

THE NATION GOD BLESSES

Pursuing What Pleases God | Genesis 12:1-7

At the start of this week when we celebrate our nation's founding, I invite you to think with me on a passage of scripture which declares beliefs which are dear to the heart of not only our country, but of some other nations as well. The Word of the Lord comes to us today from Genesis chapter 12, verses 1-7. Hear the Word of God...

The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. 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. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

Who Does God Really Bless?

Of all the passages of Scripture that have resonated most in the hearts of religious people through the years, few have reverberated with the force of this text from Genesis 12. This vision of being "the nation God blesses" – of being a people to whom God specially appears, and to whom he promises a great name and a great land and a great curse against those who oppose them and a great role in his plan to bless others – this vision has profoundly influenced the self-understanding and behavior of so many people that it may be said to be one of the most potent seeds of change and conflict in the world today.

Just think about that in the context of what you see going on in Israel and Gaza today. Many JEWS have viewed this passage from Genesis as an affirmation of their unique and irrevocable status as God's chosen nation. They have found in this text the theological key that tells them to expect opposition from those who would try to curse and destroy them. They've viewed this Scripture as declaring their unquestionable right to the land of Canaan (modern day Israel and Palestine) and protecting it at all costs. Even if their enemies curse them, Israel will be the nation God blesses.

American CHRISTIANS, too, have laid claim to this teaching from Genesis. From Puritan times to the present day, many Americans have viewed our country as God's "New Israel," in a sense. Think about the parallels. Like Abram and his family, our forbearers set out from their lands to the East and came to this Promised Land of opportunity. Those settlers met their own version of the Canaanites – natives whom the newcomers destroyed or displaced, justifying their actions based on a divine sanction to fulfill their manifest destiny. Woe to the nation or network that seeks to curse us, who fails to see that we are the country through whom **"all peoples on earth will be blessed."** We

in America are the people with the great name and the great land, the nation God blesses. Think how often you hear politicians conclude a speech by saying: "And may God bless America."

Interestingly, many MUSLIMS see life in these terms too. After all, they also claim Abram as their spiritual forefather. They view themselves as engaged in a great struggle against those who would curse them, those who are not willing to recognize the unique status that Allah, Almighty God himself, has given them. With all of the unblinking certainty and sense of righteous mission often seen among Jews and Christians, many religious Muslims, see the spread of Islam as the God-ordained means by which all people on earth will be blessed and Allah's will fully done. Hamas enacts its atrocities convinced that they do well because Islam is the nation God blesses.

Given these competing visions and the fervor and confidence with which they are held, is it any wonder that the world is in a state of unrest today? Can you see any real hope for change in this continuing clash of cultures beyond building taller walls? Will it be enough to simply export freedom fast as we can and hope that makes the fireworks finally die down? I know that these are complex issues and that we cannot solve them or salve our worry with simple solutions. But do you think it might help in any way if Christians, Jews and Muslims alike stopped to ask: Beyond a cursory or convenient reading, what does the Book, the Bible, tell us about the nation God blesses?

God Extends Grace to All

In trying to answer that question, it helps to define our terms. It is hard to read the Bible closely and not come away seeing that, in at least two senses, God blesses every nation. For one thing, all the nations of this earth get what theologians call "common grace." In a Universe that is 99.99+% vacuum and void, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and "none of the aboves" all get air to breathe, land to walk and build on, the raw materials of life. If you've traveled outside of these United States then you know that God does not reserve purple mountains majesty and amber waves of grain for Americans only. We are not the only ones to enjoy the blessings of friendship or laughter. God sheds his grace on all the world and cares about having everyone experience common graces like food and shelter and clean air and freedom.

As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, **[God] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:45)**. Even the war-torn and the disaster-ravaged nations receive common grace. God blesses and sustains every people with a kindness which, if removed, would end life altogether or else make it a screaming hell such as we imagine only in nightmares.

There is, however, a second sense in which God blesses every nation. The Scriptures teach that all nations also receive the touch of what theologians call "saving grace." The Book of Revelation says of Jesus: **With your blood you purchased [people] from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev 5:9)**. The Apostle John was given a vision of the party at the end of history: **There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches (Rev 7:9)**.

In other words, the Bible makes clear that the final gathering of God's people will not look like many churches, synagogues, and mosques do right now. It will be a multi-racial, multi-national gathering. There will be former Arabs and former Americans side-by-side. There will be former Israelis, Chinese, Indians and others. They will be robed not in the color of flags but in the purity of the Lamb. Only those who put their trust in God's grace and not their moral goodness will be saved; but there will be people from every nation on earth who do so. In other words, God's saving grace will not be universal but it will be global. And this, like the reality of common grace, should temper all the children of Abram when we're tempted to think too narrowly of ourselves as THE nation God blesses. It should challenge us when we're bent on NOT thinking about the well-being of people in other nations because – by God's grace -- some of them are going to be seated next to you and me at the big banquet table one day. If we've not given a darn about each other it could make for very awkward table conversation.

God Blesses the Humble Nation

If we study the Bible closely, however, I think we do find that while God extends grace to all, there is a particular kind of nation which God blesses in other ways too. There are some nations which God blesses with a quality of life and a creative witness in the world that extends blessing to others. For all her failures and flaws, America (I'll dare to say) has been THAT kind of blessed nation through much of her history. We've built institutions and advanced innovation and repented of errors and extended human rights and exhibited hospitality that has blessed the world. If America wishes to continue to have this influence, then the time has come to take note once again of what the Bible says about two specific requirements for remaining the sort of nation God blesses in this way.

For ONE thing, the Bible teaches us that God blesses the HUMBLE nation. Listen to what the prophet Moses said to God's people: **Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." (Deut 8:11-20)**

Of all the destructive temptations a nation and people faces, perhaps none is so insidious as the temptation to pride. Ironically, the more a people are blessed, the greater the risk that they will develop the spiritual disease of pride that results in their blessings being withdrawn. Dozens and dozens of times in history, God has raised up great nations. Some of them enjoyed hundreds of years of influence. But there came a day when their people became convinced that they had an economy or educational system no one could beat. They had a military and technology no one could overcome. They had a culture that would certainly go on forever. They thought they had no need to examine themselves or repent of sin because the threat, the problem, the thing to be rooted out was always in someone else.

Their blessings led them to spiritual conceit. The people of these nations stopped viewing what they had as a sacred gift or as a trust to be used for blessing others. They became proud toward God and other people. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece,

Rome, the Mayans, the British, the Soviets – empire after empire, all became proud and fell from their former heights.

As the Apostle James says: **Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up (James 4:10)**. Or as the Psalmist declares: **Blessed are those who walk in the light of your presence, O Lord. They rejoice in your name all day long, for you are their glory and strength, and by your favor you exalt [their] horn (Psalm 89:15-18)**. Where do you see humility being exercised in America, in Israel, among Arab people today? As our own Abraham Lincoln so often reminded us, it is when a people declares their humble dependence upon almighty God... it is when they resolve to live humbly with malice toward none and charity toward all... that they become the nation God blesses.

God Blesses the Obedient Nation

If we are people of this Book, then we also know that God blesses the OBEDIENT nation. The richest blessings of God are always predicated upon obedience. Listen to what we read in the book of Exodus: **Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, 'This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession (Exodus 19:3-8)**. Hear what Moses said to God's people in his farewell address: **If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you if you obey the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 28)**. Jesus put it more directly: **If you obey my teaching you will know the truth and the truth will set you free (John 8:31-32)**.

Have you followed at all the debate going on in Louisiana about the posting of the Ten Commandments in classrooms and other public places? The governor there shares the conviction once stated by George Orwell that the condition of our country has sunk to a depth where the restatement of what used to be obvious moral principles is the first duty of thoughtful people. The governor may be right, but whether we print or post the Ten Commandments is far less important than whether these precepts are engraved upon our hearts and enfolded in our common life.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike all recognize the Ten Commandments in word. In practice, however, do we hold no gods before the Lord our God? Do we forsake all graven images or idols? Do we reverence the name of God? Do we observe a Sabbath rest each week so we bring clarity and strength to all we do? Do we honor our parents and those forbearers who built the nation we've inherited? Do we forsake murder of any kind, protecting life however we can? Do we run from adultery, keeping our promises and preserving our purity? Do we turn from stealing anything, seeking instead to practice generosity? Do we refuse to indulge in any gossip or false witness about one another, aiming always to build each other up? Have we banished coveting and envy, so that we've learned to be content ourselves and to celebrate the good that others enjoy?

Can you imagine a nation where this was true? We have never been a perfect nation, but there was a time in America's life when these truths were more self-evident. There

was a time when humility before God and others was a higher value. There was a time when obedience to the Ten Commandments was seen not as a threat to liberty but as the path to the blessed life itself. This is not the nostalgia of an older man. This is the hope for the future of all you younger people.

We are living in immensely conflictual times as a country and world. The voices get louder. The spaces between people get wider. As Christians, Jews, and Muslims, we can descend further into that pit of superiority and selfishness that sows the seeds of suspicion and destruction in every generation and land; or, we can make a different choice. By our humility before others and our obedience before God, we can be the vanguard of a spiritual revolution. We can help our country become in a deeper way **the nation that God blesses** and which by the quality of her life and witness is used by God to bless all people. I still believe in that future and, in that spirit say and pray, **may God bless America.**