

Part 13: The Longest Road Trip

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What do Clark Griswold, Goofy and Gandalf all have in common? They all know the best road trips start with a promise.

Whether it's Walley World, family bonding, or the destruction of Smaug, It's the promise of what we might gain at the end that gives us a new beginning. But as any roadtripper knows, problems along the way are closer than they appear.

When I worked in campus ministry we'd pack our family in a car every summer and drive across the country. Along the way, things got hairy. We've seen deer fly over our car, rain storms that bring the interstate to a stop, sheets of ice and 100 car pile-ups. And that's just the problems on the outside. That doesn't include the physical damage of gas station food, or the mental anguish of the never appropriate, "Are we there yet?" Those problems test the promise.

What we see today in Genesis 12 is a big promise that starts history's longest road trip. That's the title of our sermon today: "The Longest Road Trip." Not only does Genesis 12 record the longest road trip in the book of Genesis, but it's a road trip that shapes the entirety of the Old Testament, runs straight through the cross of Jesus in the New Testament, and still paves the path that each of us are on today.

All of us are on the road to somewhere in hopes of finding something. But if you're uncertain of the promise, you'll always be disoriented in the face of problems along the way. We all know that the more dangerous question we can ask is not, "Are we there yet?" Instead, defeated and drained we ask the deeper questions, "Where are we even going?"

All of us want the safety, the stability and the stability of Eden. It's an innate human desire. But the road back into God's promise, isn't one that runs backwards to the garden, it's one that runs forward from Abram, to the cross, and into glory.

And if you want to get from here to there—you've got to take the road of faith. It's a road that doesn't look like the road we'd choose, but that is precisely the point. That's why our main point this morning is this: **The road of faith begins and ends with the promise of grace.**

The road of faith is less about where we are going and more about who we are following. And what can we expect along the route? We will see three things today: faith begins with an **Unexpected Promise**, that brings us to **Unexpected Places**, and is filled with **Unexpected Graces**.

Now by way of recap, the first 11 chapters of Genesis have been tracking how God's paradise lost by the sinful choices of man would be redeemed by the promise of God. God's promise was that through the one child of Eve, God would recreate his people, he would gather them back to his place, and he would dwell with them in his presence.

As the chapters progress, it's like we are playing three card monte. You know the game where they put a ball under a cup and then add two other cups—moving them around while you have to guess which cup

contains the prize? Well, we know that the promise was in one of the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japheth. But in Genesis 11, a lot more cups got put on that table. We saw how from those three sons, the entire world was repopulated after the flood. The table of nations explained how humanity spread, but lost in the sprawl was any shot that we could keep track of the promise.

Our passage today opens up nearly 400 years after the flood, and begins to narrow the lens of promise once more on a guy named Abram. If you have your Bible open to the last few verses of Genesis chapter 11, we learn a little about Abram and it's problematic if you're keeping score at home. They've lived in Ur and Haran—which are far away from God's place. Joshua 24:2 tells us his family worshiped idols, which is a far cry from seeking the presence of the Lord God. And Sarai, Abram's wife, is barren. That's not great if you're hoping for more people.

This is not the cup we're looking for. There's nothing about him that screams hero. But that's good news for us. Because the road of grace doesn't start with heroes. It starts with a promise. God's promise. That's our first point this morning, the road of faith begins with **An Unexpected Promise**.

The story of the Bible can be summarized in two words: "But God." This is the last person we'd expect to help us get back to God's promise—but it's exactly who God chose. After 400 years of silence, God speaks again: **Genesis 12:1-3**, "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'"

I want to point out two things about the promise, the first is the nature of it, the second is the nothing of it.

Look at the nature of the promise. If you're reading in your English Bible and you notice that the "Lord" is in all caps—that's because it's based on the Hebrew word, "Yahweh." That's the personal name God gives himself and it implies his covenant faithfulness.

This promise is rooted in God's faithfulness—not Abrams. The Lord made the promise. The Lord would lead Abram into a land. The Lord would make childless Abram into a great nation. The Lord would bless Abram and protect him. And as the Lord blessed Abram, Abram would be the blessing to the nations. The promise of a people, and a place in God's presence was back. The Lord is the promise giver and the promiser keeper.

That's what leads us to the "nothing" of the promise. Abram was told to "Go," and Abram was commanded to "be a blessing to the nations." And yet it was God who promised to bring him into the land, and it was God who promised to make Abram a blessing, "so that" he would be a blessing to the nations.

When God calls us, he gives us what we need in order to fulfill the call. He was to go, and follow the Lord, and the Lord would deal with the rest. His hope, and the hope of the nations was in him doing nothing but trusting the covenant keeping God of the Bible.

And if you were with us in Galatians, you know that the Lord called Abram to "Go," so that Christ might call all of us to, "come." Abram was called to, "go to the land" that the Lord would show him so that we

might come to the man whom the Lord has shown us. Abram was looking forward to Jesus, who calls all of us to him.

The question is, will you go? Now, it's important to notice that Abram appeared successful and settled in Haran. He had his broader family there, he had acquired many possessions and household staff there. He was doing well. You might feel like you're doing well too. You might feel like your life is fine, you've managed to insulate yourself in such a way that you've forgotten your biggest problems—but when you hear what God has for you in his promise—you realized that in settling for everything—you've gained nothing.

Abram was probably voted the person least likely to go on an adventure. But, when Gandalf called the comfortable Bilbo on an adventure—he went. And when you hear the promise of life for you in Jesus, and the Lord calls you to faith in him, you go with him.

It costs you everything—it's only the everything you already have. Abram was so smitten by the promise of God, that he left what he couldn't keep in order to gain what he couldn't earn. This is what faith does, this is what faith sees, this is who faith follows. Jesus himself says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

But every beginning starts with a good ending. And the promise of what we have in Jesus—the forgiveness of sins, intimacy with God, life everlasting—that moves us. Through the promise of God, grace pulls us into its own orbit.

Faith knows what it loses, but it sees more clearly what it gains. Charles Spurgeon says it this way: "Faith is not a blind thing; for faith begins with knowledge. It is not a speculative thing; for faith believes facts of which it is sure. It is not an impractical, dreamy thing; for faith trusts, and stakes its destiny upon the truth of revelation."

And what Abram heard in God's revelation launched him—and the whole of human history—forward in hopes of a promise of redemption beyond our wildest dreams.

And where it led Abram is not where he would have expected. Here's our second point: **Unexpected Places**

Read with me **Genesis 12:4-9**. "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb."

For 500 miles Abram followed the Lord, not knowing where he was going, but knowing who he was following. But then they got to this land called Canaan, and the Lord said, "Here it is!" I grew up in San Diego, which meant I often visited the World Famous San Diego Zoo in all its glory. So when I moved to

Montana, you could imagine the excitement I had when I heard that there is a zoo in Montana. But I can imagine my experience seeing the Zoo of Montana in Billings was a lot like what Abram saw when he arrived in the Promised Land of Canaan.

Shocked for two reasons. First, did you notice what was in the land? The Canaanites! That's why Abram settled out by the oak at Moreh and between Bethel and Ai. Those were Canaanite cities. He got there, and it was already occupied.

But in a moment we will also see what wasn't there. Canaan sat in a rain shadow. The moisture off the Mediterranean dumped its bounty to the east and to the south. It was a rather dry and rugged land.

And notice even how Abram lived when he got there—in tents. Now, if you were given the promise of a God you didn't see, and were told of children you didn't have, in a land you didn't know, and you'd be a blessing to a people you've never met, and if you dropped everything to obey and this is what you found—what would you think?

I wonder what you thought when you first came to Jesus? How long was it before the promise seemed like a problem. The bills still piled up. Your health still struggled. Your kids still argued. Your wife still was frustrated. And you say, "Wait a minute here, what happened to all that promised business?"

It will be good for us to know that Abram never built a permanent settlement in the land he was promised. The one to whom the promise was made lived his life as an outsider under temporary tent pegs. But look at what was permanent. Look at what really fixed his hope deep into bedrock.

Between his temporary homes—he built altars of worship to the Lord. When he got there the Lord reminded him that he would keep his word. This was the Lord's land and he was going to keep his promise. And Abram believed the Lord. This is what the eyes of faith do—we take God at his word even when we see the problems of the world.

Abram didn't arrive and start singing, "This land is my land, this land is your land," he said, "This land is God's land. And though I can't see it now—I can see the God who makes promises. And by creating these altars as he wandered, the man who was never settled in home showed how we might be settled in our own hearts.

Everything about life in this world is temporary—but our worship is our permanent fixture which bring us peace. We are a plug and play people of promise. The Lord can bring us into any culture, and we find our peace by worshipping him. And this worship is part of our witness to others.

Isn't it fascinating that if those Canaanites went out to one of those camp sites after Abram left there would be no sign of Abram—but there would be a clear witness to the Lord. As we live and work in this life, how are we finding our security in establishing enduring worship and by helping others see the enduring witness of the God who is the God of this world. That's how we find contentment here, that's how we make our home in an unexpected place. Might we assess our contentment in this world and seek to remind ourselves of our true settlement—the one who the author of Hebrews tells us is built by Jesus himself.

We've got to learn to remind others—for that's their hope. But we've also got to learn to remind ourselves. For it's all too easy to forget in our own hearts.

And lo and behold, look what happens next: **Genesis 12:10**, “Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.”

The land had a famine, the land had a severe famine. And here Abram’s faith in God’s promise was tested again. Have you ever had an experience like Abram? You trusted God, you followed him out of sin, and you wanted to trust him—you wondered if he knew what he was doing—you obeyed, and then things got harder.

You probably say as Abram did here, “Well, I could have told you this would happen. It’s Canaan after all.” So, Abram decided to go to Egypt. Why? Because that Nile River Delta had crops and crops abundantly.

Now, was it wrong for him to go to Egypt? It’s not clear on the surface. But notice what is also absent from his decision to go to Egypt: any clear wrestling or reliance upon God. Right before this, when Abram encountered a threat to his promise, he worshiped and called upon God and God reaffirmed the promise reminding Abram that God would care for him.

There are lots of actions we can pursue in the face of problems on the road of faith. Some of them, just like going to Egypt, might be wise and good. It’s not wrong to want to save up money for economic security, it’s not wrong to seek a physician when you’re sick, it’s not wrong to want a spouse for the sake of intimacy.

But when we feel those potholes begin to rumble under our feet—we had better make sure that what drives us to those pit stops is still the promise of God and not a functional unbelief in the promise of God. Because what we are about to see is a crash course in how we can crash along the course. Paul warns us that anything not from faith is sin—and here we see that Abram’s decision was not a wise one on account of the scarcity of food, it was a foolish one on account of the scarcity of faith. The road of faith follows what we can’t see—but on the flip side, a faithless heart is often easily seen.

And here’s where we see how our failures of faith are met with the wonder of **Unexpected Grace**.

Here the wheels begin to fall off the family car: **Genesis 12:11-13**, “When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, ‘I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.’”

Before he even got to Egypt, he seemed to have forgotten that God said he would bless those who blessed Abram and curse those who dishonored him. Instead, he pauses and looks at his beautiful wife and says, “I think you might be able to save me.”

He knew that if the Egyptians saw this pretty refugee as being married to him, they might kill him so that she could be eligible to marry one of their own. So, he places on his wife the weight of being his functional savior. “Say you’re my sister, then they will let me live and treat me well for your sake.”

That’s how idolatry works. It’s not only wrong, but it places a weight on others they cannot bear. The Lord was going to deal well with Abram, the Lord was going to deliver Abram and now all of the weight fell on Sarai.

He thought this was a sure thing. For a little while they'd act like brother and sister. As soon as they got the food they needed, they would return. Easy-peasy. Sin always promises to be a quick stop along the road of faith.

But it's been said before that sin will take you further than you wanted to go, keep you longer than you wanted to stay. That's what happens next. If you look at verses 14-16, Abram is well treated. In fact he's given animals, servants, and even camels (the luxury item of the day).

But he was well treated because Pharaoh took Sarai as his own wife. Abram didn't consider this route! He was willing to live with Sarai as a sister for a season, but now he had lost Sarai as his wife by the hand of the world's greatest super power. He got what he had hoped for, good treatment and a spared life. But it cost him everything. Moreover, the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house because of what Abram had done.

I wonder if you've ever felt like Abram. God's call to faith in the promise of Jesus was the greatest thing you've heard. You responded in faith and left everything behind. Along the way, you knew this world wasn't perfect, you saw the danger of others and yet you trusted God to deal with those external circumstances. But you forgot about a different enemy, not one who lived behind walls, but one that is within your own heart. Your sinful and fickle heart began to doubt God. One small, seemingly safe sin led to another, which led to another, and before you know it—you're not only off course, the van is up on cinder blocks because temptation has robbed you blind.

This is Abram's situation. He's not in the land of promise, he's lost the wife of promise, he's doubted the God of presence and now he finds himself in the presence of a king who has a big problem with him.

There's no AAA out here. There's no roadside assistance. You're on your own. That is, unless the God of promise really keeps his promise. And he does. Our salvation is always from the Lord. And when Abram realized he was helpless, he was delivered by the God who helps the helpless. **Genesis 12:17-20**, "But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. So Pharaoh called Abram and said, 'What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go.'" And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had."

Brothers and sisters, Abraham was not the first, nor he will be the last journeyman on the road of faith who finds himself lost on the way. And if our hope remains fixed on what we see, then there's no way around the problems. But if our hope returns to where it always should have been—to the promise—we find hope.

It was not on account of Pharaoh's mercy, it was not on account of Sarah's beauty, it was not on account of Abraham's ingenuity--Abraham was delivered from the dungeon of his own doubt by the very God in whom he doubted. When we fall, the nature of the God in whom we trust allows us to experience unexpected grace.

Abram got what he was promised even though he walked away from it. God himself put him back on track. And the way God puts us back on track is by sending his own Son as a sojourner. Not to the land of plenty--but to the land of problems. Jesus died because we lost the way. Jesus died because we stood condemned not before a Pharaoh--but before a God.

And yet for all who hope in the promise of Jesus, there's grace along the way. Grace that reveals the ever empty promises of sin, and grace that sends us back on the road of faith. Spurgeon once said, "The Lord's mercy often rides to the door of our hearts on the black horse of affliction."

Perhaps you feel like Abraham, afflicted, accused and abandoned. But stop looking at the wrong thing. Cast your eyes on the power of the promise. Trust in the Lord. Return right now even to him. Ask him to forgive you. That's the way forward. That's how we find our true provision. That's the way back to the man of promise.

So, what are you waiting for—let's get back on that road. Hear the call of God in Christ Jesus, and run to him. Run with this promise to the nations, run today on the road with worship and witness in the face of our problems. Let us run with perseverance the race set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. We have a promise in Christ, which means we get new beginnings every day, a fresh call of mercy and grace.