

Genesis 12 The generous God

Introduction

In the ancient world the vast majority of people had an idea of local tribal gods who were there exclusively for them and only operated in their district, country or region. Others blurred the distinctions between God and the created order. The message loud and clear that came in the Jewish Bible the Old Testament was very different. In the early chapters of the first book Genesis which means –the beginning- is a statement about an almighty God who created the whole universe and what is more created humanity in His own image in order to have a relationship with us. It was not a localised vision for a few in a tribe or even exclusively for one nation, albeit the Jewish people, the descendants of a man called Abraham and his wife Sarah, were chosen with the special privilege of bring God's good news to the world. The vision of the generous God for His world was set out in Genesis 12:1-3. It was a calling that caused a radical change in the life of this man and his family who would set out on a faith journey with God without knowing most of the details of what lay ahead in the future. They had 'only' the promises of God to guarantee their incredible future. The rest you might accurately say is history!

1. The declaration of the generous God (Genesis 12:1-3)

(a) The call to Abram (Genesis 12:1) *The Lord had said to Abram, Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.* This was actually the second call that came to the man whom God called in Ur to travel on to the Promised Land (Genesis 11:31). Why did it need to be repeated some years later? This was because the first call had been forgotten. The Lord had asked them to go to Canaan, but despite the good start they stopped at Haran. It was perfectly permissible to stop in Haran on the way; the problem was that having taken a great step of faith to embark on a journey the majority of this family group chose to give up along the way. Terah, Abram's dad, would die in Haran, having settled for missing out on the blessing God had provided for him and his family in Canaan. We have set out on a faith journey in our commitment to erecting fit-for-purpose premises and engaging in new forms of outreach activities in the hope of having a more effective mission in our community in the twenty-first century. Will we like most of Abram's family stop part way along the journey, never finding out what God has ultimately provided for us? Or will we, despite some disappointments along the way, renew our determination to continue seeking His will, so that we will in His time see the rewards of obedience as we follow in the way He has provided for us? This is not a small matter. All the members of Abram's family had made significant material and financial sacrifices to take the trip to Haran; possibly lucrative careers had been giving up to heed God's call; certainly they were now following a simpler lifestyle. Did they think we've made enough sacrifices for God He cannot expect any more from us? We will never know the answer to such questions. What is important to note here was that God intended Abram to move on to the place of future blessing. They may have had many encouragements in the years at Haran, yet God had a better place in store for them. This did not mean a place free from challenges and difficulties, but a calling to heed the voice of their Lord who invited them to continue their journey of faith. There are times when we, personally or collectively, want to take a break, take a step back, but God calls us once more to continue on in the journey with Him. He is Jehovah Jireh, the God who will provide the strength that we need. Do we really believe that? I think that we do, sometimes we need a little reassurance that this is the case, but we know that God

can be trusted to guide and direct us into the future He has planned for us. (b) **The nature of the call** ¹*The Lord had said to Abram, Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.* ²*I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing.* ³ *I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.* (i) A call to leave your country Abram can tick that box. Lord I have already done that one. Isn't God gracious to begin with words that would encourage His servant to see the progress he has already made. Sometimes we forget our progress in the Christian life and dwell too much on the negatives of our failings and shortcomings. The devil would love to keep us in that place. God doesn't because His grace is sufficient to cover all our needs whatever we have done. Abraham, God says, I appreciate that you loved the place where you have lived and worshipped and worked for generations in your family, but it is now time to move on to another place in another country. Sometimes that may literally occur to us today in a call to missionary service of whatever form overseas. Abram in the light of the call of God and the circumstances before him was called to leave Haran and move on to Canaan. (ii) It was also a call to leave your people. He was very comfortable with the community of what we would today call Iraqi people in Haran. His family felt very much at home there. It is natural that when people emigrate to another country that they choose to settle in locations where their fellow countrymen have settled. This has happened over the centuries, but God wanted to remind His servant that his calling was to go to Canaan. Sometimes the people of God can be too comfortable in our churches that we neglect to cultivate or maintain friendships with people outside the church community. How can we ever hope to lead people to Christ if we never spend time with them? We rightly value our Sunday gatherings and our home groups and it is right that they are a priority to us in our weekly schedules, but we also must remember the priority of mission and the situations and people whom we can serve in the name of Jesus. Although we value fellowship, we must constantly remind ourselves that our primary calling is to mission and evangelism. This ought to be reflected in our prayer life too. (iii) It was also a call to leave your father's household His physical family did not want to go on with God and the only way Abram would fulfil the calling God has for him was by leaving them behind in Haran. It is really tough when a Christian is the only believer in their family. It was a huge shock to the family of our former link BMS missionary Justin Horsfall, who at that stage, were not believers and were stunned when she told them what she planned to do with the rest of her life. This is a tough challenge for every Christian. But Jesus did not water it down in His call to prospective disciples. Luke 9:23-25 states: *Then He said to them all: If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me.* ²⁴*For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will save it.* ²⁵*What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?* Luke is not implying that following Jesus wholeheartedly is all about what we give up. It may include some of that without question. However, we may also gain greater blessings than we had imagined also. Luke 18:29-30 reports Jesus as declaring: *I tell you the truth, Jesus said to them, no-one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God* ³⁰ *will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.* What Jesus is teaching primarily, therefore, is not so much what we are separated from, but whom we are separated to (God) and His priorities for our lives. (iv) A call to receive a land (Genesis 12:2a) ²*I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you;* Even now, in this second call, God did not give Abram a geographical location; instead he received a fresh invitation to continue a journey with God, to start once again in obedience to His call; When we have our setbacks it is so easy, like Abraham's family, to settle in our 'Haran' rather than trusting the Lord to go forward with us into the better place He has prepared for us. It may be some time before we

know for certain the place for our future premises, but the geographical location is less important than in being in the place of obedience to the revealed will of God. The promises of blessing in verses two and three of Genesis 12 only applied if Abram honoured God and moved to the Promised Land. This was not an optional extra for a spiritual expert; rather it was a bottom line essential act for a child of God who wanted to be in the place of blessing, rather than in the barren land. Abram you have 'lost' your country, but you will gain a country for your descendants. (v) A call to receive a name (Genesis 12:2b) *I will make your name great and you will be a blessing*. I believe that this promise was not just to this one person, but to the extended family he would father through Isaac; and ultimately to the Jewish people in the Land. Yet these words are carefully chosen here. The presence of Abraham and his descendants in Canaan was not just for their benefit; it was not even solely to bring glory and honour to God, though it did. Notice the phrase at the end of Genesis 12:2: *you will be a blessing*. By your obedience to God, neighbours and other fellow citizens will have their lives enriched as His people live in the way God wants them to. The Jews were called God's Chosen People, but for the benefit of others currently outside God's kingdom. In the same way in John 15, in Jesus' powerful message on our relationship with Him, using the picture of a vine and its branches, He makes a similar point regarding the place of the Christian Church in the purposes of God. John 15:16: *You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in My name*. Notice the causal link here between the blessings and obedience. It is easy to vote to go forward in God's work when all appears plain sailing, but our faith and reliance on God is proven when we make the same faith commitments when the going gets tough. When we will still affirm: 'Lord Your will be done'. Please open the door to that place and close the door to others –even if it is the option I would have preferred. In years to come it is these kinds of moments that later generations highlight to see how we have been willing to trust God (or otherwise) to lead us forward into the next phase of our service for Him. (vi) A call to be a mission-focussed people (Genesis 12:3)³*I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you*. In this immediate context these words are directly applicable to Abraham individually and then to the Jewish people collectively. The Jewish people in history have never been numerous. They have accomplished far more than any other race, in proportion to numbers. When other nations have abused and suppressed them God brought low that nation from its former glories. The Egyptians who enslaved the Jews were over powered by the mighty miracles of God in the time of Moses (Exodus 1 -15); when the mighty Greek Empire, in the person of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem in 168BC, the Romans soon overwhelmed that decadent empire. The Spanish Inquisition against the Jews between 1486 and 1492 so barbaric in nature would lead to the fall of that mighty nation. Spain and Portugal so dominant at that time in world affairs would lose their place due to the barbarity of their conduct in the centuries that followed. The freedom loving Dutch gained their independence in 1581 and welcomed the Jews into their territories. The House of Orange was strongly associated with Jews, especially after 1593 in the Netherlands, and their tolerant and open-minded version of the Christian faith was brought to Britain when William of Orange took the British crown jointly with his wife Mary in 1689. The British Empire that largely disappeared in the twentieth century, in part may have been hastened in its decline by its deceitful treatment of the Jews and the Palestinians in the Holy Land, in the promises made about the future of that geographical region. It may be no accident that America has been the only country in the last century to be a consistent friend of the Jewish people, and that she has prospered as a result of God's blessing, in line with this promise. This principle also has a New Testament application to Christian believers. The people that persecute Christians are

not attacking believers primarily, but our Lord and Saviour Jesus. As a result they are storing up judgement upon themselves. Remember the words of Jesus to Saul of Tarsus, the brutal young Jew who had been beating, imprisoning and killing followers of Jesus. In Acts 9 we have the account of Saul's trip to Damascus with the intention of committing acts of violence against believing Jews in that city. Jesus intervened into that situation with an extraordinary message to this unpleasant young man: *As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me? ⁵ Who are you, Lord? Saul asked. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, he replied. ⁶ Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do* (Acts 9:4-6). When the gospel transforms people's lives it makes a far greater difference to the quality of their existence than they ever expected. Historians have often argued that the Christian (Methodist) revival in eighteenth-century England saved that country from a French-style revolution. By leading people to Christ we do far more than see an individual changed it can have a huge impact in a family and in a community and even on occasions in a country. And as Paul reminded us in Romans 4:16-17, we are all children of Abraham if we share His faith in our great God, and consequently can be partakers in the blessings associated with Abraham. *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring— not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: I have made you a father of many nations. He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed— the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.* What an honour in our journey of faith to be walking in the spiritual footsteps of Abram's literal and physical journey of faith, 4,000 years ago.

2. An illustration of the generosity of God (Luke 19:1-10)

(a) **Time to explore the teaching of Jesus** (Luke 19:1) The streets were crowded because a well-known rabbi was visiting Jericho and the people had turned out to see and hear him. This would be the last time Jesus visited that place before His crucifixion and death. No-one present would have guessed that this would have been the case. Jesus was a healthy man in his thirties. We may think that we have decades still to live –which may turn out to be the case-, but there are no guarantees about tomorrow. I have spoken to lots of people over the years who are interested in Jesus and who claim that at some point in the future they will put their faith and trust in Him, but not now! Who knows whether that day will ever come? I suspect that for most, if not all of us, we have had aspirations of doing a whole variety of things, but because we didn't set aside the time or the money or...? nothing happened! Luke in his gospel chooses not to focus on the crowds that had gathered that day. Instead he draws attention to one local person whose life was to be transformed by Jesus. Luke 19:1 tells us: *Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.* God does not owe us a guaranteed 60, 70, 80 or 90 or even 100 years of life. Life itself is a gift that we have once to live for an uncertain period of time. The question can be asked how grateful are we to our creator for this precious gift? Have you ever stopped to think why God created you? Or what the purpose is of life here on earth? Maybe you are here today and this description would be true of you? In the Bible, in the book of Isaiah it says these words: *Seek the Lord while you can find Him. Call on Him while He is near* (Isaiah 55:6). Do you need to take that step today? I want to give that opportunity to you. No-one has unlimited opportunities each of us is responsible for taking the ones provided to us.

(b) **Time to respond to the teaching of Jesus** (Luke 19:2-6) (i) **Seeking Jesus** (19:2-4) *A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd.⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.* Luke focuses his account

around one notorious local individual Zacchaeus. He was the wealthiest man in the city and one of a handful of seriously rich private citizens in Israel. How did he get so wealthy? Zacchaeus had won the franchise for collecting taxes on behalf of the Romans in the most densely populated and prosperous part of the country. There were three tax franchises and he had landed on his feet. The system worked this way: The Romans put the contracts for tax collection out to tender. The bidder who offered the highest amount usually got the contract. On top of the fee for the occupying forces of Rome the tax collectors were allowed to charge an additional sum to cover their expenses in operating the tax system. Here was where the abuse could set in as there was no set rate for these charges. Most tax collectors were raking in much more than they were entitled to take in and had become seriously rich at the expense of their neighbours and fellow citizens. As a result they tended to be loathed by the average citizen and their lives in serious risk from freedom fighters who resisted the occupying army of Rome. Almost certainly Jesus would have spent many hours in Jericho, but Luke provides a very short summary of Jesus' encounter with this most unlikely convert. *A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd.⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.* This man did not want people to notice that he was interested in Jesus and his message. He did not hide up in a tree because he was very small –though this was possibly a partial consideration. He was there to hide behind the foliage to find out more without other people seeing what he was doing. Maybe that has been true of you? Interested in Jesus, maybe even impressed by the lives of one or two Christians you know well; you want to know more about Him and what it means to follow Jesus? Zacchaeus's plan is working well until Jesus stops at the foot of that very tree and then draws the crowd's attention to the occupant of the tree. Suddenly from being satisfied with his plans this man became very vulnerable. Jesus could have made a harsh comment about it being the appropriate place for such a person –out of sight out of mind! He could have asked the crowd how they viewed the collaborator with the enemies of their nation? To have followed that path might have led to Zacchaeus remaining attached to the tree but with a rope around his neck –as still happens in a good number of countries around the world today to perceived collaborators with declared enemies of particular states or terrorist organisations. It is important to note that Jesus had not given up on him. He didn't focus on the many flaws in this man's life or his past failures. Instead He saw what this man could become in the future –if only God had control of His life. This is how God views you and me. He sees the potential we possess to be the men and women He created us to be, through the enabling power of His Holy Spirit. As a Christian here this morning will we try and see other people as Jesus does? It is not always easy; in fact it is sometimes impossible in our own strength when the person before us has fallen so far short of the life God desires them to lead. However, no-one is beyond the reach of the grace of God. Praise God for that! (ii) **Receiving Jesus** (Luke 19:5-6) *When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.* Zacchaeus was a man who had a controlling instinct. He had to know what was going on in some detail before he would commit to anything. I picture him as a nervous man as well. There were Zealots who lived near Jericho, and who was a more inviting target than him! Yet God had plans for this selfish man's life. I believe that the purpose of this visit to that city on that day was to meet with this one man! Luke records: *when Jesus reached **the spot**...* there is no luck or chance with God. It was not an accidental encounter. Christians believe in a God who is sovereign in His world. There are lots of things we may never understand but will trust Him to take care of us. What were Jesus' words to this man? He could truthfully have torn a strip of him; recited a lengthy list of his shortcomings or even told the crowd who it

was up the tree and embarrassed him. However, Jesus didn't take that option. He told him that He was needed to come down quickly from the tree and go home and get ready for dinner because Jesus was coming to spend the evening at his home. No-one in the crowd would have seen that coming. Jesus treated Zacchaeus with dignity and respect even if his diner host had rarely done that with any of his clients. To be a guest in a Middle Eastern home meant far more than a social time in a person's home today. It was then a public statement of friendship and the guest was regarded for the duration of their stay as a member of that family. Jesus who was perfect identified with a rogue collaborator and spent the evening having dinner with him and his family. Instead of absolute humiliation Zacchaeus cannot believe his good fortune. He walked home with a spring in his step. A man who had no friends outside of his employees, as a collaborator with Rome, was going to receive the most popular man in town for an evening meal. The coming down out of the tree was the easy bit. What would they talk about over dinner? The tax-collectors would normally have boasted how much they had extorted from people. This was not a good line of conversation with a man of God who could hardly have been expected to approve of such actions. What could I talk about with Jesus? Maybe you've had a meal with a number of guests and the conversation was either a bit tricky or the silences were embarrassing? There was a huge potential for that to happen on this occasion –at least in theory.

(c) **Time to apply the teaching of Jesus in his life** (Luke 19:7-10) (i) **The Reaction of the Crowd** (Luke 15:7)⁷*All the people saw this and began to mutter, He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner'.* If Jesus had been on the verge of seeking re-election to the local council or the Sanhedrin (Jewish ruling council) in Jerusalem then His chances would have taken a massive hit! I suspect no-one in the crowd was happy with His course of action. What about you and me? Do we regard some people as beyond the pale? Their lives unreachable by God; maybe you even thought of yourself that way, that something you have done in the past is too bad to be forgiveable by God? Let me tell you the faith we profess as Christians is based on the undeserved kindness (grace) of God. None of us are good enough to earn salvation. God through Jesus offers His love and mercy to the undeserving, made possible to us through the amazing sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. If you have never trusted Jesus can I ask you this morning to ask yourself this question: what reason (not excuse!) is there for not committing my life to Jesus today? (ii) **The Transformation of Zacchaeus** (Luke 15:8-10) ⁸*But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.* ⁹*Jesus said to him, Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.*¹⁰ *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost* (Luke 19:7-10). He called Jesus **Lord**, a declaration of faith in Jesus. Would it just be words to make the rest of the evening go well by telling Jesus what He wanted to hear –even if he never had any intention of following Him? As a minister over the years I have heard many unsolicited comments in people's homes about coming to church. I suspect if all those that said they would come had showed up then our large premises (in my previous church) would have needed to be extended like those in this church as a result on steadily increasing attendances. In the book of James in the New Testament- a letter written to explain that genuine faith reveals practical lifestyle applications- there are these blunt words: *As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead* (James 2:26). How do we know that Zacchaeus' conversion was genuine? Read verse eight: *But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.* Leviticus 6:5, in the Old Testament stated: *He must make restitution in full, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the owner...* This man is serious about correcting his past mistakes, to the extent that he may no longer be rich at all by the time he has finished but

something else is much more important than his bank balance. He chose to give away fifty percent of his wealth to the poor for starters –a free gift. Then instead of the return of the extorted sum plus 20% by way of compensation –he gives four times the original sum as compensation. It appears to suggest that he has kept good records and knows to whom he owe money and can pay it back. What if Jesus had not bothered to cross the road and speak to this man? Is there any likelihood that he would have come to such a transformation on his own? I seriously doubt it. Who knows what can happen when followers of Jesus today attempt to do what He did and offer the hand of friendship and see where it leads? Who knows how many people when they get to know a genuine and sincere Christian will want (in time) to come to know Jesus for themselves? Maybe you are here as a guest of someone in this church – are you ready to commit your life to Christ or want to find out more? I want to give you an opportunity to take that step as we close in prayer Amen.