Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality
THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
THE OLD TESTAMENT

A series of studies on the lives of Old Testament characters, written for laypeople and pastors, and designed to encourage Christ-centered reading, teaching, and preaching of the Old Testament.

TREMPER LONGMAN III
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Living in the Gap Between

PROMISE
AND
REALITY

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
ABRAHAM

IAIN M. DUGUID

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To the members of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Oxford (1992–95); with gratitude to God for our time among you. May you always experience the full measure of the joy of God’s grace.
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The New Testament is in the Old concealed;  
the Old Testament is in the New revealed.  
—Augustine

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

“In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his
“glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:22–27)

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn’t understand. But Moses, the prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending for which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged an ending. In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; his coming was declared in advance in the Old Testament, not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah but by means of the stories of all of the events, characters, and circumstances on the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded his plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.

AIMS OF THIS SERIES

The Gospel According to the Old Testament Series is committed to the proposition that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a unified revelation of God, and that its thematic unity is found in Christ. The individual books of the Old Testament exhibit diverse genres, styles, and individual theologies, but tying them all together is the constant foreshadowing of, and pointing forward to, Christ. Believing in the fundamentally Christocentric nature of the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament,
we offer this series of studies in the Old Testament with the following aims:

- to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament
- to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament
- to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament

To this end, the volumes in this series are written for pastors and laypeople, not scholars.

While such a series could take a number of different shapes, we have decided, in most cases, to focus individual volumes on Old Testament figures—people—rather than books or themes. Some books, of course, will receive major attention in connection with their authors or main characters (e.g., Daniel or Isaiah). Also, themes will be emphasized in connection with particular figures.

It is our hope and prayer that this series will revive interest in and study of the Old Testament as readers recognize that the Old Testament points forward to Jesus Christ.

Tremper Longman III
J. Alan Groves
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No book could be written without the assistance and encouragement of numerous people. The temptation in writing this page, as with the acceptance speeches of Oscar-winning actors, is to try to give a complete listing of all those “without whom this would not have been possible.” Such a list would try the patience of reader and publisher alike, while still inevitably missing someone. So I will endeavor to be brief.

This book originated as a series of sermons preached at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Oxford, England; they were then updated and re-delivered in a very different setting during a pastoral vacancy at Aliso Creek Presbyterian Church in Laguna Niguel, California. I want to thank both congregations of God’s people for their encouragement and support. The series editors, Al Groves and Tremper Longman III, were also my teachers at Westminister Seminary in Philadelphia; I therefore owe them a double debt. Thanks are due to Jim Scott and Thom Notaro at P&R Publishing for improving the readability of the manuscript in numerous ways. The faults and shortcomings, however, remain my own.

I would particularly like to thank my wife, Barb, my most faithful and enthusiastic critic. She field-tested the material in a women’s Bible study at New Life Presbyterian Church in Escondido, California, and contributed many of the questions in the “For Further Reflection” sections. Without her love and constant support, I wouldn’t have nearly as much fun doing what I do. Thanks are
also due to my children, Jamie, Sam, Hannah, Robbie, and Rosie for keeping me firmly in touch with real life and reminding me of the things that are most important.

This book is dedicated, however, to the memory of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Oxford (1992–95). No fledgling pastor could ever have had a more loving and committed congregation. Of each member it could be said, as Paul said of Timothy, that they took a genuine interest in the welfare of one another and the wider community, not putting their own interests first, but those of Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:20–21). Barb and I praise God for every remembrance of you all, and look forward to our reunion in heaven, when the full fruit of your labors will be revealed.

SOLI DEO GLORIA
INTRODUCTION:

LIVING IN
THE REALITY GAP

How do you respond when you find yourself falling into the reality gap? How do you feel when there seems to be a huge difference between what God has promised and what you see now? What do you do when the vision you once had of the way your life was supposed to work out seems to be crumbling into dust? It is easy to be a Christian in the sunshine of Palm Sunday, surrounded by the crowds chanting their praises to Jesus, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” But it is much harder to be a disciple in the gathering gloom on the road to Emmaus, puzzling over the death of the Messiah and not yet seeing how that death will lead to resurrection.

For most of us, much of our life seems to be spent trudging along that dreary road to Emmaus. For one person, the reality gap may appear in the form of sudden and unexpected unemployment, with little prospect of another job. For another, it may come with sickness and crippling health problems. It may come to you through the death of a spouse or child. It may be caused by an intense frustration with the church in which God has placed you. Any or all of these circumstances may cause a crisis of faith in your life as you ponder the reality gap between what God has promised and the circumstances in which you find yourself. Surely this isn’t what life should be like as a Christian, you think to yourself.
THE EMMAUS ROAD SERMON

Where can you turn when you experience a crisis of faith? What help is available to strengthen the faith of those who are caught in the reality gap, who feel stuck in a time warp along the road between Jerusalem and Emmaus? Perhaps the best reply to that question is the answer that Jesus himself gave to the disciples who first traveled along that dark road. After they recounted their puzzlement to him, not yet realizing who he was, Jesus responded,

“How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

In other words, Jesus gave them an Old Testament sermon that started with the writings of Moses (the first five books of the Bible) and continued through all the prophets (the rest of the Old Testament), showing them how the pattern of suffering followed by glory is continually interwoven through the threads of the history of God’s people. If they had understood the Old Testament better, the death and resurrection of Jesus would not have come as such a shock. They would have been better equipped to face the tough realities of life with an unshakable faith in God.

ABRAHAM AS OUR EXAMPLE

Where did Abraham fit into that Emmaus road sermon? Luke doesn’t tell us the details, but it is hard to
imagine that Abraham was overlooked by Jesus. Abraham is supremely the man of faith in the Old Testament. He, perhaps more than almost any other person in the Bible, knew what it means to live by faith in the face of overwhelming circumstances. In the pages of the book of Genesis, we find recorded for us the faith, and the failures, of a man like us, who lived in the gap between promise and reality.

Indeed, even in the Old Testament, Abraham was regarded as an exemplary figure. In Isaiah 51:2, the exiles in Babylon were urged to consider his experience as a model for their own: “Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many.” Just as Abraham had been called by God from the city of Ur, against overwhelming odds, to enter the Promised Land, so also the exiles could rely on God to fulfill his promises to the patriarch. They could have faith that the God of Abraham would return them once again to that land, impossible though that seemed.

But the use of Abraham as an example goes back further than the Exile. As we examine the narrative of Abraham, we shall find that his story was written to provide encouragement for the generation in the wilderness, those who were on an Emmaus journey of their own, stuck in the reality gap between their calling out of Egypt by God and their still-future possession of the Land of Promise. For them, too, Abraham provided both an example to follow and a warning to avoid sin. The fertility of Egypt was a sidetrack for Abraham, just as it was for them; the temptation to take shortcuts and “help God out” was very real for both; Abraham’s call to exercise faith in the unseen reality of God’s promise against all odds was a challenge for them to heed.

But what about us? We do not live in the wilderness of Sinai, nor among the exiles of Babylon. What can we learn from Abraham? The writer to the Hebrews gives us
our answer in Hebrews 3–4 by showing us the fundamental analogy between our present spiritual position as Christians and that of the wilderness generation. We too have not yet entered our rest (4:6). We too run the risk of disobeying the gospel promise and falling short of God’s blessing (3:12; 4:1). Although everything in creation is subject to the authority of Jesus, at present we often do not see that heavenly reality clearly reflected in our own earthly experience (Heb. 2:8). We need to live by faith, just like our Old Testament forefathers (Heb. 11). So we too can learn a great deal from Abraham’s example of how to live in the gap between promise and reality.

ABRAHAM AND THE GOSPEL

Yet if Abraham is only an example for us to follow, we are of all men most to be pitied. Who among us can live up to the standard of even a flawed hero such as Abraham? Thankfully, our salvation as Christians rests not on our trying to do what Abraham did, but on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross in our place, whereby our sins were atoned for, the wrath of God was turned away from us, and we were reconciled to him. To put it another way, the gospel is not “What would Abraham do?” but “What has Jesus done?” So, in our exposition of the life of Abraham, we will see not only how he provides positive and negative examples for us, but also how he acts as a forerunner and shadow, pointing forward to Christ.

This is, after all, the central thrust of the Emmaus road sermon. Jesus recounted for his disciples what Moses and the prophets had written, not because they were full of good examples for them to follow, but because they spoke of him. Specifically, they spoke of his sufferings and the glories that would follow. The whole Old Testament is thereby declared to be a thoroughly Christocentric book. This is true, not simply because
there are superficial parallels between certain Old Testament events and events in the life of Jesus, but more profoundly because the whole Old Testament was designed by God to provide a context within which to understand the sufferings and glorification of Christ. Our greatest need, in order to live by faith in the midst of the reality gap, is not to have a good example to follow. Rather, we need a growing understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, of his sufferings and the glory that followed, as the context for our present sufferings and certain hope for the glory to come.
The making of a tennis player does not begin the first time he or she steps onto Centre Court at Wimbledon; nor does the making of a concert violinist begin on stage at Carnegie Hall. Such careers begin much earlier than that, often in childhood. Making it to the top demands sacrificing much that others take for granted; while others play, they must work—on lobs and smashes, serves and backhands, scales and arpeggios, bowing and fingering. Without those years of preparation, they would never be ready for their big moment in the public eye, the goal to which their whole life has been heading. Indeed, it would be unfair to expect a top performance at the highest level from a beginner. Only those who have matured through long and sometimes tedious years of preparation are equipped to undertake such a searching test.

The same principle holds true in God’s service. Like an astute coach or a gifted teacher, God prepares his saints for the tasks to which he has appointed them before he uses them. Moses, for example, spent forty years in the desert, herding sheep, before God called him to
lead his people out of Egypt. What better preparation in patience could there have been for his assignment of leading an equally stubborn flock of people through the wilderness for forty years? Similarly, David learned courage from his own experience as a shepherd. Later, the one who had learned how to take on wild animals in the defense of his flock would be called upon to take on the biggest wild animal of all, mighty Goliath, in the defense of God’s flock. God knows how to prepare his people for the tasks to which they are assigned.

THE PREPARATION OF ABRAHAM AND SARAH

The principle of preparation for service is also evident in the life of Abraham. We often miss this aspect of Abraham’s story because we usually commence our reading of it at the beginning of Genesis 12. But that’s not actually where his story begins. In the book of Genesis, the beginning of a major new section is frequently marked by the formula “This is the account of...” So, for example, we find “This is the account of Noah” (Gen. 6:9), “This is the account of Abraham’s son Isaac” (25:19), and “This is the account of Jacob” (37:2). Abraham’s story is introduced by the same marker at Genesis 11:27: “This is the account of Terah.” We tend to skip over the verses that follow this announcement in order to get into the exciting material of Genesis 12. After all, aren’t the intervening verses only about obscure genealogies and incidental details, which may be of interest to Old Testament experts but have nothing to say to ordinary people? By no means! In fact, quite the reverse is true. Genesis 11:27–32 gives us vital information about the background to the calling and subsequent career of Abraham.

You see, God’s dealings with Abraham didn’t start with him as a seventy-five-year-old about to set out on a
journey to Canaan. God didn’t just slip down to Haran, looking for a suitable retiree to act as the father of his people. No, he had been preparing Abraham for a while—even though he (or Abram, as he was then known) was quite unaware of that fact. The circumstances are recorded for us in Genesis 11:31–32.

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran.

We find out here that it was actually Abram’s father, Terah, who first set out for Canaan, taking Abram with him. The Scriptures don’t tell us why he wanted to make the move. This was a period of history in which there were great movements of population around the Middle East. Terah, Abram, and Lot would by no means have been alone in pulling up stakes and setting off in search of greener pastures. But they never made it to Canaan. For some reason—again, we’re not told why—they stopped at Haran and settled there. Yet the idea of going to Canaan had been planted in Abram’s mind. Through this experience of moving once from home and family in Ur, he was being prepared by God, so that when the call came to get up and move on to Canaan, he was ready. God had fitted him to hear his call and answer it. In an unexpected way, God was preparing his saint for future service.

Of course, Terah himself was not picked at random, either. The genealogy of Genesis 11:10–26 shows us that he came from the line of Shem, the son of Noah. He was a descendant of the very line in which God had been working for many generations. What is more, in the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11:10–26, it is the tenth name
that is the one of key significance. Noah, the one in whom the line of Adam was preserved through the Flood, was the tenth patriarch in the line from Adam. Abram was the tenth patriarch in the line of Shem, suggesting that through Abram a new deliverance would be set in motion.

God’s plan from the beginning was to preserve for himself a godly line, through whom the promise of a redemptive offspring of Eve (Gen. 3:15) would ultimately be granted. God planned that this “seed” of the woman would ultimately triumph over Satan and his cohorts. This godly line was soon endangered from without and within. Angered by the acceptance of his brother’s offering, Cain killed his brother, Abel (Gen. 4:8). But God responded by giving Eve another child, or, more literally, “another seed” (4:25). When humanity became utterly corrupt within a few generations, God kept Noah safe through the Flood, so that the line of promise could continue (Gen. 6–9). Then, with Abram, came the next phase in the history of redemption. Although Abram may have been unaware of the ways in which God had prepared him for his task, everything was ready.

Sarah (or Sarai, as her parents had named her) too was being prepared in the school of hard knocks for women. Genesis 11:30 tells us, “Now Sarai was barren.” And then the writer repeats himself (just in case you missed it the first time around): “She had no children.” Not to be able to have children in a society where a woman’s value was measured by her fertility was a bitter blow indeed. Sarai must have shed many bitter tears over her inability to bear children. But, paradoxically, her inability in this area was a crucial part of God’s preparation of her for her role in his plan. In order for her to be the mother of the child of promise, it was necessary for her to be unable to bear children without the direct intervention of God.
OUR PREPARATION

In Ephesians 2:10, Paul describes us as “God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” That raises the question, “For what good works is God preparing you?” Your answer right now may well be, “I haven’t a clue.” God’s purposes are certainly not always transparent at the time. Moses probably had no idea why he was stuck in the desert with the sheep. He must have felt permanently sidelined. Likewise, David had little idea of the future greatness for which he was being fitted. Abram could scarcely have discerned the higher hand bringing him from Ur to Haran, and Sarai’s tears were not answered with an explanation of the need for her present pain. Only later, with the benefit of hindsight, would they be able to look back and discern how God had indeed done all things well in their lives. In the meantime, they simply had to cling to God, believing, though not understanding.

An awareness of the way in which God frequently works may similarly provide a vital perspective on our own experience. The situation in which we find ourselves may well be a key part of God’s preparation of us for the task to which he will call us at some point in the future. But it may be only as we look back that we will come to understand how it all works into God’s plan for our lives. In the meantime, we may simply have to cling to God, believing, though not understanding.

AN EXAMPLE

Let me give a small example from my own experience. When I felt God calling me to the ministry at the age of seventeen, a vital part of that call was Romans 15:20, where Paul proclaims, “It has always been my am-
bition to preach the gospel.” As a teenager, God impressed that verse upon my heart as a call to me personally to share Paul’s ambition. Over the years, however, I came to recognize that I had latched onto only half of what Paul is really saying. His full statement is, “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation.”

In other words, what Paul is actually proclaiming is not so much his commitment to preaching the gospel as his commitment to church planting. This fact came home to me only as I sat in front of a congregation of people, about to tell them that the Lord was apparently opening the doors for us to go to Oxford, England, to plant a church there. I almost fell off my chair when I made the connection! What we had considered to be the outcome of a series of strange twists and turns in our lives, when we had frequently been unsure of what the long-term future held, now seemed to have been in the Lord’s mind all along, even though we had had no idea of it! What a comfort it was then, and throughout our time in Oxford, to be assured that God had brought us there for his purposes.

It may be the same for you, too. The experiences in which you find yourself now may very well turn out to be God’s preparing of you for the good works he has planned for you to do later. That’s a great encouragement, isn’t it? Of course, a caution is necessary at this point: we must not elevate our reading of God’s working through circumstances into authoritative guidance; we can easily be wrong! We must not forget that the Bible is the only infallible rule in our lives. No matter how clear the Lord’s leading may seem to us, we are still called upon to subject our understanding of it to the Scriptures and also to the wisdom and discernment of the wider body of Christ. But when circumstances do work together to point us in a particular direction, or to show us how
God has indeed worked things together for our good, we should take encouragement from them and thank the Lord for them.

Praise God that he prepares his people through many different circumstances before he calls them to any task! By the way, that’s not just a lesson for young people to learn. Moses and Abram were still in their preparation stage long after most people have retired!

PREPARATION DOES NOT GUARANTEE “SUCCESS”

But even lengthy preparation does not guarantee immediate success. Although God prepared Abram and Sarai to hear his call, and then called them to become a great nation through which blessing would come to all nations, for a long time all that distinguished them from their neighbors was the promise of God. There was no halo of glory surrounding their camels as they traveled from Haran to Canaan; nor was there a pillar of cloud and fire to lead them, as Israel had coming out of Egypt. At a time when many other people were traversing the Near East, they appeared to be just another group of travelers. Only the promise of God marked them out.

It’s the same way today, isn’t it? What marks you out from your non-Christian neighbors? You’re not smarter than they are; you’re not richer; you’re not better looking or healthier. You experience many of the same kinds of problems and crises that they do. So what marks you out as different? Only the promises of God do. If you’re a Christian, you know that God is working in you and through you to achieve his purposes in the world. If you’re a Christian, you know that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Rom. 8:28).

It is precisely that promise which enables you to experience the reality gap. For the non-Christian, there is
logically no reality gap. His or her life may be going well or it may not, but either way it has no meaning. If one is simply a chance collocation of atoms, there is no reason why one’s life should go well or why one’s sufferings should have any significance. There is no promise that the non-Christian can claim. He or she is left simply hoping against hope that everything will turn out all right in the end. The Christian, however, is different. He or she knows that God is in control of all things and that, even if all appearances are to the contrary, God has a plan in which all things in heaven and under heaven will work out for his glory and our good. It is precisely our faith that creates the reality gap when we don’t understand how particular trials or circumstances will work out.

STAYING STRONG IN THE REALITY GAP

So how do you stay strong in the midst of the reality gap, when you find yourself drowning in painful feelings, dire circumstances, or broken relationships? The answer is simple—at least in theory. You cling to the promises of God and the God of the promises. You don’t have to understand; you just have to cling. That is the lesson that Abraham had to learn. Like so many of us, he had to learn the lesson not once, not twice, but repeatedly. It took him a while to catch on. But we have an advantage over Abraham. We have the whole history of God’s faithful dealings with his people, recorded in the Scriptures for our instruction. What is more, God’s promises to us have been signed and sealed in the broken body and shed blood of Christ. Abraham had to leave his home and his family on the strength of the bare word of God’s call. We have this further assurance: “[God] did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32).
That is why it is such an encouragement to gather around the Lord’s Table. We come as those who are marked out from the world by the promises of God and by faith partake of the sign and seal of the promise. There we remember that Christ died for us. We remember that there is no forgiveness anywhere else, nor do we need any other resource. There we remember that Jesus Christ is coming back to bring us to his heavenly home, where we will gather at another feast in his presence, when the gap between promise and reality will finally be closed once and for all. There we worship in awe at God’s stubborn grace, his inexplicable love for sinners, whom he slowly, patiently, and thoroughly turns into saints who can stand forever in his presence.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. How would the fact that Abram had already set out once for Canaan make obedience to God’s call easier when it came?

2. How did God prepare the following characters in biblical history for their place in his plans: Joseph (Gen. 37–46), Moses (Ex. 2–14), David (1 Sam. 16–20), Esther (Est. 2–4), and Paul (Acts 7:54–9:31)?

3. How has God prepared you for the work he has given you to do?

4. What might God be doing in your life right now to prepare you for his service in the future?

5. Are you sometimes afraid of what God may ask you to do? If so, why?

6. How does this passage of Scripture encourage you to trust God more?
BELIEVING THE UNBELIEVABLE (GENESIS 12)

The letter began, “Iain Duguid, you may have won $25 million.” I think the letter then went on to give me some suggestions as to how I might spend my newfound wealth. I don’t really remember, however, because I threw the letter straight into the bin. Some things are just too good to be true. Some promises are too far-fetched for a skeptic like me to believe. So I find myself wondering how Abram responded when God spoke to him in these terms:

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. (Gen. 12:2–3)

The Bible doesn’t tell us the thoughts that went through Abram’s head. It doesn’t reveal how he broke the
news to his wife. He simply obeyed. God spoke—and Abram went. Just as in the very beginning of all things, in those first days of creation, when God simply spoke the word and it happened, so also here, in this new beginning for mankind, God spoke the word and it came to pass.

A NEW BEGINNING FOR MANKIND

Make no mistake, what we see here in Genesis 12 is nothing short of a new beginning for mankind. In the first eleven chapters of Genesis, we observe the slow, steady, shocking spread of sin from its origin in the Garden of Eden. Five times in these chapters, God’s solemn curse is pronounced upon sin and sinners, replacing the original blessing upon life in the Garden. But now God begins the process of re-creating for himself a people by pronouncing a fivefold blessing upon Abram. God will bless Abram and turn him into the very embodiment of blessing, a living model of what blessing should be. In the same way that Babe Ruth is “Mr. Baseball,” Abram will be “Mr. Blessing.” What the builders of the Tower of Babel sought to do in their own behalf and failed to accomplish—to establish a lasting city and thus make a name for themselves—God will do for Abram. God will make him into a nation and make his name great. Through his obedience, Abram will bring blessing to the whole world: “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” God’s original plan of blessing for the whole world will be brought to fruition through Abram’s obedience. The way of blessing that was once marked by the Tree of Life and then by Noah’s ark is now marked by identification with Abram and his seed. Abram is promised a heady mixture of power, prestige, and status.

That blessing will be worked out through Abram’s becoming “a great nation” (12:2). Implicit in this promise
is what becomes explicit later in the narrative, that God will grant Abraham descendants and a land for them to live in. Indeed, in large measure the story of the Pentateuch is the working out of these promises of blessing, descendants, and land.

There are fundamental obstacles along the road to the fulfillment of each promise. How can sinners enjoy God’s blessing? How can an elderly and barren couple have descendants? How can a handful of people possess a land that is already occupied by others? From a human perspective, the obstacles seem insuperable. But, as the Pentateuch unfolds, it becomes clear that nothing can stand in the way of the purposes of the sovereign and omnipotent God, who called heaven and earth into being out of nothing.

YOUR VISION IS TOO SMALL

Big promises make big demands on your faith, don’t they? They demand a big vision. Given the choice, Abram would probably have settled for forty acres of prime real estate. He would have been content with enough land for himself and his immediate family to live on. But God didn’t ask Abram what he wanted. He sovereignly chose to give him an entire country—far more land than he could ever have needed himself. God gave to Abram the whole land—north, south, east, and west—as far as the eye could see (Gen. 13:14–15).

Similarly, Abram would quite happily have settled for one son, even the offspring of his wife’s servant, Hagar. You can see that from Abram’s reaction when God tells him in Genesis 17 that Sarah is going to have a son. He laughs to himself and says, “If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!” (Gen. 17:18). Abram was really saying, “God, that’s too difficult. Let’s just settle for something a little more reasonable, shall we?” A son for
Sarah at their age was just too much to hope for. But God didn’t want simply to give him a son by his wife’s servant; he wanted to give him countless descendants of his own, as many as the stars of the sky or the dust of the earth. He didn’t want simply to give Abram enough property for him to be comfortable on; he wanted him to possess the whole land. Abram’s vision was too small! God wanted to do something big with him.

What about you? Are you settling for a vision that is too small in your life? Are you choosing the easy option because you don’t really believe God can bring about something great in your life? Yes, God sometimes calls us to be faithful in the little things, but is that really your calling, or are you afraid to hope for anything more? And what about your church? Do you expect to see God do great things there? Do you pray for God to do great things there, or are you content just to survive? All too often we don’t really expect God to do anything dramatic, do we? It all seems too difficult to imagine. Yet we are part of an army with a great commission. We have received our marching orders to take the gospel to the ends of the earth: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Along with those instructions comes the divine promise: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (v. 20). If God is with us, then what task is impossible? Like Abram, you and I need to hear the challenge posed by God’s promises.

THE WAY OF GREATNESS

Abram embarked on the way of greatness by following the path of self-sacrifice. The man through whom the promised salvation of the world was to come had first of all to be isolated from all that he held dear. He had to leave his home and his family, his friends and his relatives. In addition, he had to leave the centers of power in
the world. Ur and Haran were two of the three greatest centers of trade in Mesopotamia at that time. They were the New York and Los Angeles of the ancient world, the places where the movers and shakers lived. He had to leave all of that behind and go—but where? He was not told the destination right away. He was simply told to go “to the land I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). If he had been told what his destination was, would he have been excited by the news? Not likely. He was going to take possession of a backward land with the dubious distinction of being regularly overrun and fought over by invading armies. But God spoke, and Abram went.

Upon arrival, Abram’s first concern was to travel over the length and breadth of the land, setting up altars and calling on the name of the Lord. Only three sites are mentioned: Shechem (12:6), the area between Bethel and Ai (v. 8), and the Negev (v. 9). These were the places that Jacob later visited on his return to the Promised Land in Genesis 34–35, and they were key sites in the conquest of the land under Joshua. In setting up altars at these places, Abram was laying claim to the land as belonging to his God. But he was also doing what the godly line had persistently done in Genesis 1–11. In Genesis 4:26, we read that in the time of Seth’s son Enosh, men began to call on the name of the Lord; and we know that people offered sacrifices as early as the days of Cain and Abel. The builders of the Tower of Babel may have done neither of these things, but Abram was of a different stock. For him, worship was essential and natural.

FAITH OVERWHELMED BY CIRCUMSTANCES

However, Abram soon found himself overwhelmed by circumstances and turned his back on that land. “Now there was a famine in the land” (Gen. 12:10). It’s a simple statement, but one full of foreboding. After all, this
was the Land of Promise. Might Abram not reasonably have expected it to be a land flowing with milk and honey? But hardly had he pitched his tent when he found the land unable to support him and his small family. What hope was there, then, for the great nation the Lord had promised that he would become? Abram’s faith was at once put to the test—and he faltered.

Have you had that experience? You start out on something, convinced it is God’s will. You have high hopes at the beginning. But almost before you have begun, the whole project seems to start falling apart. None of your hopes are realized. The whole situation is a mess, and you wonder whether it could really have been God’s leading that you followed. Surely we can identify with Abram’s failure.

GOING DOWN TO EGYPT

So it is that we find Abram going down to Egypt. In the Old Testament, going to Egypt is frequently the alternative to trusting in the Lord. Thus, when the children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness and were assailed by hunger, instead of trusting in the Lord to provide food, they moaned about their memories of the “fleshpots” of Egypt. And when the Lord provided manna, they remembered the variety of Egypt’s foodstuffs—the fish, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the garlic. Egypt, dependent as it was upon the regular rise and fall of the Nile, rather than the irregularities of rainfall, was the natural port to turn to in a storm such as that in which Abram found himself.

Going down to Egypt was a natural choice, but not necessarily a wise one. For immediately God’s whole promise was placed in jeopardy. Not only was Abram willing to give up—at least temporarily—his claim to the Land of Promise, but he also placed at risk the promised
descendants who would occupy the land. He did this by making his wife, Sarai, pretend that she was his sister. Again, it seemed the natural thing to do. It was, after all, not completely untrue, for Sarai was his half-sister (Gen. 20:12). Abram was afraid, not entirely without reason, that the whole truth might cost him his life. If his fears had been realized, he would not have been the only person in the Old Testament to be conveniently disposed of in order to allow the king to add a new wife to his harem (see 2 Sam. 11). And then what would have become of the promise?

But Abram’s logic, natural as it was, was fatally flawed. He had forgotten that the God whom he served was greater than his problems. He thought that God needed some help in fulfilling his promise. He thought too much about the potential disasters that might befall him and too little about obeying God and letting the chips fall where they may. Isn’t that what we do so often? We ask, “What if this were to happen? What if things don’t work out? What if I lose my job for telling the truth? What if I don’t get that promotion because I wasn’t willing to put in the extra hours, because I wanted to spend more time with my family?” Well, what about it?

Far from safeguarding the promise, Abram’s crafty strategy nearly destroyed the whole plan. Abram was gone from the Promised Land, Sarai was lost to Pharaoh’s harem, and instead of Abram’s being a blessing to the nations, the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of what Abram had done. As Oliver Hardy used to say to Stan Laurel, “That’s another fine mess you’ve got us into.” Oh, in one sense the plan worked beautifully. Abram got rich out of it, acquiring a good selection of animals and servants (Gen. 12:16). Everybody would favor the brother of the king’s newest wife. But, at the same time, what thoughts were going through Abram’s mind? Could earthly prosperity make
up for having apparently wrecked God’s plan? I hardly think so. Those who turn their back on God’s call in favor of what this world has to offer often live to lament their choice. Yet having once made the decision, Abram could not undo it.

Thanks be to God, however, that his plans are not so easily thwarted. The God who called the universe into existence at the snap of his fingers was not to be foiled by the blunderings of his human helpers. Circumstances, folly, and even sin would not stand in the way of God’s purpose to make Abram a great blessing. What a comforting thought that is to all of us! How often we start out with good motives, yet quickly get sidetracked by our own incompetence or fear. We botch opportunities to share our faith. We compromise our holy lifestyle, under pressure to conform and be like others. Yet above and beyond it all, God’s purpose stands secure. This is not an excuse for us to be lazy or to fudge difficult situations. The Lord would bring Abram back through this particular test over and over again, as someone teaching a horse to jump always brings it back to the fence at which it balks until finally the horse jumps it. Abram would finally learn that God is able to fulfill his promise on his own, without Abram’s help.

GENESIS 12 AND JESUS CHRIST

Genesis 12 is not just about Abram’s successes and failures. It also points forward to the coming of Christ. The key to making the connection is found in Galatians 3:16, where Paul says this:

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ.
In other words, according to Paul, the promises made to Abram already have Christ in view. When God says to Abram in Genesis 12:7, “To your offspring [lit., seed] I will give this land,” he is talking about Christ. In other words, Abram functions as a miniature picture, a representation of Christ ahead of time. Do you see how this opens up a whole new perspective on this passage? Did Abram leave home and family to go to a backward nation at God’s command? Jesus did more than that. He left the Father’s side in heaven to come to earth, to an insignificant town in a second-rate state, where he lived unnoticed for thirty years (Phil. 2:6–8). What is more, like Abram, he did so on the strength of God’s promise. He is the one to whom the messianic promise of Psalm 2 is addressed: “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery” (v. 9).

Abram received a great name, and was a blessing to those who blessed him, while those who cursed him were cursed. But Christ has received “the name that is above every name,” that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow” (Phil. 2:9–10). Those who come to Christ and are incorporated into him receive in him every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1). However, what do the Scriptures say about those who curse Christ? According to Matthew 25:41–43,

Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.”
Those who despise Christ, who treat him as someone who can safely be ignored, will be numbered among the cursed.

**THE WAY OF GREATNESS FOR JESUS**

Like Abram, Jesus Christ found that following the way of promise took him through the reality gap. The one who was promised the nations of the earth as his inheritance came to his own people, and they did not receive him (John 1:11). The exalted Son of Man, pictured in Daniel 7 as sitting on the seat of judgment, was himself judged by the Sanhedrin and condemned to death. But, unlike Abraham, who told a lie to save his own life, Jesus told the truth, knowing it would cost him his life, so that our unrighteous lives might be saved. The one who was promised that he would rule the nations with a rod of iron was himself scourged by Roman soldiers on that first Good Friday. The only sinless one was given a criminal’s death, lifted up on the cross, a fate that the law regarded as a sign of God’s judgment. The light of the world hung under a darkened sky, the sun itself being ashamed to witness such a travesty of justice. If ever there was a man in the reality gap, it was Jesus. Abram’s experience points us forward to the sufferings of Christ.

But did the promise of God falter that day? By no means! On the contrary, that first Easter was the key to the fulfillment of God’s promises, all of which find their yes and amen in Christ. Was it a travesty of justice? On a human level, yes. But on God’s level, it was a display of divine justice! Sin was condemned and judged most severely, yet sinners themselves are redeemed, bought back for God. The sinless one was made sin, so that we, the sinful ones, might be made holy. He was pierced for my transgressions; he was crushed for my iniquities; the punishment that brought me peace was upon him; by his wounds I am healed (Isa. 53).
In the Resurrection, the reality gap was bridged once and for all. There the firstfruits of the glories that would follow Christ’s sufferings were revealed. He arose in glorious form; so also shall those who trust in him rise in glory. He ascended to the right hand of the Father; so also shall those who trust in him surely rise to new life in the Father’s presence. Even now, the nations around the globe are being brought into his kingdom, with men and women from the North and the South and the East and the West beginning to confess Christ as Lord.

LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF EASTER

In the meantime, you and I continue to live here and now in the reality gap. Today our thoughts may be firmly fixed on Easter Sunday, but tomorrow is another Monday. Like Abraham, we have received the great and precious promises of God, and strive to believe them in the face of the overwhelming disappointments of life. We find ourselves struggling with the temptation to abandon the promises in favor of the apparently abundant provisions of Egypt.

The solution is to cling to the promises of God and to the God of the promises. Look to the risen Christ, who guarantees the fulfillment of the promises. Follow after him, remembering that our lives are patterned after his: first suffering, then glory. As Jesus himself reminds us, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Trouble, famine, hardship, wilderness, exile—these are the biblical words that describe our present existence. It’s not a picnic. It was never intended to be a picnic. We are pilgrims, not picnickers. But we are pilgrims progressing somewhere, not merely hopeful travelers in search of a destination. The resurrection of Christ assures us that the promises of God are true and that we can count on them. In the midst
of the deepest reality gap, we are following in the footsteps of our Savior, and one day the gap will be closed, faith will be sight, and we will be forever with the Lord in glory. In the meantime, we say with joy, “The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!”

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What did God promise Abram in Genesis 12?
2. How did a famine seem to jeopardize the fulfillment of all that God had promised?
3. How did Abram’s sin jeopardize the fulfillment of all that God had promised?
4. In what ways do we find Abram to be like Christ in this passage? In what ways is he not at all like Christ?
5. Have you ever embarked on a mission for God, only to have everything go wrong right away? What did you learn through that experience?
6. Did Abram have the power to destroy God’s purpose for his life by being disobedient? Or did even his sin serve to advance God’s plan? Is the same thing true of our disobedience?
7. Egypt was a constant source of temptation to Abram, and later to Israel, whenever they doubted God’s goodness or ability to keep his promises. To what do you turn when things go wrong and you doubt God’s love and power?