



Blessing as Transformation

BY SARITA D. GALLAGHER AND STEVEN C. HAWTHORNE

Editor's Note: What is the link between evangelism and efforts to bring about societal transformation? Throughout Scripture we see God enlisting a people with and through whom He can work to bring blessing upon all the peoples of earth. This blessing has several facets: relationship with God, material and social abundance and peace with neighbors. Christ's commission to disciple all peoples accelerates the enlistment of a community of followers to become the promised people of blessing in the midst of the nations. Thus evangelism (the initial enlistment) and discipleship (which brings that enlistment to maturity) are the foundation for every other ministry and initiative to realize God's blessing among the nations. Wherever this enlistment has not yet effectively begun, priority should be given to evangelism and discipleship (in the sense of order, not importance) because of the blessing, or transformation, which can potentially flourish. This article is an abridged form of an article by the same title in the Fourth Edition (2009) of *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*.

God's promise to Abraham was effectively a promise to the world. In Genesis 12:1-2, God declared that He would not only bless Abram (his name at that time), but that Abram would become a blessing. The next verse reveals the amazing magnitude of that blessing: "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed." How was it possible that one man would become a blessing to all of the families throughout the earth? Even though Abram obeyed God, it's unlikely that he grasped the global implications right away. The complete promise, as Abraham heard it repeated in

the years to come, had three parts: land, family and blessing. The first two parts about land and family probably made some sense right away. But what probably remained a mystery was the promise that somehow through his family, blessing would come upon every nation on earth.

While years passed without receiving the promised land or sons, Abraham must have pondered just what the fulfillment of God's promise would look like. We would do well to ponder it as well. The promise that "all nations will be blessed" is still being fulfilled in our day. What does it mean for



Sarita D. Gallagher is Assistant Professor of Religion at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. She served as a full-time missionary with the Christian Revival Crusade movement teaching biblical theology and intercultural studies in

Papua New Guinea and Australia. You may contact this author at: sgallagher@georgefox.edu



Steve Hawthorne co-edited, with Ralph Winter, the Perspectives Reader and authored the Perspectives Study Guide.

He works with WayMakers, a mission and prayer mobilization ministry. He travels widely helping the Perspectives course get underway in strategic settings.

a nation or people to be blessed? What should we be looking for as stewards of Abraham's promised blessing by faith in Christ?

What Does "Blessing" Mean?

If our only source were the book of Genesis, we would still learn a great deal about the idea of blessing. In Genesis, the word "blessing" is used to describe a pronouncement or endowment of blessing. It is an act in which a future destiny or goodness is spoken, and thus bestowed upon the person or entity being blessed. The term blessing is used to describe the fulfillment of what was promised, whether material or otherwise. God pronounced blessing at creation, empowering animal life and humanity to fulfill the mandate He had given, to "be fruitful and multiply and fill" their respective domains. Throughout the rest of Scripture, when blessing is fulfilled in creatures, people, households or nations, they are enabled to flourish and to move toward their intended fullness and destiny.

In Genesis we also see clear references to how the promise of blessing was fulfilled in tangible ways. Near the close of Abraham's life we read that God "had blessed Abraham in every way" (24:1). What exactly were these diverse ways that Abraham had been blessed?

We can find three broad categories of blessing in the Genesis story. First, we see blessing as material wealth and fruitfulness (24:35, 30:27, 30). Second, we see blessing as favored relationship with God and the experience of His presence (14:19-20, 21:22, 26:22). And third, we see blessing bringing about a measure of peace amidst families and peoples (21:22-23, 26:18-29).

Beyond Abraham's Family

We've seen what it meant for Abraham and his family to be blessed. But do we also see the nations blessed in the stories of Abraham's family in Genesis?

Of course, we see Abraham and his family sometimes becoming anything but a blessing. Abraham lies to his foreign hosts with drastic results (12:10-20, 20:1-18). Jacob's sons wipe out the men of an entire Canaanite city (33:18-34:31). Despite these and other events, God did bring help to other nations through Abraham and his descendants. For example, Abraham came to the rescue of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 14), which had been taken captive by raiding armies that had seized "all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food supply" (14:11). Not long after this, Abraham prayed that God would spare the entire city of Sodom (no doubt including some who he had already rescued from captivity). He argued his case before God, not just for Lot and his family, but for "the whole city" (19:28). Even though the city was destroyed, the point is that Abraham initiated intercession to save the entire city.

It is significant that near the end of Genesis, we see Abraham's grandson Jacob pronouncing a blessing upon the Pharaoh himself. The exact words aren't recorded, but there was a formal occasion in which "Jacob blessed Pharaoh" (47:7,10).

The crescendo of Genesis is the story of Joseph. Like Abraham and Isaac before him, the incredible productivity of Joseph's work caused watching foreigners to conclude that God's presence with Joseph had brought a surprising abundance. "The LORD was with him and ... the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hand"

(Gen 39:3). His master recognized that "the LORD'S blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field" (39:5) because of Joseph.

Blessing Egypt and the People of All the Earth

God gave Joseph an interpretation of a dream that predicted a seven-year famine. Pharaoh acknowledged Joseph's wisdom as coming from God and declared, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt" and further, "Without your permission, no one shall raise his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt" (41:41, 44). When the famine came, its devastation "spread over all the face of the earth" (41:56). Joseph was positioned to extend blessing to many nations, as "the people of all the earth came to buy grain from Joseph" (41:57).

In the second year of the seven-year famine, Joseph distributed food in exchange for money and livestock (47:14-17). As the final year of the famine came, he had arranged for the survival of the people of Egypt. In exchange for state ownership of land and a 20 percent tax (a very generous arrangement compared to most feudal systems), he offered grain to be used as seed for planting as a way of restarting agricultural cycles after the famine (47:18-24). As the famine ends with hope for long-term survival, the statement of the people is telling: "You have saved our lives!" (47:25).¹

Later Will Be Greater: Fulfillment in Descendants

Did Abraham comprehend the blessing to the nations that God was promising, especially the eventual magnitude of it? In each of the five times God spoke to Abraham (Abram), Isaac and

Jacob (Israel), promising blessing to the nations, He amplified and clarified how His promise would be fulfilled.

The Promise Fulfilled in Christ

Most Christians have been taught well about Jesus Christ coming to provide a way for people to be adopted as sons and daughters into the family of God. In the book of Galatians, Paul says that "when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son... that we might receive" adoption as children of God (Gal 4:4-5). But a few verses earlier in the same book Paul says that those who believe in Christ have been joined with Christ in such a way that they become part of Abraham's family. "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:29).

The way the promise was given to Abraham, blessing would be fulfilled in the "seed" of Abraham. This word is often used as a "collective singular," speaking of many seeds. Thus, the term can refer to one descendant or to a multitude of descendants. Which is it?

Paul answers the question this way: Both are true. There is one pre-eminent son of Abraham: "The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as referring to many, but rather to one, 'And to your seed,' that is, Christ" (Gal 3:29). Christ is the one seed of Abraham, but Paul also declares that since people become sons and daughters of Abraham's family by faith, the promise is being fulfilled by their faith as those who inherit the promise:

"It is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith,

preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, 'All the nations will be blessed in you.' So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham" (Gal 3:7-9).

Christ has now ended the curse and opened the family of God. Now people from every family on earth can be part of Abraham's family by faith in Christ. They inherit the full family heritage of being blessed in order to be a blessing to the nations.

God's Promise Becomes Our Mandate

God's promise to bless the nations through Abraham's descendants carries mandate force for all who have been joined with Christ by faith. The promise so clearly reveals God's purpose, that Christians rightly consider it to convey God's mandate to serve as His agents of blessing among all the peoples of the earth.² We are blessed in Christ in order to bring forth the blessing of Christ among all the nations. But what are we hoping for? What does it mean for the nations to be blessed? And how are we to pursue it? The promise of blessing shapes and integrates our mission in two important ways.

Relational Blessing: Belonging to God's Family

The greatest blessing imaginable is the privilege of belonging to God's people, and therefore, belonging to God as His children. Christ has opened Abraham's family to all. We now participate in bringing people from every people, tribe and clan to be joined with Christ by faith and enfolded into the people of God. Extending the invitation to belong to God's family is the greater part of what it means to bring blessing to the nations. We cannot consider that the Abrahamic blessing

has visited a people today if the gospel of Jesus Christ has not yet been clearly conveyed to them.

What will it look like when this aspect of God's blessing is fulfilled? We can look forward to the day when we will see at least some from every people on earth trusting and following Christ. The blessing of the nations means much more than evangelism, but it certainly can mean no less than the evangelization of every people.

We have seen in the book of Genesis that God displayed evidence of His dynamic presence with His people. God will be no less present amidst the peoples of the earth as groups of obedient followers of Christ emerge and grow among the nations. As in the book of Genesis, the presence of God with His people in our day is the beginning of all of the more tangible aspects of blessing that God brought about. This means that evangelization has a special priority (in order, not importance). God's promise to bless the nations is the framework in which Christ's commission makes sense. This same promise authorizes Christ's followers to hope and to work for God's life to abound in every people.

Material and Social Blessing: Abundance and Peace

We can expect the blessing of belonging to God to become a reality amidst every people. But we can look forward to so much more! We can expect to see significant displays of the abundance of God's life. We should not expect a utopian perfection. But we can work and pray with a strong hope, partly informed by what we see in the book of Genesis, that God will be with His people to bring forth significant measures of blessing among the nations.

And so we ask again, what will the fulfillment of God's promise to bless the nations look like? Of course, it will be different in every place and people, but we should expect God to bring forth every kind of blessing, such as economies that flourish with justice and righteousness, agricultures and industries that abound with plenty for all, and peace throughout communities and between peoples and races. We can expect that God will enable His people to wage war with disease, to break the vicious cycles of poverty, to provide water in desert lands, and to be present with healing in the midst of catastrophe.

We should expect that some of Abraham's children by faith will be used by God to preserve life after the example of Joseph. We are probably seeing now in many cities an answer to Abraham's prayer for the city of Sodom in Genesis 18. In that prayer God said that an entire city would be spared the immediate consequences of their sin because of the righteousness of a few. In Abraham's day there were less than ten. Now there are millions of his faith family spread throughout many of the cities of the earth.

Blessing as Transformation

Recently the term "transformation" has helped many express hope that Christian mission can be directed beyond successful evangelism to also seek lasting changes in society which reflect the justice and character of Christ. The biblical ground for integrating evangelism with social action is usually found in numerous biblical texts dealing with the hope and reality of the kingdom of God. It could be that we have been overlooking another body of biblical truth that supports a robust and strategic

GOD'S ANCIENT PROMISE OF BLESSING PROVIDES A VIVID, RICH AND POWERFUL FRAMEWORK FOR INTEGRATING THE PURSUIT OF SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE COMPLETION OF WORLD EVANGELIZATION.

holism. God's ancient promise of blessing provides a vivid, rich and powerful framework for integrating the pursuit of societal transformation and the completion of world evangelization.

Here are six reasons why the Abrahamic promise of blessing provides a framework for us to pray, plan and co-labor for the evangelization of all the peoples of the earth with hope that the results will include significant transformation.

1. God Works With and Through His People

God's people work with intentionality, strategy and hope, using all of the grace, skills and resources God has entrusted to them. But at the same time, God infuses the work of His people with His power and life. Blessing is a function of the work of people and the presence of God. Blessing is always more than the sum of all human efforts.

2. Increase and Fullness, but Never Perfection or Utopia

A blessed city or people is not a perfect society. Instead, hope for blessing gives us courage to pray and to work toward societies that flourish in every way—spiritually, relationally, physically, economically, aesthetically and environmentally.

3. Not Exclusive to God's People

While God's people are distinctively blessed, God intends that

blessing to extend beyond His people. The well-being of entire cities and nations can be pursued without respect to how the gospel may have been received or rejected.

4. Growth Rather Than Redistribution

Generosity is certainly a virtue of anyone who would desire to be a blessing in a biblical sense. But being a blessing means something other than merely sharing wealth with equality in view. The basic idea of blessing is that God's life multiplies and comes to an abundance or fullness by God's doing.

5. Blessing Even From the Poor and Powerless

Throughout Genesis, God brought about great blessing through weak, comparatively poor or powerless people. Being a blessing in God's hand is never the exclusive privilege of those who are wealthy or well-positioned by global standards.

6. Blessing is Variable, Slow-Forming and Long-Lasting

Changes that can be attributed to God's blessing often take place over a period of years, generations, or even centuries. The fruition of blessing appears in comparable, but never identical ways in every people or place.

Co-Workers with God to Bring Blessing

We find in the Genesis account a remarkably clear prophetic sketch of the broad scope of

God's purpose for His people. Since God's promise to Abraham embodies His purpose and our mission, then we are right to expect that our mission will lead to social and material change or transformation. But the main lesson to be learned is not that God's mission includes concerns for social and physical issues. The greatest lessons we may find are those which show us how to co-work with God to bring forth His blessing. To be God's blessing among all the peoples will require our utmost effort somehow blended with the exertion of God's miraculous, life-giving power.

As God continues the fulfillment of His promise in our day, we can learn important lessons about how we can co-work with God from the lives of Abraham's family. Perhaps the person in Genesis that best exemplifies the mystery of God at work with His people to bring forth blessing is Abraham's great-grandson Joseph.

1. Co-working With God

Joseph worked with God and God worked through Joseph. When Potiphar's household was blessed, the miraculous increase was said to be "the Lord's blessing." But the abundance multiplied in extraordinary ways because of the diligence and wisdom of Joseph's efforts. We see God at work in supernatural ways by giving Joseph abilities to interpret dreams. But it was Joseph's skill and wisdom, given by God, that put together a long-range plan to help the people of Egypt survive the famine and to restore economic and agricultural abundance.

2. Working Faithfully Regardless of Position

When Joseph worked as a slave, he worked diligently so that blessing abounded throughout all of

his master's affairs. Even while in Pharaoh's dungeon as a prisoner, he proved trustworthy and was put in charge of running the prison because "whatever he did, the LORD made to prosper" (Gen 39:23). He was promoted to the highest pinnacle of power in an extensive empire. In that position he was used to save many lives and to restore the fertile agricultural economy of Egypt.

3. Serving as One Sent by God

Joseph gradually came to understand that he had been sent by God. He could have lived out a story-line of victimization as someone who had been brutalized by his family, unjustly treated as a slave, wrongly accused and forgotten in prison. But instead, he recognized that God was aiming at something far beyond his own well-being. God was using circumstances intended for evil and turning them toward good (50:20). Joseph told his brothers, "God sent me before you to preserve life" (45:5). Joseph is the first person in the story of Scripture who verbalizes a recognition that they have been expressly sent by God to accomplish a mission of any kind.

4. Accomplishing God's Purpose

As Joseph stated it, the purpose God sent him to accomplish was simply to "preserve life." Joseph preserved the lives of his own family, but the grateful exclamation of the Egyptian people tells the greater story of lives saved throughout Egypt and Canaan: "You have saved our lives!" (47:25).

Without clarity about God's greater purpose unfolding over many years, it's doubtful that Joseph would have recognized that God had sent him at all. Joseph could have arranged that his re-

mains would have been entombed in grand Egyptian style. Instead, he insisted that his remains be carried back to the land that God had promised Abraham (Gen 50:25, Heb 11:22). Joseph realized that he was pursuing a purpose that would be fulfilled beyond his own life span.

You Have Been Long Awaited

We know that Abraham gazed at the sky, counting the stars, believing that his family would number in the billions. But according to Jesus, Abraham saw more than the sky at night. He saw the day. The Day of Christ. A day in which billions of his children would be blessed and be a blessing among all the peoples of earth. No wonder he was moved with joy. Jesus said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56).^f

- 1 Some observers have interpreted Joseph's action as a shrewd act of oppression denying impoverished people ownership of land. The account emphasizes that many lives were saved. When viewed in light of most famines that wiped out millions of people in the ancient world, along the likelihood that many regimes would have allowed much of the population to slowly starve, it is possible to see Joseph's work as a work of salvation. But because there was a restoring of agricultural abundance, it should be considered an act of blessing.
- 2 In Genesis 12:2, the Hebrew expression "be a blessing" is in the imperative mood. Taken by itself this verb could be considered to be a clear command to Abram to somehow become a blessing. But even though the word itself is in the imperative mood, the grammar of the entire expression frames this phrase as a forceful way to express the purpose of the three cohortative Hebrew verbs immediately before it (to make Abram a great nation, to bless him, and to make his name great).