

## **Blessed to be a Blessing Part 2**

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Blessed to be a Blessing Series

Genesis 12:1-3

Last week I began a new series that I am calling “Blessed to be a Blessing.” As I mentioned last week, if you have been here for any length of time, you are aware of the blessing that has been on Vineyard Columbus for many years. This is not to compare our church to another church, or to suggest that there is more blessing on us than elsewhere. It is merely to affirm that God has blessed our church.

Wherever you dip down into the ministry of Vineyard Columbus, you are going to see blessing. Whether we look at the growth of the church, or the several thousand people who have received Christ here in the last five years, or our ministry to those in the community with AIDS or who are HIV-positive, the hundreds of folks fed at our food pantry each week, our medical clinic, our ministry to the homeless, our 300+ small groups that provide a relational web for the many thousands of people here, our children’s ministry that last weekend taught over 1300 children, there is blessing on Vineyard Columbus.

Now, we face some challenges in our city and in our world. Do you know that in the immediate neighborhood of this church 40% of the homes are headed by single parents? The poverty rates are going up in our immediate neighborhood. 20% of the kids are eligible for school lunches. The number of immigrants has increased in our immediate neighborhood.

And there are new challenges emerging in our world. 20 years ago the great global challenge to Christianity was worldwide communism. People used to talk about the Iron Curtain and there was Bible smuggling behind the Iron Curtain. But now, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the great global challenge to Christianity is militant Islam. In light of the blessing that has been on our church, in light of the challenges facing us locally and globally, we as a church are proposing to do two things:

1. We want to build a community center on the front of our building. A community center that will offer daycare for some of the single parents living in the vicinity of our church, as well as to church members. We want to expand our after school programs for elementary and high school students. We want to offer music, art, dance classes, vocational training, a free medical clinic, a free legal clinic, parenting classes, moms’ groups.

We want to do more than simply preach to our neighborhood. We want to serve our neighbors with the gospel that is not only good words, but also good deeds.

2. And we also want to raise up three full teams from Vineyard Columbus to be sent out for long-term missions to unreached peoples primarily among Muslims in Africa and in Asia.

In order to accomplish these two goals, building a new community center, and raising up three missions teams, each of which would have 8-10 adults – so we're talking about 24-30 adults along with their children – we are going to be engaged in a giving campaign here at Vineyard Columbus that will culminate in an All-Church Celebration event in which everyone who is part of this church will be invited down to the Columbus Convention Center on Thursday evening, March 10<sup>th</sup>. We are canceling all of our church events from Monday through Friday that week and on March 10<sup>th</sup> we're going to have the whole church and lots of friends come down to the Columbus Convention Center for a massive celebration service. It is going to be great because the church here is going to get a chance to meet the church. Right now, we're chopped off into four different services including our young adult, Joshua House, service. Most folks don't have an opportunity to meet each other.

So we are going to be involved in the giving campaign over the next two months. A giving campaign which is aimed at a target different than what churches traditionally aim when we do giving campaigns. Typically, churches do giving campaigns as we did seven years ago to construct a building for our own purpose and our own use. We are trying to do something very different here. We want to build something that will primarily be for service to our community. We want to raise up teams that will primarily be sent out to the world. We are engaging in a giving campaign that will aim our resources away from ourselves towards others.

We know we have been blessed. But we also know that there is a biblical principle that whenever an individual or a church is blessed, that blessing must be given away. Blessing is not to be hoarded up, contrary to what America normally says. Blessing is to be given away.

And do you know blessing can come to us not just when everything in our lives is going well, or when the sea is calm and the winds are not blowing. Blessing can come to us even in the midst of the most extreme trials.

Let me share with you a story from this congregation. About 15 months ago a member of our church, Scott Bell, was riding a dirt bike along with his son at a friend's house. He was going about 15 mph and he happened to hit a little rut that had been carved out by some rain. As a result of hitting that little rut, Scott went over the top of the bike, landed funny on an embankment and broke his neck. He broke his neck (if you know anything about the spine) at C1 and C3 to

C5. He didn't injure himself in any other way. He wasn't bruised except he fell funny and broke his neck. Because he broke his neck, this 45-year old member of our church, with a wife, three kids, and a business, ended up as a quadriplegic.

Over the last 15 months he had medical crisis after medical crisis. He nearly died innumerable times. His care ran through all of the family's health insurance. So along with being a quadriplegic, losing all of his mobility, losing his health suddenly, his family suffered a most severe financial trial. And then just a week ago Friday, Scott Bell, at age 46, finally died.

You don't know what your life is built on, friend, until you face a crisis. Now, most of us are not going to face the size of crisis that the Bell Family faced. But there will be a curve in the road for every single one of us. The curve in the road might be the death of a spouse, or the inability to get pregnant, cancer, a heart-attack, the betrayal by someone close to you. The curve in the road may be your divorce, or a layoff, or a broken engagement.

Through this crisis I saw in flesh and blood Scott's wife, Christy, continually follow Jesus. I saw her continue to have joy in the midst of great pain. I saw her express faith. I talked with her the day after Scott's funeral and I said, "Christy, what's it been like the last 15 months?"

She said, "O Rich, it has been tough. But we received so much blessing from God for fifteen months. I could not turn around without having someone else calling to encourage me and my kids. Every other day I got another card in the mail. I'd go to CVS or Meijers and someone would come up to me and say, 'I'm praying for you. I heard about your situation.' People came by saying they were worried about the kids and took them out."

Christians came over and retro-fitted the house to make it wheelchair accessible. A couple in our church gave them a computer and was training Scott in how to work on the computer through voice activation. During the last 15 months there were countless meals brought to the Bell's. Whenever Christy needed to go to the grocery and couldn't because she was running back and forth to the hospital, someone went to the grocery for her. People picked up the kids for her.

She said that through the last 15 months and all the roller-coaster rides of up and down with Scott's health, the crisis, and the financial problems that she constantly had the feeling before God of, "God, why have you been so generous with me? Why are you providing so lavishly? Why are you blessing us so much? I'm almost embarrassed by how supported you've made me."

I could go on and on talking about what individuals did. Tree of Life Christian School held a gigantic garage sale for the Bell's and raised a whole bunch of

money for the family. I can tell you this, though, that support and blessing would not have been there had Christy not been obedient to God for years in developing deep relationships with other Christians, had Christy not been involved for years in ministry to many, many other people in the community, when she came to a time of need, she would have had no one to turn to.

Parenthetically, we often have people complain and say: You know, I turned to the church during my time of crisis and I was not helped. Friend, the church is just people. It isn't any entity or organization apart from people. And if you've invested yourself in people and in relationships in this church, then in your time of crisis, God will bless you through those invested relationships. But if you haven't, what you are going to discover is that there is a thinness of support. There is a general principle that as you have given, so it will be given to you. Christy gave a lot to a lot of people for a lot of years. In her time of extreme need, she was blessed by this church and by others.

Today, I want to continue in this series. I'm calling today's talk "Blessed to be a Blessing – Part 2." Turn with me to Genesis 12:1-3.

Genesis 12:1-3,

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Ge 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.

Ge 12:2 "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.

Ge 12:3 I will bless those who bless you,

and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth

will be blessed through you.

Scholars differ in the way that they break down Genesis 12's blessings. Some people say that there is a 3-part blessing: God promises to make Abraham into a great nation, give Abraham a great name, and give Abraham's descendents the land. Other people break it down into four blessings: nationhood, a great name, the land, and mediating blessings to others.

I will break it down into a four-fold blessing. We read in v. 2,

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Ge 12:2 "I will make you into a great nation

and I will bless you;

Here God promises countless descendents to Abraham. This is an amazing promise, given Abram's age. We read in v. 4,

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Ge 12:4 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.

His wife was 65. The idea that these two would have countless descendents did not seem within the realm of possibility apart from a miracle.

You know, this promise of countless descendents did not begin to be realized in Abram's life with even one descendent until 25 years later when Abraham was 100 years old and his wife was 90. Humanly speaking, a couple that old simply cannot have children. It is a medical impossibility.

But God spoke to Abraham. We read in Genesis 18:14 these words:

SLIDE

Ge 18:14 Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."

As I meditated upon these words in my morning devotions this week, here's what I wrote in my prayer journal:

Lord, you are the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Nothing in the universe exists apart from your will. You made galaxies and the Super Nova. You made the tiniest atom and the smallest part of an atom. It was you who designed the human brain and it was you who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Nothing is too hard for you.

SLIDE

- No problem is too hard for you to solve.
- No person is too hard for you to save.
- No sin is too hard for you to forgive.
- No sickness is too hard for you to heal.
- No prayer is too hard for you to answer.
- No gift is too hard for you to give.
- No need is too hard for you to meet.
- No demon is too hard for you to cast out.
- No promise is too hard for you to fulfill.

I spent about an hour applying each of these statements to my own life and to the people I love and to the people in this church and to our world.

Friend, do you think your faith would grow if you meditated more deeply upon Genesis 18:14? Is anything too hard for the Lord? No sickness, no problem, no relationship, no salvation, no prayer is too hard for God.

Our plan for the community center, and our plans to radically expand our involvement in world missions are fundamentally grounded in this simple statement of faith that nothing is too hard for God. It is not difficult to look around our city and see a multitude of problems that don't seem fixable. Families are breaking down at an epidemic rate. Many people are trapped in a cycle of poverty that goes from generation to generation. Schools are struggling to educate kids. There is a hopelessness and a defeatism that affects many lives. Multitudes of people in our community are unemployed or underemployed, struggling to provide for themselves and their families. There are families with low-wage jobs. Many people have no medical insurance, no access to medical care, no access to decent daycare, no provision for their kids after school.

We are not so presumptuous as to believe that our church can design a program that will change people's lives apart from God. The community center is built with the fundamental conviction that no matter what the problem is facing the city, nothing is too hard for God. Do you believe that?

We look out at our world and see the most desperate fracturing and shattering of bonds of trust between people. Folks are talking about a war of civilizations. The so-called Christian world being at war with the so-called Islamic world. How can we possibly hope to make a difference in world so war-torn and distrustful? How can our three little teams of missionaries hope to change anything at all?

The truth is they can't change anything on their own. Missionaries have to carry in their hearts Genesis 18:14 – Is anything too hard for the Lord?

You know, there are lots of things that do not seem within the realm of possibility in your individual life, in our community, in our world apart from a miracle. But God worked miraculously in the life of Abraham and he fulfilled his promise to make Abraham into a great nation and to give him countless descendents. The way the promise was ultimately fulfilled was through one of Abraham's descendents, namely the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus is introduced to us in Matthew 1:1 as the Son of Abraham.

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Mt 1:1 A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham:

Jesus Christ became the Savior of the world. Anyone who puts their trust in Christ today becomes a son or daughter of Abraham. And even more importantly, anyone who puts their trust in Christ today becomes a son or

daughter of God. Billions of people throughout history, from every single nation on every continent, has joined themselves to Abraham through faith in Abraham's descendent, Jesus Christ.

God blessed Abraham by promising to make Abraham in to a great nation.

One mark of God's blessing is reproduction. There is a scholar who defined church as a community mandated to reproduce. You are not a church, if you are not reproducing.

I agree with that. In fact, when we, as a church, designed our mission statement we said that our mission as a church:

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Is to develop passionate, mature, reproducing disciples to plant passionate, mature, reproducing churches, and to serve the world through love and good deeds to the glory of God.

God's blessing is extended through being reproducing Christians. And God's blessing is experienced when you see yourself reproducing. When you find yourself off and praying for someone's salvation, when you find yourself sharing your Christian faith, when you find yourself helping another person take a step toward Christ, when the right thing in your doesn't just stay in you, but it starts bearing fruit in other people's lives, there is the kingdom of God. There is the blessing of God. Being a reproductive Christian is a sign of living under God's blessing of Abraham.

One of the reasons we are engaged in this giving campaign is to further the blessing of God. We want to extend this reproductive blessing through the community center. We want to extend this blessing of reproduction through world missions.

Here's a prayer you can pray in the year 2005. Lord, may I be a reproductive Christian this year. May I be used by you in assisting a person to take another step toward Christ. Will you allow me to plant the seed of faith in other people. Lord, will you use me to bring prodigals back home.

The first blessing: I will make you a great nation.

The second blessing: I will make your name great. V. 2,

#### SLIDE

I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.

God promises to give Abram a great name. The name Abram means "Exalted Father." Later in Genesis God changed Abram's name to Abraham, which

means “The Father of Many Nations.” God gave Abraham another wonderful name. He called him “A Friend of God.”

God loves giving people new names. You know, in 21<sup>st</sup> century America names are nothing other than personal labels, personal identifiers. Your name says almost nothing about you. But this was entirely not the case in the Bible. The giving of a name had a deeper significance. Especially when God gives someone a new name, God is giving that person a new capacity, a new character. In the Old Testament to be given a new name by God was akin to the New Testament born-again experience. Simply put, in the Bible the name is the person. When we pray in the name of Jesus, we are declaring that our prayers are only effective because of the personal presence and activity of Jesus.

So, names in the Bible are not just labels, or tags, or a set of letters that your parents give you. Your name speaks about your fundamental identity.

Here is a spiritual secret. When we, like the people we read about last week in Genesis 11, who were building the Tower of Babel, try to gain a name for ourselves, when we try to establish our own identity in ourselves, by ourselves, apart from God, we always fail. The result is always disarray, disillusionment, divine displeasure. But when God establishes your identity, when God names you, when God speaks a word over your life and says, “You are mine – you are my son; you are my daughter,” and you hear that, there’s the blessing.

When you know who you are in God and you live out of an identity that God gives you, there’s the blessing. When you say about yourself, “I’m not just a product of my past; I’m not just a victim of the trauma I suffered; I’m not simply defined by my past failures, or my background, or how my kids are doing, or how big my house is, by my profession, by how many sales I produce like everyone else; I’m not going to be defined by my grade point average; I’m not going to brag or advertise my accomplishments, or feel depressed by my income. God has given me a new name. I have an identity in God. I’m not going to be defined by my psychological condition, or by a label some counselor or therapist put on me. I’m not going to be defined simply by my ethnic or racial background. I’m not just Roman Catholic, Jewish, African-American, or Filipino. I won’t be defined by my profession, as a lawyer or a mother. I belong to Christ.”

Friend, that is where the blessing is.

Let me ask you a question: Do you know who you are in God? Do you know who you are to God? There is almost nothing more fundamental than your identity. Why not take some time to meditate on this. Who are you fundamentally? What do you think of yourself? What label do you most fundamentally place on yourself?



Imagine the difference in your joy level if your first response to the question: Tell me a little bit about yourself and you immediately thought to yourself: I'm a daughter of God. I'm a son of God. I'm a saint. For some of you, imagine the difference in your sexual practice if you said: I am the holy temple of God. I'm not just a piece of meat. God's Holy Spirit lives in me. It is unthinkable that I would do this or that thing because I am a temple of the Holy Spirit. Imagine the difference in your confidence if you said: Things are really crazy around here right now. But I know who I am.

And imagine now that we get to give this away. The blessing is not just for us, it is for others. We now have kids in our community identifying themselves by being a clone of Britney Spears or Ashlee Simpson or some gangster rapper or some hip-hop artist, or pro athlete. What if kids in our neighborhood went to middle school or high school and they identified themselves clearly as sons and daughters of God – Christians – and that they belong to King Jesus.

What if adults in our community, instead of identifying themselves as victims of abuse, or losers identified themselves as belonging to Jesus? What a difference in this neighborhood.

Imagine internationally, if people instead of identifying themselves with some fundamentalist Islamic sect or giving themselves over to alcohol or drug abuse, or prostitution, identified themselves as belonging to Jesus Christ. We have the privilege of being used by God to give people new identities, new ways to conceive of themselves, and new names.

The third blessing is the blessing of the land. In v. 1 Abraham is told in Gen. 12:1,

#### SLIDE

Ge 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.

And then in v. 7,

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Ge 12:7 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.

The promise of the land is repeated throughout the Old Testament over two dozen times. Here is what we read in Genesis 15:18-19, for example:

#### SLIDE

Ge 15:18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your

descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—

Ge 15:19 the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites,

The question today, of course, is does the promise mean that the current state of Israel, as a Jewish Nation, has a biblical claim to the strip of land they are occupying. This is a huge political question. It may be THE single biggest religious/political question facing the world today. Does Israel have a biblical claim, not only to the land as set up by the United Nations in 1948, but according to Genesis 15:18-19, to the West Bank and Gaza, to portions of Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and all the way to Iraq? Can the current Middle East dispute simply be settled by citing some of the biblical verses I just quoted? The land belongs to the Jewish people – period, end of case.

You know, a lot of conservative Christians in our country believe this to be the case. This is certainly the view of virtually all of the televangelists and radio preachers. This is the view of Dallas Theological Seminary and other dispensational schools like Grace Seminary. This is the view of the International Christian Embassy and end-time writers like Tim LaHaye and Hal Lindsey. This is the view of many people in the government. The issue of the land is certainly something that sincere Christians can differ over.

You know, as a Jewish believer in Jesus, as a man who prays to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob every day, I have struggled with the idea for years that the hopes, aspirations, homes, families, safety, and the very lives of millions of Arabs don't seem to matter to my fellow Christians. As a Jew I understand what it feels like from a history of being victimized by enemies too strong for you. I deeply empathize with Arabs whose homes and lives have been taken because the Israeli army is too strong for them.

When Christians cavalierly say that the Bible gives the land to the Jews, then what the Arab, or broader Muslim community hears is: You Christians care nothing about me, or my family at all. I mean nothing to you as an Arab, a Muslim. And I suppose I mean nothing to your God. Your Bible is not worth reading.

Why should an Arab or Muslim embrace something that tells that person that their family, their history, their home, their life doesn't matter? I really grieve when I hear radio or TV evangelists talk about Israel. I think to myself: Have you spent even 30 seconds walking in the shoes of an Arab?

Do you know that the Arabs who occupy Palestine, many of them can trace their lineage back to Christianity before the 7<sup>th</sup> century when they were overwhelmed by the Muslim invasion. Many Palestinian Christians have lost their land through all of these wars. I think to myself when we cavalierly say: Well, the Bible simply doesn't give you the land, how would you feel if you got your house

knocked down or your niece, nephew or son or daughter was shot in front of you? I'm really saddened about the current post-9/11 American Christian culture that writes off a billion Arabs and Muslims, and views all Arabs and Muslims as terrorists or potential terrorists.

I know the approach I'm about to take will be new for many of you. But I ask you to consider this truth. We are all cousins as descendents of Abraham – Christian, Jew and Muslim.

I've spoken very rarely about this subject, but as a follower of Jesus coming from a Jewish background, I think that the Israeli-Palestinian Crisis that has affected the entire world cannot be resolved simply by appealing to a few Old Testament texts. In fact, I do not believe that the promises in the Old Testament that give Abraham and his descendents the land apply to the modern state of Israel at all. Why, as a Jewish follower of Jesus, do I disagree with the most popular American Christian interpretation of the Old Testament promises?

I have at least four reasons. Let me go through them quickly.

1. The land was never owned by the Jews. The land always belonged to God. The Jewish people were simply tenants in the land. Leviticus 25:23 says this:

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Lev 25:23 “ ‘The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants

2. Tenancy in the land was contingent upon Israel obeying the commands of God. If Israel disobeyed and they forfeited their claim to the land. We read in Lev. 18:24-28 these words:

#### SLIDE

Lev 18:24 “ ‘Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled.

Lev 18:25 Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.

Lev 18:26 But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things,

Lev 18:27 for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled.

Lev 18:28 And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.

Does anyone believe that the modern secular state of Israel, in which a high percentage of Jewish people do not even believe in God and would label themselves as atheists, are living in obedience to God or his laws?

3. There is absolutely no territorial focus in the New Testament at all.

When Paul lists the privilege of the Jewish people in Romans 9, he surprisingly omits the land. He writes:

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Ro 9:4 Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises.

Ro 9:5 Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

He mentions everything but the land. Of course, the New Testament seems to entirely reject the Old Testament view of sacred space where God is especially present. Today God is present wherever Christians are gathered, Matthew 18:20,

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Mt 18:20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

We followers of Jesus are not like Muslims, who have sacred cities – Mecca or Medina; or have sacred space like the Arabian Peninsula. We followers of Jesus no longer have or need a Temple, a holy city, or a holy land. We followers of Jesus understand that the whole earth belongs to God.

It is interesting that in light of Jesus' coming, in light of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Messiah Jesus and his gift of the Spirit, Paul extends the promise to Abraham and he says in Romans 4:13 these words:

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Ro 4:13 It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.

Abraham and his descendents are not merely heirs of the land of Israel, the biblical Judea or Samaria. He who trusts in God as Abraham did is an heir of the world.

4. With the coming of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the New Testament has changed the entire direction and flow of Old Testament missions. In the Old Testament, the nations flow to the Promised Land.

The Old Testament vision was of the world going to Israel to find God.  
The movement was centripetal, toward the center.

We read in Isaiah 2:2,3,

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Isa 2:2 In the last days

the mountain of the LORD'S temple will be established  
as chief among the mountains;  
it will be raised above the hills,  
and all nations will stream to it.

Isa 2:3 Many peoples will come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways,  
so that we may walk in his paths."

The law will go out from Zion,  
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

And in Isaiah 60:1-7,

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Isa 60:1 "Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.

Isa 60:2 See, darkness covers the earth  
and thick darkness is over the peoples,  
but the LORD rises upon you  
and his glory appears over you.

Isa 60:3 Nations will come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Isa 60:4 "Lift up your eyes and look about you:

All assemble and come to you;  
your sons come from afar,  
and your daughters are carried on the arm.

Isa 60:5 Then you will look and be radiant,  
your heart will throb and swell with joy;  
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,  
to you the riches of the nations will come.

Isa 60:6 Herds of camels will cover your land,  
young camels of Midian and Ephah.

And all from Sheba will come,  
bearing gold and incense  
and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

Isa 60:7 All Kedar's flocks will be gathered to you,  
the rams of Nebaioth will serve you;

they will be accepted as offerings on my altar,  
and I will adorn my glorious temple.

But the New Testament reverses the flow. God's people start in Jerusalem and go out from there to the world. The movement is centrifugal. Jerusalem loses its special status. Jerusalem is now merely the starting point of world missions, not the ending point.

Does this mean that there is no place for the Jews in God's eternal plan? Does this mean that the land ought to be turned over to the Arabs as much of the world argues?

I believe, contrary to much of the reformed tradition and writers like N.T. Wright, the church has not replaced Israel. And I believe in the literal fulfillment of the promise of God made to the apostle Paul in Romans 11:25-26,

#### SLIDE

Ro 11:25 I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.

Ro 11:26 And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:

"The deliverer will come from Zion;  
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.

I believe even now God is saving Jewish people through Jesus Christ. And there is going to be a massive number of Jews who embrace Jesus as Messiah before the end comes. I also believe that the current Israeli-Palestinian dispute can't be resolved by quoting a few selected verses from the Old Testament. I think that the issue is far more complicated and that we have to apply hard questions of biblical justice and biblical forgiveness to that little strip of land called Israel.

Here is where I come down. In my mind, the history of the world demands a Jewish homeland. Not the promises in the Old Testament, the history of the world. As you look over the last 20 centuries – from the history of anti-Semitism in the Christian world and Islamic world, to the Nazi Holocaust, to 21<sup>st</sup> century anti-Jewish sentiment in Europe, Asia, and Africa, that provides for me an overwhelming case for the need of a Jewish homeland. There has to be a place of safety, a place of security, a place of control by the Jewish people for their own well-being. And justice requires this.

But justice also demands a homeland for the Palestinian people. Israel cannot be given a free pass to attack or abuse Palestinians. In my mind, both Jews and Palestinians have just and legitimate claims. Both people need protection. Both need security. Both need control over their own homeland. And both deserve the world's assistance in solving the dispute. We Christians should, as Christians, pray for peace and work for peace in the most troubled parts of the world. The

Christian carol: “O Bethlehem, O Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie” has not been true for generations and we cannot resolve this dispute by appealing to a few Old Testament texts.

Here is the fourth and final blessing: The blessing of giving away blessing. V. 3,

#### SLIDE

Ge 12:3 I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you.

God is saying to Abraham: You will be a source of blessing to others. It is not enough that the blessing has come to our church or to you or to me. It is not enough to say: Well, I'm saved. I know the truth. My marriage is good. My identity is in Christ. It is the ultimate egotism to store up blessing for ourselves.

You will be a source of blessing to others. What a life goal. You know, if you could pray one thing for yourself every single day, you couldn't do a lot better than praying: Father, make me a source of blessing to others. Father, make me a source of blessing to my coworkers. Father, make me a source of blessing to my family, to my roommate. Make me a blessing to my children, to my spouse. Make me an encouragement. May I be a comfort to those who are hurting.

Blessing upon us is tied to us bringing blessing to our city. There is a book that I want to strongly recommend to those of you who are readers. It is by Ray Bakke and it is called “A Theology As Big As The City.” Ray Bakke points out that the verse most often quoted from Jeremiah 29 is v. 11.

#### SLIDE

Jer 29:11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

This is the kind of verse that everyone puts on their refrigerators. Isn't it great? God wants to bless us. But we almost never read Jeremiah 29:11 in context. The context was a message from God to the Exiles (Jer. 29:1).

#### SLIDE

Jer 29:1 This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

The Israelites were captive people living in a far-off land. God advises them how to live as strangers and aliens. He tells them to join in the life and culture of the city. Jer. 29:4-6,

#### SLIDE

Jer 29:4 This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

Jer 29:5 "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

Jer 29:6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.

But the key verse in understanding the prosperity promised in v. 11 is Jeremiah 29:7,

#### SLIDE

Jer 29:7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

In other words, the prosperity that individuals Christians enjoy is connected to the prosperity of the city in which we live. We are, as Christians, to do two things: 1) actively seek the peace and prosperity of the city; and 2) pray for the city. We seek individual peace and prosperity, we pray for our church and blessing on the church, but believers are instructed in Jeremiah 29 to pray for blessing on the city we find ourselves in.

Now, this leads to a crucial principle that most of us in our Christian development have missed. We should not seek the health of our church apart from seeking the health of our city. Why are we doing the community center? Because we are seeking the health of our city. We are not only doing good to others by raising the overall water level of the city, we are doing good to ourselves.

#### A. What are the lessons?

1. The very worst thing a Christian can do is move out of the city. "Well, I just want to move way out into the country, get 5-10 acres of land." When a Christian does that, they immediately become marginal to the culture-forming womb of the power center.
2. We've got to develop a positive view of the city and, specifically, we must develop a view that links the prosperity of the city to the prosperity and blessing on the church. We are not at war with our city.



Question: How often do you pray for Columbus, for Mayor Coleman, for the School Superintendent, the Police Force, the power centers at OSU and large corporations?

You know, to engage with the city, to engage with missions, to give blessing away, we've got to get in there and get our hands dirty. When God created men and women he actually reached down in the mud to make us. That's what it says in Genesis 2. He stuck his hands into the mud and made us.

And that is what we're trying to do with this giving campaign. We're trying to stick our hands into the mud and bring blessing. I believe that this church is a treasure chest of talents and gifts. Some of you are musicians. Some of you are artists. Some of you have backgrounds in dance. Some of you are social workers, vocational counselors, attorneys, doctors, nurses, moms, people with big hearts. This is going to be an opportunity for you to give away what God has put in you.

Let me tell you a couple of stories in conclusion. There is a man named Don Schoendorfer, who was from a church in Colorado. Years ago Don Schoendorfer was in Morocco when he saw something that would change his life and the lives of thousands of other people. He saw a crippled woman dragging herself across a dirt road. Don realized that this woman represented countless of people around the globe who crawl along the ground, or who wait for friends or loved ones to pick them up and carry them.

Don saw what people had seen for centuries. But his training as a mechanical engineer triggered a different train of thought. What if he could design an inexpensive wheelchair using mountain bike wheels rather than standard wheelchair wheels that could withstand the condition of streets in developing countries. Don put together a proto-type chair and placed it in the courtyard of the Mariner's Church in Irvine, California. Other engineers came by and added their improvements until the result was a lightweight, low-cost, practical design that could be built and delivered to any country in the world for under \$42.00. The project so captivated Don that he quit his job and began the Free Wheelchair Mission.

Can you imagine the life changes Don has seen as he has heard from thousands of people around the globe who used to pull themselves along the ground and now are mobile? FWM has literally distributed tens of thousands of wheelchairs around the globe. They are doing justice.

One other example, a few years ago Don Harris began thinking about capital formation. He recognized that in the United States most net worth is invested in people's homes. Homeowners get better tax breaks than renters. A home is one of the few appreciating assets. But Don realized that many people with full time jobs are unable to obtain home loans because they are never able to save

enough money for a down payment. Then Don noted something else. Most sellers sell their homes from between 3-5% below the asking price.

Putting these two pieces of information together, he began The Nehemiah Corporation built around the three-way virtuous cycle. The Nehemiah Corporation gives potential homeowners with good credit and no savings 3% of the asking price under these conditions: Homeowners pay the asking price for the house, and the seller rebates 3% to The Nehemiah Corporation. It is a brilliant solution. It works justice. Since 1997 The Nehemiah Corporation has assisted over 160,000 families by providing more than \$646 million dollars in down payment gifts.

Brothers and sisters, God has put things in your lives to make a difference in this world. This giving campaign, this Community Center, our call to missions is an opportunity for you to make a difference – not only to receive blessing, but to be a blessing to others. Let's pray.

## **Blessed To Be A Blessing Part 2**

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Rich Nathan

January 15-16, 2005

Blessed To Be A Blessing Series

Genesis 12:1-3

- I. Blessed To Be A Great Nation (Gen. 12:2)
  - A. The Blessing Of God's Infinite Ability (Gen. 18:14)
  - B. The Blessing Of Reproduction
- II. Blessed With A Great Name (Gen. 12:2)
- III. Blessed With A Great Land (Gen. 12:7)
- IV. Blessed To Be A Great Blessing (Gen. 12:3)
  - A. Blessing Requires A Focus Upon Our City (Jer. 29:1-11)
  - B. Blessing Requires Our Hands To Get Dirty (Gen. 2:7)
  - C. Blessing Requires All Of Our Gifts And Creativity