

THE STORY

A New Start

Genesis 12:1-5 & 15:1-6

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.

*"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.
(Genesis 12:1-5)*

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

*"Do not be afraid, Abram.
I am your shield,
your very great reward."*

But Abram said, "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"

And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir."

He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:1-6)

The view from up here is pretty bleak. *The Story* does not begin well. I mean, the very beginning, the "*in the beginning...*" was good – very good, in fact. God created heaven and earth, filled them with plants and trees of every kind, sun, moon and stars, fish and birds, animals and creepy crawling things. God ends the six days of work by making sure that there will be a visible reminder – an icon – of God's presence and goodness. God creates man... and woman. Together they are made in God's image, and it is all good. God's creation is very good. And God completes creation with a day of rest, a day of enjoyment, a day set aside as special and holy.

But the rest – and the goodness – do not last long. Adam and Eve are deceived. They are tricked into disobeying God. It seems like a simple act of disobedience – a mere taste of fruit – but in that one boundary-crossing act they bring evil into God’s good world, and that evil – like an aggressive virus – soon spreads and contaminates all of life. Where there had been blessing, now there is a curse. Adam and Eve point fingers at each other... and at God. Work becomes toil. Violence and evil become a way of life until “...every inclination of the thoughts of humanity’s heart was only evil all the time.” (Gen. 6:5) God is grieved. God’s heart is filled with pain at what has happened to God’s good creation.

Even when God scrubs the world clean with the flood, even when God makes a fresh start with Noah and his family, the rebellion still persists. Evil has taken root deep in the human heart – in every human’s heart – even in a righteous man like Noah. The rebellion against God seems unstoppable, and the situation is bleak.

But God is not going to give up. God is not going to give up.
God is not going to give up.

So God begins to take back the earth. And God takes back the earth in a curious way... a strange way... in a way that’s a little disturbing. God picks out a favorite. God chooses to play favorites.

Does that sound strange? Does that sound wrong? Does that sound unjust?

God plays favorites.

Frankly, it sounds wrong to me... In my world, I want everyone to be equal. In my world, I want everyone to have a free choice. In my world, I want each person to be able to choose who they want to be... and what they want to do.

But the hard fact is that we don’t get to choose. I mean, there are a lot of things that we can choose. There are a lot of decisions we can and should make.

But there's one very critical choice we cannot make. We cannot choose to be good. I don't mean generally good. I don't mean that we aren't good compared to certain people who are clearly bad. I don't mean that "*every inclination of the thoughts of our hearts is only evil all the time.*" (Gen. 6:5)

What I mean is that not one of us is perfectly good. What I mean is that each one of us has taken a bite of the fruit. Each one of us has the knowledge of good and evil – a personal knowledge of both good and evil. Not one of us is ignorant when it comes to evil... not one of us is blissfully naïve.

Again, we are all in the same boat. We are all able to choose so many things, able to choose so many good things, but not able to choose only and always to be good. We are all totally equal in this one important way.

Maybe I've gotten off track. I was talking about how God chose a favorite to start making the world new. I was talking about how that seems unfair to us, and in a sense it is. Abraham is no better than we are. Sarah's no different than us. Abraham knew evil. He could spin out a lie out quicker than you could say, "Melchizidek" three times fast. Sarah knew how to manipulate a situation to get what she wanted. She could turn on those around her like a mamma bear – especially to protect her son. And Abraham knew how to give into her nagging.

There's nothing outstanding about Abraham and Sarah. There's nothing exemplary. There's nothing extraordinarily good. In fact, if you are looking for a couple to make a new start... if you're looking for a patriarch and a matriarch of a brand new people... if you're looking to build a great nation... you're not going to start with Abram... you're not going to choose Sarai.

Abram has no future... literally, no future. He has no children. No children to carry on the family name. And Sarai is way past the age of child-bearing. She is simply too old even to hope to be called "Mommy" or to sweep up her son or daughter in her arms.

You don't start a family with a barren old couple. You don't grow a family tree with an old dried up seed. You don't build a great nation from a couple of has-beens – or never-have-beens.

And their situation gets worse before it gets better. God tells Abram and Sarai to leave their home... to leave their land... to become wandering nomads... homeless. How do you create security for your family – if you had a family – if you don't have a place to call home... if you don't have your little plot of land to work? How in the world can you build a kingdom if you don't have any place to be king over?

This is who God chooses: a couple well past their prime – old, barren, homeless. This is who God claims as his favorites. This is who God chooses to bless out of all the people on earth.

And it's precisely at this point that I start to see a little of God's plan. I see a little glimmer of what God may be up to. Can you see it?

God is playing favorites – he is choosing one couple and no other. But God is not playing favorites like you and I play favorites. God has chosen a couple who have experienced the full weight of the punishment for Adam and Eve's sin. Sarai is not Eve – “mother of all the living.” Sarai would love to experience the pains of childbirth... but she sits alone in her tent while her husband is outside working... but not working the ground. There are no thorns or thistles to hinder Abram's work. He does not break the ground by the sweat of his brow because he has no ground to claim as his own.

Abram and Sarai know the curse of sin. They know it better than most.

Yet God chooses them. And here's why I think God chooses this unlikely couple: I think God scrapes the bottom of the barrel and comes up with Abram and Sarai so that when God blesses them, everyone can see what kind of blessing comes for those who are drawn close to God. God picks the down-and-out, the broken, so that when he puts them back together, everyone will know who's behind it, who's the true source of the goodness and abundance – and they'll want to get in on the blessing.

God plays favorites with one barren, homeless couple so that they will be a shining example of just what God can do. God blesses them like crazy – brings laughter into their home and hearts – so that just maybe, others will want to get in on the blessing... so that others will want to get close to this God who will be “*a shield... a very great reward.*” (Gen. 15:1)

God plays favorites with one couple – so that he can play favorites with others. God blesses Abram so the blessing can spread to others.

God is beginning to reverse the curse. God is beginning to turn back the tide of evil that has washed over the earth.

God is not going to give up. God is not going to give up. God is not going to give up.

God is not going to give up on you. No matter how broken, no matter how screwed up your life has been or seems to be, no matter what your family was like or is like, no matter what your past or present or what you think your future is resigned to, God is not going to give up on you. God is not going to give up on us. God is not going to give up on our world. Isn't that good news? Would you take that little tiny seed of hope in your hand?

Hold out your hand and repeat after me, “I am a work in progress. God is not going to give up on me.” Say it again... Now clench that hope tight... and plant it in your heart. And bow your head with me and let's ask God to cause that seed of hope to grow...

God of All Hope,

Where we are broken, where we are dry and barren and fruitless, at the very point of our deepest pain and our darkest fears, come and plant your seed of hope. Open the eyes of our hearts in order that we may know the hope to which you have called us, the great riches of our future with you and the unimaginable power that is available to those who, like Abraham and Sarah, walk by faith and not by sight. Let our hope in you feed our faith in your promises and may the blessing of goodness and love that you pour out on us spill over, shine forth, sing out to others. Amen