

GOD'S HEART FOR THE WORLD

SERIES: MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM: WHY ARE WE HERE?

Danny Hall

As I was preparing for this series, I began to think more and more about what kind of world we live in, what sort of things go on in our world. So I made a list of some of the things that have happened in the last week. And what a week we've had!

- Following a weekend of international protests, more troops were deployed to the Persian Gulf region.
- The U.S. and Turkey hammered out an agreement that will allow U.S. troops to have bases in Turkey in the event of a war.
- More than a hundred people died in two separate nightclub fire tragedies.
- A Mexican teenager died after receiving a second heart and lung transplant, which was needed because the organs used in the first transplant were of the wrong blood type.

Here is a sampling of local news:

- Palo Alto High School joined a rising number of schools banning sexually suggestive "freak dancing." Attendance at a school-sponsored dance dropped dramatically after that ban.
- Police searched the home of Scott and Laci Peterson again as they continue to investigate Scott's involvement in the disappearance of his wife, eight months pregnant, on December 24, 2002. Also, last week she passed her due date for the baby.
- An eighteen-year-old died in an automobile accident in San Jose while engaging in a street race.
- Agilent Technologies announced a layoff of another four thousand workers, typical of the economic difficulties we have in our valley.

On the good side:

- A team of people from PBC has been on a medical mission in rural Mexico all week long and will return late tonight.

And let's not forget the sports world:

- Mike Tyson won a fight.
- Tonya Harding lost a fight.
- Full-squad baseball spring training camps opened this week. But in one of those camps, a twenty-three-year-old pitcher for the Baltimore Orioles died after collapsing at practice. The diet supplement Ephedra is believed to have contributed to his death.

While all of that was going on, consider this:

- More than twenty million people tuned in to see Trista Rehn choose Ryan Sutter as her potential mate in the finale of *The Bachelorette*.
- That paled in comparison to the forty-two million people who tuned in Monday night as Evan Marriott chose substitute school teacher Zora Andrich in the finale of *Joe Millionaire* (who of course wasn't a millionaire after all).

Finally, here are two other statistics that may be the most important and the most sobering:

- In the last week more than 2.5 million people were born into this world, and more than 1.2 million people in the world died.

Isn't that amazing? The cycle of life and death is a constant. Life is tragedy and joy mixed together, although unfortunately in far too many places I fear the tragedy outweighs the moments of joy. In this complex and crazy world, all these things happened, and they're just a drop in the bucket of all the things I could have mentioned. I believe the fragmentation and difficulty and craziness are partly why escapism into pop culture has such a strong allure. People are longing for some sense of relief or connection with something that feels good.

As followers of Christ, where do we fit into this world? One of the questions I like to ask myself and others is, why am I here? Why am I in the world of the early twenty-first century? Why am I in Silicon Valley in the early part of the year 2003? Why is my life story intersecting with your life story, with those of all the people around me, and with those of the people my life touches at least in some small way all around the world?

That question is one of the things I want to challenge us to think about in this series. As we explore the Scriptures together and reflect on their implications, I hope we can each humble ourselves before God and say to him, "Please show me my place as someone who worships and follows the Lord Jesus Christ. Show me what you want me to do in my world."

We're going to look at questions like what God's mission for this world is, and how we fit in. We're going to survey key passages of Scripture that will give us some insight. Let me briefly outline where we're going across the seven messages of this series. In this first message we're going to look at the problem from twenty thousand feet up, so to speak. We're going to survey a major theme that flows all through Scripture by looking first at its Old Testament roots and then at its New Testament fulfillment and interpretation.

In the next message I want to look at the very difficult subject of why evangelism is necessary. In a world that is very pluralistic, in which there are no final answers for most people, the question of why we should bother with missions is an important one. Does evangelism make any difference at all? We are going to look at the issue of why the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is necessary biblically.

Then we are going to devote a number of messages to some specific passages where Jesus, Paul, and others in the New Testament talk about our role in fulfilling the Great Commission of taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to every person around the world. We are going to examine some of the implications for you and me from different angles.

Finally we are going to close this series with a great celebration that will look forward to the day when people from every nation and tribe and tongue will stand before the throne of God and worship him together.

Now to set the stage, let's take that view from twenty thousand feet up of what God is doing, what his heart is for the world. We're going to look at Genesis 12 first. Let me give you the context of this chapter.

Independence and judgment

The story of God's plan of salvation, his redemptive work, really starts at the end of chapter 11 of Genesis. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are the prologue to the story. In these chapters we see three cycles.

In the first cycle, the story of creation, we find that human beings were made in God's image, and that they were uniquely designed to live in fellowship with the eternal God and with each other, as the wonderful crown of his creation. In order for this relationship with God to be authentic, humans had to enter into it by free choice. But in response to that freedom they chose independence and self-centeredness. So right from the beginning we see not only the relationship between humans and God ripped apart, but human relationships that flowed out of that were fractured as well. The first murder took place when Cain killed his brother Abel. The isolation began to flow out into the whole world because of the choice that humans made to be independent from God.

In the second cycle we read the story of Noah. By this time the population of the earth had expanded greatly, which meant that evil and destruction grew exponentially in the wake of man's ongoing choice to be independent from God. The whole world was now filled with the spirit of separation from God. Only Noah was found to be righteous in God's sight, so he alone was extended God's act of mercy. All the rest of the people of the earth, refusing to live in

relationship with God, were hit with judgment.

The final cycle tells the story of the tower of Babel. Once again the population had grown large, and once again the spirit of separation from God was firmly entrenched. Humans became proud, and once again that resulted in judgment from God.

In each of these three cycles, beginning with Adam and Eve and their immediate family and increasing in scope to more and more of society, the story is told of how humans were offered free relationship with God but chose the way of independence and self-interest apart from him. In every case it led to relational dysfunction and destruction on the human level, and to judgment from God. At the end of eleven chapters of Genesis it's clear that the human race made a royal mess of things. In our day we see the world characterized by all kinds of fractures and fragmentation and destruction as humans continue to choose to live independently from God.

At the end of chapter 11 God turns the focus away from these larger stories about the destructiveness of sin and separation from God, and he zeroes in on one man, Abraham.

The promise of blessing

As Abraham becomes the focal point of the story, God now begins to demonstrate clearly where his heart is and where he is going. He has already foreshadowed what he will do all the way back in Genesis 3:15, in the midst of the curses that he announced to Adam and Eve because of their rebellion. He said there that the seed of the woman would one day bruise the head of the serpent, foreshadowing that Christ who would come forth from the seed of Adam and Eve would indeed conquer Satan himself, and the power of death and evil would be broken. That incipient work of redemption is starting to become clearer in Genesis 12, our first text. Let's read verses 1-3 (note Abraham was called Abram at this point):

**Now the LORD said to Abram,
"Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father's house,
To the land which I will show you;
And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;
And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will curse.
And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."**

This story starts with a command: "Go." In Stephen's sermon in Acts 7 before he is stoned to death, he tells us that Abram was living in Mesopotamia, a pagan land, when he encountered "the God of glory." God took the initiative to reach down into the life of Abram, and he said, "Abram, I am choosing you, and I want you to go forth from your country, from your relatives, from your father's house."

This is an historical act in which God is beginning to set in motion the building of a nation through whom the Messiah will come, as we will see in a moment. But in some ways it is also a paradigm of the spiritual journey that we as believers go on. God says to us, "I am calling you out from your place of security, from the safe world you have built for yourself and about yourself." The idea of leaving country and home and father's house symbolizes our leaving all that has entangled us in our sinfulness. The response to God's call is always to go, to get up and leave whatever is hindering us from being all that God wants us to be.

When God commands Abram to leave the comfort and companionship of family and the security of home, to move out into a new place he will lead Abram to, he also gives Abram a promise. There are four aspects to this promise. First God says, "I will make you a great nation." Second, he says, "I will bless you and make your name great." Abram will become a man of renown, the father of the great nation God will make from him. He will be fully and richly blessed by God. Third, God even says, "I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you." In

other words, Abram will stand as a paradigm for those who will follow God after him. The stream of God's blessing will flow to them, too. And those who choose to oppose Abram, God will oppose. Fourth, God says, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." God is about to do something that is going to transcend the blessings that come simply to Abram. This is not just a reward to one man for faithfully going where God calls him to go--although there are personal rewards for Abram. This is a call for Abram to become part of a larger story, a work that God is doing by which he will bless all the families of the earth. The theme of God's blessing the nations, or all the families of the earth, recurs throughout Scripture. In this first promise to Abram we see a window opening up to the heart of God: God loves the world--not just one man, one ethnic group, or one nation. He loves all people.

Now let's look at how the plan unfolds. In the next verse, Genesis 12:4, Abram gets up and goes in response to God's command. Abram just says, "Okay," and does it. Would that all of us responded to the call of God that way! If it were me I would have said, "Let me ask a few questions first. What's the best route to get there? And what am I going to find when I get there? Will I have a three-bedroom house with a backyard pool?" But as far as we know, Abram asks no questions. God says, "Go," and he goes. However, he doesn't get it right all the time. He knows that in order for him to be the father of a great nation, of course he must have an heir. When he gets old and hasn't had any children, as the familiar story goes, they bring in his wife Sarai's handmaiden, and he conceives a child by her (Genesis 16). That just starts all kinds of chaos, and God says, "That's not what I intended. Trust me." Finally Isaac is born from his wife as the child of promise, the child of this covenant (Genesis 21). By now God has changed Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah (Genesis 17).

The promise that God first gives Abraham in Genesis 12, he reiterates to him in different forms and at different times over the course of his life. One of the key instances is found in Genesis 22, which tells the very next story after Isaac is born. God comes to Abraham and says, "I want you to take Isaac up and sacrifice him to me." (Someone pointed out that it was easier for Abraham to obey that command because Isaac was a teenager at the time.)

Looking back on this episode, the author of Hebrews says that Abraham is fully prepared to sacrifice Isaac, the child of the covenant, because he believes that if Isaac's life is given in this sacrifice, God will simply raise him from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19). By this time Abraham has come to fully believe in the promise. But of course God stays Abraham's hand and provides a ram as a substitution sacrifice for Isaac. Then he gives the promise to Abraham again in Genesis 22:15-19:

Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and you have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed [descendants] as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

The word "nations" here is important. It crops up all through Scripture in both the Old Testament and New Testament. The word translated "nations" does not signify national borders, but rather has to do with peoples. That's why the term "people groups" has been coined in missionology. It means ethnicities. God is saying that all the ethnic groups of the earth will be blessed by this seed of Abraham.

God renews the promise here, again with Abraham's son Isaac in Genesis 26:3-5, and again with his grandson Jacob in Genesis 28:13-15. In the promise, all through this story of the founding of the nation of Israel, God continues to remind them that this is his covenant with Abraham, and through him all the nations of the world will be blessed.

Now let's fast-forward to the New-Testament perspective.

The promise fulfilled

In Acts 3 Peter is giving his second sermon after the day of Pentecost. He is talking about all that has happened to Christ, and at the end of his sermon in verses 24-26 he picks up the thread of God's promise to Abraham:

And likewise, all the prophets who had spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days. It is you who are the sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to

Abraham, “And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.”

Peter refers to the promise God made to bless all the families of the earth in Abraham’s seed. He says, “This promise is fulfilled in Jesus.” He is *the* seed, the one who is the culmination of the story of redemption that began with Abraham and continued through the building of the nation and all that transpired between that first passage and this one. Jesus came, died on the cross, and rose from the dead. Peter is saying, “All that you have heard all your life about what God was going to do through Abraham’s seed is now happening! It is Jesus through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed.”

In Galatians 3 Paul is arguing that salvation comes not through following the Law but through faith in Christ. Interwoven into his argument are references to the Abrahamic covenant and the import of its fulfillment. Verses 6-9:

Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles [ethnic groups] by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the nations [ethnic groups] will be blessed in you.” So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

Let’s jump down to verses 15-16:

Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is only a man’s covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, but rather to one, “And to your seed,” that is, Christ.

Echoing the words of Peter in Acts 3, Paul points to the wonderful covenant promise by God that he would bless all peoples everywhere, and he says, “This is it! It is Christ! He is the seed of Abraham, the fulfillment of God’s blessing for all peoples.”

The gospel is not just for a privileged group of people in the historical lineage of Abraham, but for all those in the lineage of faith in Jesus Christ. From the Old-Testament beginning all the way through to the New-Testament fulfillment, it has always been God’s plan to bring salvation and forgiveness to all people everywhere. His salvation was never intended to be hoarded. He never intended to be some sort of local deity. This message is not limited to those of a particular culture or those with particular religious trappings. No, it has always been about God’s blessing to the world. Peter and Paul are both echoing John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son....”

What are some implications of this work of God that began so long ago, that was fulfilled in Christ, and that is ongoing even today?

God’s love for the world

First of all, God loves the world. That seems terribly elementary doesn’t it? But how many of us understand that it is God’s primary work in the world to spread his love to every corner of it? Remember my little list of events that took place last week? I get caught up in things like that. I like building a comfortable, fun life. I have my escapes. I love the baseball team I grew up rooting for. It’s so easy for me to get locked into my life and forget that God loves the world. That has profound implications for how I, as a Christ-follower, think about my life and how I live it.

The second implication is that God is not limited to one people or group. This is not some narrow-minded religious focus. We somehow feel full of privilege, but if there is one thing we must get into our minds and hearts, it is that we have to lose the sense of triumph that comes so easily for us as evangelical Christians, as if somehow we’re better than everyone else because we’ve got this message. That is so contrary to the heart of God for the world! God wants to love the world through us, and yes, Jesus is the answer, but it is very important to guard our hearts from narrow-minded pride over who we are religiously.

The final implication is that it is God’s people who will share his love with the world. God wants to extend his

kingdom, to proclaim his message of forgiveness and love to this world, through his people. You and I become agents proclaiming the wonder of the grace of Jesus Christ and the love of God. As Christ-followers that is our calling.

I used to wonder what we as Christians do here on earth that we won't do when we are forever with Christ in heaven. The only thing I could think of was sharing God's love with people who don't know him. We're going to worship in heaven, fellowship in heaven, learn from him in heaven--all the things that churches do now. The unique part of being a Christ-follower now is being a messenger of his love to those who are lost without him, who need to be touched by his grace. That's a huge part of what it means to be a Christ-follower in this world--having the very heart of God in our hearts.

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Catalog No. 4851

Genesis 12:1-3; 22:15-19; Acts 3:24-26; Galatians 3:6-9, 15-16

First Message

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February 23, 2003

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