Old Testament, where we have Abraham...it's been years now, he still doesn't own the land; he's experiencing blessing, but he still...the land isn't his, and worst of all, he doesn't have any descendants yet. He's saying 'How can I become a great nation? I don't even have a child!' And he goes to God about that, in Genesis chapter 15, verse 1. And God comes back to him and renews the promise. And one of the things God says to him...God takes his friend—that's what he's eventually called, Abraham, His friend—He takes him out into the night and He points him up to the sky, and he says, 'Listen, Abraham, you see all those stars? Look up there. Can you see 'em all? Count 'em. Go ahead, count 'em.' I kinda picture Abraham goin', 'One, two, three, four...' you know, and just, 'Ok, I'll try,' you know. And then God says, 'Listen! Your descendants are gonna outnumber the stars. I know you don't have a son yet, but you're gonna have more descendants than the stars.'

Then comes this thing, this astounding statement. It says "*Then he believed in the LORD.*" Now I picture this again, where God says, 'Your descendants are gonna outnumber the stars, Abraham.' And Abraham's lookin' up to the sky and he just goes, 'Ok.' I mean, I don't picture this cathartic, crisis moment where he goes, 'Ohhhh!' I just think he... 'Yeah, ok, I believe You.' And God says 'That's righteousness. I count that as getting it right.'

That's how you respond to the promise of God. You believe it. That's the right way to respond. Now, it isn't always easy to believe it. You go further in Abraham's story and you come to one of the strangest passages, found in Genesis chapter 22, much later in Abraham's story. He now has that son. In fact, that son is a teenager, and Abraham has enjoyed a blessed life and things have gone well. And he's nearing the end and he's enjoying this son. They named him "Laughter" because they had laughed. By the time he came they were laughing when God said "You're gonna have a son." And when he was born they said, 'Ok, we're gonna call him "Laughter"', and it filled their home with laughter; it filled their home with joy. It filled their home with love for this child.

And now the child's a teenager, and God comes to Abraham and He says this to him. He says, 'Abraham, I need you to do something, and it's a test.' Chapter 22, verse 1 says God tested Abraham; and the test was this. He says to Abraham in verse 2,

*"Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."*

'Take this child you really love, and take him and offer him as a burn offering.' A burn offering was an offering that was meant to express your total dedication to God. And God's saying, 'Listen, you really are committed to me? You're really devoted to me? You wanna show it to me? Sacrifice your son. Sacrifice your son. Show me I mean more to you than he does.'

Abraham sets out with a couple of servants, his son, wood loaded; he's ready to do the offering. And we're told that he travels for a number of days. Eventually he leaves the helpers behind, and it's just he and his son climbing on the mountain. And the son is saying, 'What's this about?' And his dad is telling him, 'This is gonna be a burnt offering.' The son is going, 'Where's the offering?' And then we find, later up in the high mountain, just the two of 'em alone, that the child is... the young son...is tied with a rope and he's laid on the altar. And Abraham picks up a knife and is gonna slay his son.

At this point in time you kinda wonder 'What's he thinking? What's going through his mind? What's happening here?' And you wonder with the son what kind of conversation went on at that time, and what was Abraham telling his son as he took that knife. All along he'd said God would provide, God will provide. And it's time to bring down the knife.

We're told in the book of Hebrews what Abraham was thinking at that point in time. We're not left to wonder. We're not left to be curious. We're told exactly what Abraham was thinking at that point in time. We're told that as he raised that knife he considered that God is able to raise even from the dead. Abraham believed that if that knife dropped and his son was killed, God would still raise him up and he would still have the endless descendants that had been promised. That was the faith that Abraham had...absolutely convinced that that knife would not stop God's promise.

There's intervention at that point; an angel interrupts. An angel of the LORD speaks from heaven; he stops it. He says, 'You have passed the test' in essence. 'I know where you're at.' And then he goes on and he makes a promise based on what had just happened. He renews the promise that had been made before. He says

*"By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, that because you have done this thing, you've not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you..."*

'...I will follow through totally on this; just the way I have been, I'm gonna keep it up.' And he goes on and he includes 'not only will you be greatly blessed.' He says

*"In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."*

I need to stop there just a second, because this is a verse that the Apostle Paul pulls out and says, 'There's the gospel right there.' That's the gospel spoken long before Jesus. God says to Abraham, "*In your seed*", and it's not a plural here. He's speaking of one descendant. He says, 'In your descendant all the nations of the earth shall be blessed,' and Paul says He was talking about Jesus at that moment—descendant of Abraham, descendant of Isaac. In Him all the nations will be blessed. That is the gospel.

And He says 'It's because you have obeyed My voice.' What a tremendous moment! Abraham simply responds to the promise of grace that had been given by receiving it with a faith...not just a casual faith, but a faith that would obey. And in responding he is blessed, and he becomes a blessing. And the phrasing we use around our congregation, he enjoys grace and grace is extended through him. And the promise, that promise, becomes the driving force of the rest of the biblical story. It is the thread that runs through it, and it runs through history right up to this moment. And that is the thread that is running through your story. God is keeping that promise.

We'll be tracking that in the weeks ahead. We'll be seeing how that develops in the stories that follow in the Old Testament and then on into the New. But for right now I'm just gonna pause for a second and I wanna put a little pastoral note to this as we close. And all I simply wanna say... When we look at Abraham's story and we track through it, and then we're gonna see how that promise unfolds in the generations that follow, the thing that I want you to understand is we're seeing here a template, a paradigm, a pattern that will be repeated and I believe is repeated in all our lives. I'm convinced that God's grace in this world of increasing sin, God's greater grace will always come to you in a word of promise rooted in this ancient, ancient promise. It may be high drama; it may be low drama. The setting, the condition, the situation isn't so important. What is critical is a word of promise that God gives you that is rooted in this promise, a word where God will promise to bless you, and will promise to make you a blessing through the descendant of Abraham.

To respond to that grace will be as simple as to look up at the stars and say, 'Ok, I believe it.' It won't always be that simple, thought. There'll be times of testing, when your faith will be taken to the max. Don't fear those. God brought the test to Abraham when he was ready for it, not before. When you respond to God's grace that way in your life, simply taking the promise and believing it with a faith that will obey, you will be blessed, and you will be a blessing, because you'll be doing what God wants done. That's all He wants from you—hear Him and respond, and let His grace loose. Let's stand.

We've spent time together today to encourage each other with song, to renew our faith and our focus on Jesus, and also to see the roots of the gospel. Our challenge now is to go out into a culture that is one of increasing sin and needs to hear God's grace.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Grip that truth and enjoy that grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.