

God has a plan, but we see only a part

Sermon for Sunday, September 12, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-9; Romans 1:13-17

INTRODUCTION to the series on Abraham and Sarah

Abraham and Sarah are two of the most important people in the entire Bible. In the Old Testament, their story takes up fourteen chapters of Genesis, more than one fourth of the entire book. But that's not the end. Abraham's name repeatedly comes up as the prime example of someone who trusted God and obeyed God's commands. God is often called "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." And in the New Testament, both Matthew and Luke go into great detail to show how Jesus descended from Abraham. Although the focus is mostly on the male partner, his wife Sarah was certainly a major part of what happened, so I put them together.

Here is how Hebrews 11:8-12 sums up their life.

It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going. And even when he reached the land God promised him, he lived there by faith—for he was like a foreigner, living in a tent. And so did Isaac and Jacob, to whom God gave the same promise. Abraham did this because he was confidently looking forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God.

It was by faith that Sarah together with Abraham was able to have a child, even though they were too old and Sarah was barren. Abraham believed that God would keep his promise. And so a whole nation came from this one man, Abraham, who was too old to have any children—a nation with so many people that, like the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore, there is no way to count them.

The Bible contains, among other things, a picture of God's plan for the people of our world, the people he created in love, and longs for us to acknowledge him as our God, to know him, to obey him, to love him. That plan began with creation and the first chapters of Genesis. We're going to pick up the story with Abraham and Sarah. Over the next several months, chapter by chapter, we're going to hear their story, learn from their lives, and — most importantly — follow God's plan in our own lives.

Just one note, so you don't get confused: Abraham and Sarah were originally named Abram and Sarai. God gives them their new names in chapter 17, which we'll come to later.

Sermon: "God has a plan, but we see only a part"

1) What is God's plan for you?

Do ideas ever pop into your head? Maybe you're wondering what to do about some difficult situation — could be how to repair a leaky pipe without having to take apart the whole basement, or it could be how to repair a broken relationship. Or anything. You've been going over things in your mind, and then — out of nowhere — comes this great idea. It's just perfect. You just know that it's right.

QUESTION: Who gets the credit for this? Is it possible that God put that idea in your mind?

This is one of life's mysteries: How does God communicate with us? In the Bible, we see dozens of instances where people receive ideas and instructions from God. Sometimes they make sense, but sometimes they are just so out-there, the people shake their heads and say, "No, this can't be right."

Here's what happened with Abraham (or Abram):

Genesis 12:1-2, Today's English Version:

The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's home, and go to a land that I am going to show you. I will give you many descendants, and they will become a great nation. I will bless you and make your name famous, so that you will be a blessing."

We don't know how God got this message to Abraham. Clearly it was so compelling that Abraham had no doubt as to the source of the message. There is no hint here of "This must be a dream" or "Am I losing my mind?" The only question which needed answering was, "Do I obey God or not?"

The Bible tells us nothing about Abraham's thought process. Did he automatically say "OK, I'll do it." Or did he need time to think about it? Did he talk it over with Sarai? What if Sarai had said, "No, I don't want to go"?

And what about the questions Abram would have had?

- Where is this place? How far is it?
- What if the people who live there won't sell me some land so I can start a new farm there with all our livestock?

All we know is that in verse 4 they headed out.

Genesis 12:4–5, Today's English Version:

When Abram was 75 years old, he started out from Haran, as the LORD had told him to do; and Lot went with him. Abram took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all the wealth and all the slaves they had acquired in Haran, and they started out for the land of Canaan.

QUESTION: Does God still call people to follow his directions today? If so, is it for everyone, or just for people called to be missionaries in far off lands, or to be pastors and priests in churches? Is God calling *you*?

There are two ways to look at this question. One: does God call people to move away from home, change their jobs, and start a new life? For some people, they would answer "Yes." They can describe how that very thing happened to them. That doesn't appear to be a common experience, though.

But on the other hand, God *does* call each one of us to a new way of life: a life based on following Jesus, obeying the commands he has given us in the Bible, all the while living in fellowship with him. God *does* have a plan for your life. It's right there in black and white.

Let's do a little experiment, just to try this on. Turn with me in the Bible to Romans chapter 12 (page ____). Start reading at verse 12, and go to the end of that chapter. There are lots of little tidbits in here. Pick one that catches your attention — again, that may be God speaking to you — and focus on that this week. Don't try to be SuperChristian. Just pick one thing, and do your best at it. If it's hard, then pray and ask God to help you. That's also part of God's plan for your life: be open to God to work in you, so you can become more like Jesus.

Note: Some people get really caught on the idea that God has a detailed plan for their lives. Example: "God has one specific person I'm supposed to marry; and if I marry anyone else, then I've missed God's best for my life." One counsellor told me about a woman he worked with who would not get dressed in the morning until she had a definite sense that God was telling her to wear *this* underwear, *this* pair of socks, pants or skirt or dress — and which one? Simply getting dressed took her two hours; and then she needed to discern what God wanted her to have for breakfast. Clearly that is an extreme which has no foundation in the Bible.

2) What is God's plan for our church?

I brought with me today some books from my personal library. These are the ones which tell how to be the church. They are based on Biblical teaching and decades of experience in dozens of different churches. There is a wealth of wisdom in here.

There are just a few problems with this, though:

- ◆ What works well in one place doesn't necessarily work well everywhere else;
- ◆ Some of them contradict one another;
- ◆ Reading some of these books can cause feelings of exhilaration when I read about what church can be like, feelings of depression when I consider how far away our reality is from that picture, and feelings of hope when I discover that we are already doing a number of things they suggest.

I'm excited about Fletcher Church and Merlin Church. One of my aims today and throughout this series is to make the connection between this old, old story and our lives and our church today. It's not just we who are on a journey; the church is, too.

I'll share with you some of the things that make me excited about our church here, and encourage you to also release your dreams for Fletcher/Merlin Church. My hope is that together we can share some of our excitement and hope together.

Let's face it, there are some things which can discourage us. But recognizing a problem is the first step in removing it; instead of moaning over problems, we can start taking positive steps to address the causes of those problems. Our weaknesses can actually become opportunities for growth.

But I'm getting ahead of myself here. The heading for this first section asks "What is God's plan for our church?" The church is built on the power and presence of God.

Romans 1:16, New International Version:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

That verse is a summary of what the church is all about:

- ◆ Rather than being ashamed of the gospel – the good news about Jesus Christ – we proclaim it to those around us;
- ◆ When people receive the gospel – that is, when they believe the message and ask Jesus to come into their lives – they are in touch with the mighty power of God;
- ◆ The result is salvation: people's sins are forgiven, crushed spirits are healed, relationships are restored, they enter into an intimate contact with God, and he begins the process of transforming them to be like his son, Jesus;
- ◆ And so the cycle begins again: as they experience God's love flowing through them, it overflows into

their relationships with others: they love and serve others in the name of Jesus, and proclaim the good news to still others.

Note two things about this:

- a) **It's about people.** The whole mission of the church is about people's lives being changed.
- b) **It's is God's power at work.** All of this – every part of it, every step of the way – is from God. If we “do church” by our own efforts, then the result will be of little worth. But when we open ourselves to God to work in us and through us, then anything is possible.

What dream has God given you about our church? Maybe you've had some idea for years, but you've never shared it with anyone because you think it's too dumb or too difficult or too whatever. Or maybe something has just come to you, and you can feel that spark of excitement. Abraham and Sarah must have thought the dream was too great... but they went ahead anyway. If it's God's dream, then don't stifle it!

Share that dream! Here's what I want you to do. Take the paper that came with the bulletin today. Put your idea or dream down there. That's the first step in moving from impossible to reality, putting it on paper. Write it down or draw a picture. Make a poem, whatever.

Don't listen to that voice which says, “That's a dumb idea; that would never work here.” Trust God; dream with faith.

Remember: the key in all this is that it is God who provides the power to make all this happen. How do we receive that power? By being connected to God. Our outward work depends entirely on our inward relationship with God.

3) Your dream from God – let it soar

I'm going to ask you to place those papers on the offering plate. That's right, we're going to take two offerings today: one for money, and one for dreams. We'll take these papers to our meetings this week, and pray over them, and ask for God's direction. If you'd like to be part of making that dream a reality — that is, if you want to be part of the team which makes that idea come to life, then please put your name on that paper.

Now, one more thing before we finish. That meeting isn't for another day or two. That's way too long to wait to share a great dream.

Right now, pair up with someone else. Each of you take one minute to describe what your part of the dream looks

like. You don't have to make plans or anything; just share the excitement of what God can do through us.

Theme for today: You get the impression that God is calling you to uproot your family and move to some distant land you've only vaguely heard about. You don't know anyone there, and have no place to stay once you arrive. But the call is so strong you feel compelled to obey.

QUESTION: How will you explain this to your friends and relatives?

This is a picture of what Abram and Sarai faced. Yet they did it, in faithful obedience to God, trusting that he would guide and help them.

QUESTION: What parallel do you see in your own life?