

Series: "Genesis: The Beginning Continued"

Sermon: "Towers to Touch or Words to Trust?"

Text: Genesis 12:1-3; Hebrews 4:12-13; John 1: 1-14 ; 20:24-31

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- This may be one of those Covid induced crazy-sermons. However, the more I got into it and studied the links in Scripture, the more convinced I needed to stick with it. That will teach you to show up on Sunday. You can't just close Zoom or stop the recording.
- In **Genesis**, we have now walked through the record of God creating a **perfect setting** for human beings to fulfill their created reason for being part of His perfect eternal plan.
- We have listened in as God made our **perfect purpose** clear:
***26 (...)*God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."**

***27*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.**

***28* God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."**

***29* Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.**

***31* God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.**

- We have acknowledged Scripture says, we humans were all—every last one of us—created to be a representative image—the visible

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statue—of God's righteous, life-giving, gracious and **RELATIONAL** nature. More about that last one in weeks ahead.

- We have seen that we humans were meant to fill the earth representing God—lifting up his NAME to acknowledge his greatness—showing his glory by being like him—spreading his life-giving ways by trusting that his ways are always the best for all concerned.
- We have also seen that our wonderful nature as human created for this purpose gave us a choice. We could choose to trust God for fulfilling all of this—for living out our created purpose. Or, we could try to be purposeful creatures with a meaningful existence without God. We could chose to live life autonomously by trusting our own ability to make it work out in a way of our own choosing.
- We have seen how our earliest human ancestors chose most often chose autonomy—independence from God—rather than faith in God as the way to LIFE.
- We have watched them do this in the stories of talking Serpent's and angels with flaming swords. We have. We have seen them make their choices while living on for many centuries. We have heard about Nephilim and mighty men of renown. We know the story of a flood that destroyed all humans save those protected by God in a very big boat.
- We have seen the re-creation of humanity go bad again until their united efforts to reach their gods of their own making were thwarted at the city and tower they were building on the plain of Shinar.
- We read how this thwarting of human independence meant to bring power in autonomous unity instead separated humans and spread them against their will in a confusing way by God's hand.

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- We have learned that through all of this amazing early history of the creation and of humans with their created purpose, God always blessed a lineage of humans—**a reproducing seed**—some of whom did trust him. He did this to ensure His eternal perfect plan would be fulfilled.
- One way or another, God's plan was going to happen. Humans could willingly participate in it and experience the blessing of real life that comes from faith in God. Or, humans could choose autonomy— independence from God—and experience living but not really the LIFE for which they were created to live in fellowship with the Creator God.
- A talking serpent, a humanity destroying flood, great warriors, giants, towers to the heavens—I remind us of all of these this morning because we have now reached chapter 12 of *Genesis*.
- In chapter 12, we begin the story of a man named **Abram** and his family. Abram is a man in the lineage of humans through whom God will fulfill his plan. We saw that last week as we read that Abram is the son of Terah. We saw the week before that Terah is in the lineage of Shem—the guy called "Name" whose offspring will continue to call upon THE NAME of the Lord and fulfill the human purpose.
- So, I remind us of serpents, floods, and heavenly towers, because with Abram we reach a human with whom I can more easily identify. Sure he is a Mesopotamian *Sheik* that, practices, polygamy, roams the land living in tents, owns camels, and meets with God's angels—including one messenger who is most likely the preincarnate Son of God. So, his life is somewhat different than mine.

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- Yes, but now he is a man with a lifespan closer to 100 than 1000 years. He is a man who has family issues. He is a man who knows how to be pragmatic—to go along to get along.
- He is a man, as I said last week, who is trying to figure out how to live by trusting God in a now, very messy world broken by the impact of sin and surrounded by unbelievers.
- It may just be me, but I have an easier time identifying with Abraham and his trying to trust God for life than I do with Adam or with Noah, or with Shem.
- I suspect it is not just me because with Abram, we begin to get many more sermons and Sunday school lessons down through history in the church that focus on Abram—eventually Abraham—as an **example** for us to follow. We begin to sense that our life could somehow be more parallel to his life than it could ever have been to... the life of Eve for example.
- There may certainly be good things we can learn and even practice from the example of Abraham's faith. The author of **Hebrews** may even be suggesting this with some of what he says by including Abraham in his "Hall of Faith" in **Hebrews** chapter 11.
- But, lest we go astray at this pivotal change in the narrative of the book of **Genesis**, I need to make a point for us to keep in mind even though it has taken me far too long to do that already this morning.
- We might think that chapters 1-11 of **Genesis** were written to tell us some things about God and how he works in his creation and worked with the first humans. We then might conclude the switch in the tone of the narrative from these cosmic events, destructive floods and other things like them, at chapter 12, signals we are now talking about specific human beings and the moral lessons, good or bad, we can learn from their examples. I'll say it up front. We are not!

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- At first glance you may wonder why I make any deal at all about this let alone such a big deal of the moralizing application of the Bible stories we are about to read.
- I do it because some of the church we are used to lives in a **Veggie Tale** world of interpretation where we tell the stories of the Word of God as if they were meant to be just self-contained moral lessons or just psychological feeling boosters.
- So, for example, as we begin to read the blessing-promises the Creator God makes to Abram in chapter 12, it would be easy to decide those promises are revealed to us so we can be blessed and be happy like Abraham was blessed and happy (if he ever was??)
- It will be easy to conclude those promises are there so people can have a good life. It will be easy to conclude the focus has shifted from something spoken from God about God himself, his ways and his purposes, to a formula for getting the life I want now.
- There is a much longer explanation here than I want to get into in this setting. So, I'll do this instead. I'll ask that we all keep in mind, the purpose of the book of **Genesis** does not change with the change in the narrative at chapter 12.
- The purpose of the book does not now become instructions to humans on how to have a happy, blessed life. No, Moses is still telling his readers, about God. He is telling them what God is like when working with humans, because now, humans sometimes trust God and sometimes do not.
- AND, Moses is especially—telling how God will continue to fulfill his perfect purpose even though the environment for that is now messed up and, for the most part humans are now unbelieving and strive to make their own purpose for existence in order to be personally happy and fulfilled before they die.

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- I bring this up now because we so often, are focused on this well-known Abrahamic covenant we are about to read as to what it says to Abram and to his Jewish offspring. I think these words are right here for a very different reason. They are here because of what they say about God and his continued CREATION-HUMAN purpose.
- Let's me read just the covenant proper and I'll show you what I mean without yet addressing any details. **Read Genesis 12:1-3.**
- So, before I walk through the details of these verses and what follows them in the days ahead, there is a foundational truth that I believe needs comprehending (or re-comprehending) today. I think we would all say we accept this foundational truth. However, I hear some interesting words from some that might suggest otherwise.
- There was a time in human history, when the Lord God, communicated with humans by walking with them in the Garden in the cool of the day. We know this because when Adam and Eve sinned they were hiding from God as they heard him doing this normal walking around. They knew he would be coming for his walk with them.
- I take it that sin messed up that physical walk-time with God as the norm of God communicating, teaching and working his plan through humans. Of course, personal, physical walk-times with every human might also have been complicated, once the human population grew quite large.
- But, whatever the reason, I conclude there was a change, because when we get to **Genesis 4:26**, we read that short line that, to me, seems to come from nowhere around the time when Enosh is born to Seth. Moses records, "**At that time, men began to call on the name of the LORD.**"

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- When we looked at that verse, we recognized that not every reader can even agree on what it means to "*call on the name of the Lord,*" or even how to translate the words. Was this the beginning of *prayer* to a God not physically present? Was it the start of *worshipping* God they couldn't see with their physical eyes all the time? Was it an *evangelistic* move that now men are somehow calling out the name of God publicly so others will hear and believe?
- I will not re-argue my conclusions. I point to this verse now only as evidence that somehow **relating** between God and humans seems to have been different by this point in human history than it was when they walked in a direct physical relationship in the Garden.
- Now, at Genesis 12:1-3, we are seeing yet another example of how God will relate to humans in yet a different way to fulfill his purpose through them. Here, in 12:1-3, there is no emphasis placed on **how** God communicated—that is, the **means** by which he communicated to Abram. The emphasis is on the *fact* that he communicated and then, *what* he communicated.
- In the time of Abram, the Lord God may no longer physically walk every afternoon with his purposeful humans to help them carry out their part in his plan. Humans may now need to "*call on the name of the LORD,*" who is not physically there and not physically visible to them—certainly not all of the time.
- But, please note, God still wants to have a **relationship** with his human agents. He is not a deistic, watchmaker sort of God. AND, now please note the way God graciously offers his relating at this point. This is where I hear a bit of confusion in our day.
- We learn here, pretty clearly, that one way God will relate is that **he will say things**—and, especially here, he will make **promises**—and

his human agent can then decide whether or not to trust him and to act upon those promises in faith.

- Those words, those promises here, like the humans, become **living agents** for God in his plan. They are not simply vocalizations made from air moving in distinct, oscillating waves that then dissipate and no longer exist. They are the very living WORD of GOD!
- God may not physically be there so that his human agents can see him with their eyes and hear him with their ears every day—he may not be there to brush up against them on the path in the Garden or to hold their hand when they need it like a child night.
- **However, God is still there.** We must never denigrate the living, personal, relational presence of God by his Words. God's Words are not the same as human words. We must not see them and treat them as if they are—well, just some more words!
- It is interesting that the NT book of *Hebrews* that talks about Abraham's faith also talks so much about God's Words and his promises in Living Words.
- This author in *Hebrews*, recognizes that God's ultimate revelation of himself, in human history, was the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. But, even for his readers back then, Jesus is no longer there to see and touch physically. Are his readers left without revelation that is certainly sourced in God because Jesus is no longer walking the earth in the cool of the day?
- No the author of *Hebrews*, soon after talking about the ultimate communication of God in Jesus who is no longer present physically, says...

2 We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. *2* For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, *3* how shall we escape if we

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ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ⁴ God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

⁵ It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. ⁶ But there is a place where someone has testified:

*"What is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?*

*⁷ You made him a little lower than the angels;
you crowned him with glory and honor*

⁸ and put everything under his feet."

- When the author speaks of "what we have heard," it becomes clear that the author doesn't mean what we have heard from mere human words, but from God's Words—which are different.
- I went ahead and continued with the bit from God's Words that the author cites out of Psalm 8 showing that he is thinking in big terms here about what God's Words tell us. He is thinking about the very created purpose of humans. God's Words can convey that purpose in a living way even when Jesus is not present to vibrate the air with his physically spoken words.
- If we want to get these things right, the author insists we must found our lives on God's Words.
- "OK, Raleigh, most would agree, we need that information from God—the **facts**—and that is why we read, study and teach his word from Scripture."
- Well, here is where I think we may be departing just 2% from the reality of God's Word and what **God** says it is.
- The author of *Hebrews* says just a bit later some words that most of us have heard and maybe even memorized: Hebrews 4:12ff **For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the**

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thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

- Do you see how the author talks about God's Word being living and active and then the living action of God's **sight** as if the two are so linked they are the same thing? The author can do this because God's Words are not simply sounds carrying information. God's Words are different. They are alive and bring us God's presence and ministry in our hearts.
- Have you ever considered why John says what he says at the beginning of his Gospel about "**word?**" ***John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.***
- There is that big foundational connection with God as the Word again—in creation. Hmm? Why is that there? Is God somehow His Word? Is His Word somehow God—unlike any other word?
- To top it off in John 1:14 John says, ¹⁴ ***The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.***
- OK, OK, enough! I want you to think about it even if it hurts your head a bit.
- Let me cut to the chase and re-tie this back to *Genesis* as I finish.
- Kevin DeYoung, in a book called Taking God at His Word wrote, "*Scripture, because it is the breathed out word of God, possesses the same authority as the God-man Jesus Christ. Submission to the Scriptures is submission to God. Over the last 200 year, many critics*

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have disputed such a claim. They have accused Christians of worshipping the Bible and not making necessary distinctions between the Bible and God. Some have said that we need to see the truths behind the Bible, and not worry so much about the Bible itself."

- *What do you think about that?* How will we think about it in a culture that tells us truth is what we feel in our heads—truth is personal and psychological.
- What do you think about that when even some believers would suggest the Word of God is like other words. It is there only to give us dead, theoretical facts and that is not enough. We need to go beyond the Word of God to get to something better—some better, deeper connection—it is usually thought to be a better relational connection as defined by our psychological concept of what constitutes relationship and truth—that is, it is what makes me feel something is truth.
- OK, this really does stem from studying *Genesis 12:1-3* in context. Here, finally, is the connection.
- By the time of the building of the Tower of Babel, the autonomous— independent from God humans who were building it—already had a very mistaken concept of what a god was like and how a god operated with humans in the world.
- They already rejected the concept of a unique, single, almighty, Creator God who had walked with Adam and Eve in a Garden. Their god-concept was already so warped they thought they might build a tower tall enough to reach the gods. I don't think they were thinking metaphorically. I conclude that's what they thought gods were like.
- To the tower-builders, these gods were as much a part of the natural world and its limitations as they were as humans. The gods were

reachable and touchable in very physical human ways, by human means

- Still, by the time of the tower, the builders were trusting these awfully weak and limited gods, that's why they eventually needed so many of them, to provide life. They rested their faith on very humanly physical evidences for these gods and their powers.
- Things like rain, crops, storms, sun, moon, stars, physical things they could see, touch, and feel, limited the gods they designed.
- In his redemptive GRACE, the Creator God, who as the WORD was able to speak all of Creation into existence and as the WORD sustain it—by his grace he continues to work with humans to fulfill their created purpose by his creating and sustaining purpose.
- Does he do that by physical manifestation they can see and feel? That's what the tower builders had determined a god had to do. If a god wasn't somehow present to them physically—and now, so often in our culture physically and /or **psychologically**—then that god wasn't really there at all.
- AND, any God who did not prove his presence in ways humans expected was deemed a god who is not trustworthy—no god at all.
- In his redeeming grace, the Creator God gave WORDS—spoke promises in those words and said, *"Trust that I am present in those words Abram, even when you can't build your tower to touch me—to prove to yourself by human definitions I am there."*
- *Genesis 12:1-3* is not the first set of Words from God—not even the first promise-words. However, it is the first set of God's Words where the narrative focus becomes knowing God's Words and then having trust in what God has spoken sometimes without any other indicator of the trustworthiness of God. Abram will struggle with this.

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- Sure, Abram would be blessed if he trusted God but the point is that God's Words would always be living and trustworthy for humans even when they couldn't see, touch or feel God's presence in the ways they expected. **God and his Word were one.**
- I suspect most of us will have to think about this a bit. For believing it and teaching it I have been accused of "**bibliolatry.**" I may be accused again today. But, that's OK. That strawman misses my point. I am not saying God is in the ink and paper or the typeface or the punctuation. I am not saying God is information. That is an assumption some people make about words—and the Word of God.
- I am saying what DeYoung says more eloquently: "*God's gracious self-disclosure comes to us through the Word made flesh and by the inscripturated word of God. These two modes of revelation reveal to us one God, one truth, one way, and one coherent set of promises, threats, and commands to live by. We must not seek to know the Word who is divine apart from the divine words of the Bible, and we ought not read the words of the Bible without an eye to the Word incarnate.*"
- God and his Word are not separate things. You cannot know one without the other. You cannot make up your own relationship with God or advanced your relationship apart from His Word. That was the attempt of the tower-builders.
- Or as John, who began his Gospel talking about The Word in very personal, relational terms put it nearer the end of his Gospel to a "doubting Thomas," ²⁴ **Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.** ²⁵ **So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"**

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But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

³⁰ Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

- The tower builders needed to touch their gods to trust they were there. God said to Abram, know me by MY WORD of promise and trust that I am there.
- Like Thomas, and like some of us, Abram found that a difficult way to live as a sinner in a messed up world surrounded by unbelievers.
- Humans say, "Come on God! Give me more than your Word so I can really trust you! So that I can know you are there!"
- God says the Word created you and all you see. When God's Word is there, God is there.
- Is the Word of God not enough anymore?