

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: God's Greater Purpose

Rich Leatherberry

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Scripture:

Genesis 12:1-9

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

² "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.

³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. ⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

⁶ Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

⁸ From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.

⁹ Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.

Transcript:

Hi, everyone. Hello to those of you who are worshiping with us online. My name is Rich Leatherberry, and I'm the missions pastor today. I'm excited to be here, excited about this text. Let me read it to you. It's from Genesis 12. The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you. And whoever curses you, I will curse. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. Abram left as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him."

Abram was 75 years old when he set out for Haran. He took his wife, Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran. They set out for the land of Canaan and they arrived there. Abram traveled through the land as far as the sight of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time, the Canaanites were in the land. The Lord appeared Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on east.

There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. Then Abram set out and continued toward Negev. Father, we pray that you would use this word, this amazing, good, right, and true word. Would you make us different people? Would you plant it into us? Water it and let it bear fruit. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen. I have a confession to make to all of you guys. I have not always been an advocate of missions. In fact, after graduating from college with a degree in psychology, my plan was to pursue a PhD and become a clinical psychologist. But God interrupted those plans, which was very inconvenient.

As a result of some experiences I had and a relationship I was in at the time, God was strongly nudging me to recommit my life to Jesus as Lord and Savior, and the one thing that was keeping me from doing that was missions. I had this crazy fear that as soon as I surrendered my life to Jesus, he would take me away from my girlfriend and send me off as a missionary to some remote place like Asia or Africa where I'd have to live in a grass hut with snakes and other life threatening animals. I hate snakes, but I was under deep spiritual conviction. It was weighing heavy on me and it was not going away.

I knew that I needed to take a step forward and trust Jesus with my whole life, and that meant leading behind my fears around being a missionary and leaving my girlfriend. In one breakthrough moment, I did. I recommitted my life to Christ and it gave me this amazing freedom and peace. And then he didn't send me overseas. He led me to something else instead. A year later, I was able to ask the girl, who is now my wife, to marry me. Now, not long after that, a time when I made a commitment to Jesus Christ, I started attending a church and I felt the nudge to volunteer in a ministry to drug and alcohol addicted youth and parents.

Those youths came because the court ordered them to. They had a choice between coming to our meetings or moving to a youth detention center. Surprisingly, they chose our meetings, right?

But they came kicking and screaming, swearing at their parents and at us, and their parents weren't any better. These were broken families, families caught up in drugs and alcohol. Monday nights were for youth only. Wednesday nights were for adults. We offered counseling through the week. And then on Sundays, we came together to worship on the back patio of this house that was by the church. It was there that I began to see the power of God moving in people's lives.

People were surrendering their lives to Jesus. Youth loving on their parents. Parents loving their kids. There was hugs and tears and new life happening. One person after another was getting set free. Free from alcohol. Free from resentment. Free to love. Free to worship God. Marriages were being healed. God was rescuing his people. I told him, "Jesus, if this is what you do, I'm in. But I was never going to be a pastor, and I was never, never, never going to do this. Never." Now, we are going through this series on how God leads us in difficult times. One of the ways that God leads us is by giving us something to do.

He uses those experiences to guide us, and that gives our lives purpose. That means leaving behind some things even though we're not really sure where we are going, like when I needed to leave my fears around leaving my girlfriend and becoming a missionary. I had to leave all of that behind, and then take the steps forward that eventually led to seminary. Those steps gave my life purpose. I think one of the most basic questions that we ask ourselves in this life is, why am I here? What is my life for? What is my purpose? There's a lot that I could say about purpose. I'll just say a few things real quick.

First, defining our purpose is a process. It takes time in patience. We're not going to discover our purpose in 20 minutes. Sorry, Bellevueans and East Siders. Finding our purpose is usually the spot where our gifts meet the deep need around us and the intersection of those two leads us to feel joy. Finding our purpose can be so daily. Most of the time we think of our purpose as sort of this greater purpose or mission of our lives, right? But every day is filled with dozens of opportunities. Each one is like a doorway that God invites us to walk through. It could be noticing someone who's in need, and so you walk through that door.

It could be the opportunity to heal a relationship, and so you walk through that door. It could be the opportunity to pray for somebody, and so you walk through that door. Each day God gives us open doors that we get to walk through to bring Jesus love and healing. And that gives us purpose. Now, the first 11 chapters of Genesis show us God's goodness and how we're meant for a relationship with God. They also show us how our ancestors kept rejecting that, and that led to disobeying God's command in Genesis 1:28 where God says to fill the earth and subdue it. This word subdue means bringing God's goodness, bringing God's justice, bringing God's heaven to earth.

The image that God has is that his people would fill the earth with his heaven on earth, but our ancestors refused that. The point is that just 28 verses into the Bible, we have something to do.

Now, the story of the Tower of Babel results in God's scattering everyone across the face of the earth and it's devastating. Intimacy and relationship with God has suddenly been replaced with isolation and wandering around from God. At this point in the biblical story, we have to ask ourselves if God has just had enough with his creation? Is God just going to push the reset button and start all over again?

The answer is our text this morning. It is the announcement of God's rescue plan for his world. Genesis 12 begins with his promise to Abram. Now, we know him as Abraham and I'll refer to him as Abraham. That guy. Well, Rich is preaching, I get to make up the names, right? This is Abraham and that's how I'll refer to him. I promise. When we meet Abraham, he is not a God-worshiper. Joshua 24:2 tells us that long ago, your forefathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham, worshiped other gods. As the Bible zeros in on Abraham, we learned that Abraham is in a bit of a mess. He doesn't know this God who's speaking to him.

He's 75 years old. He's passed the age of childbearing, so is his wife Sarai. They have no immediate family. Lot, who's Abraham's nephew, is his closest relative. Abraham at this point is a subsistence farmer. He's a herder. By our standards here on the East Side, he's just barely making it. This is a difficult time for Abraham, and that is when God gives him something to do. Go and leave the land that you are in and go to the land that I will show you. Abraham packs up and leaves. When he gets there, God speaks to him again and God tells him that he's going to give Abraham's offspring this great land.

Abraham builds an altar, and then he does something really crazy. He goes to the east side of the land, which is like going to the tri-cities. Who would do that? But he does. We don't know why, but he goes to the tri-cities and there he builds another altar. Only this time he does something different. He calls on the name of the Lord. He's worshiping God. Three things happen when we find our purpose. We get closer to God, our faith gets stronger, and God aligns our passions with his. First, God uses our purpose to bring us closer to him.

Now, Abraham leaves his country an idol worshiper, but he arrives in this new land, this stone building monument, growing tribute guy to God's faithfulness and worshiping God. God's primary purpose for our lives is relationship. God singles us out before he sends us out. Now, God singled out Abraham and he promises him all these things while Abraham is still an idol worshiper. You see, God is more interested in us. That's why he singles this out. God is more interested in us than in what we have done, because God wants the relationship. Everything else flows out of that relationship.

Now, convenient Christianity, it tells us, that you just have to say these things and pray these prayers and then you're in. Go to church a little bit. Volunteer when you can. We want to make it easy for you. Convenient. That's convenient Christianity. But many of us have found that that life is so empty. Someone once compared convenient Christianity to decaffeinated coffee. It sounds like the real thing, it looks like the real thing, just lacks the power and the punch of the

real thing. Discipleship, trusting Jesus and surrendering our lives to him is about the relationship. Our primary purpose is a relationship with Jesus.

Now, God will use what he asks us to do to bring us closer to Jesus and to strengthen our faith. Sometimes those things might feel like this exciting adventure and sometimes those things are going to feel really hard. That's when the door that is in front of us and that we're asked to walk through is really difficult and really challenging. I spent a little time and spoke with a young woman, a young mom, who is going back to college to get her degree. She's working 25 hours a week. She knows her purpose is to help her kids know Jesus' love and then to love him back.

But studying and turning in assignments and driving to sports activities and to school and to birthday parties and to the doctor's office when the kids are sick, all that has made her life so, so busy and it's been hard, especially during the pandemic. But she's learned to pray a lot and to see all those things as doors, opportunities that she can walk through just to talk with her kids about Jesus, help them experience more of Jesus' love. She prays for her kids and their relationship with God. She prays for her marriage. She prays for her family. And that has helped her rely on Jesus more. That has helped her trust Jesus more.

I just want to take a moment to say, you, young parents, man, yours is a noble cause. You are raising your kids to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. We just want to be a church that helps you with that. Whether what God is asking you to do feels like exciting adventure, or what he's asking you to do is really hard and difficult, God uses it all to bring us closer because Jesus is the prize. Now, the second thing that God does by giving us purpose is that God makes our faith stronger. Now, God is asking a lot of Abraham in this text. This is a 400 mile journey on foot. We know this because we can measure it.

Abraham has no idea, which is probably a good thing, right? Don't you think? He doesn't know where he's going. He doesn't know what's going to happen along the way. He just doesn't know. I don't know about you, but I can think of at least 12 different reasons why not to go. I'm really good at that and maybe you are too, because we tend and trend towards what's comfortable. But that leads to boredom and looking for excitement in the wrong places, while Abraham resists that pull towards staying comfortable and he leaves. And then just two verses later, he arrives. 400 miles, two verses.

Crazy. You know what that says? God was faithful to his promise. God had his back, just like God has your back, just like God will be faithful to his promises in your life. Following God's calling always brings us to this crossroads. Trust or not to trust, that is the question. It's like those trust exercises where someone is blindfolded and they're asked to lean back to the place of falling. And to do that, they have to trust that there's people behind them and that those people are going to catch them. That takes faith, right? The more we fall backwards and get caught by these people, the stronger our faith becomes.

You understand the metaphor. Faith doesn't get stronger unless we get caught. We have to lean back and trust God, and that's what lands Abraham in this Hebrews Faith Hall of Fame in Hebrews 11. By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going and his feet were tired because it was 400 miles. That's Rich's ad lib. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country. Let me ask you, where is God asking you to take a step of faith? God uses our purpose to bring us closer to him, to make our faith stronger, and third, to align our passions with his passions.

See, Genesis 12 is God's good news announcement that he's not going to give up on his word because God never gives up. Not on you. Not on me. God will single out Abraham and bless him. God promises Abraham that he will give him this land. God promises Abraham that he will make him a great nation. God promises Abraham that he will make Abraham's name great. He's going to be internationally famous, which is great for Abraham. Good for you, buddy. Why? The question is why. Why does God promise all these things stay Abraham? Because God does it so that all peoples on earth, all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

I'm not sure we're together on this one, the slides. This scripture goes like this. "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 curse those who curse you; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." God will use Abraham and his family to bless all the families of the earth. Now, Abraham's family becomes known as the nation Israel and God calls Israel this kingdom of priests at Mount Sinai. This kingdom of priests are to be God's mediators to the nations, God's representatives to the nations, to the surrounding nations.

Israel will show the surrounding nations what God is like by the way they treat one another, by the way they treat the surrounding nations. Israel will be God's representative. And through their witness, all the other nations will give up their idol practices, will give up the awful things that they're doing, and they will turn in faith to Israel's God. That's God's plan. All peoples on earth will be blessed through Abraham. What an awesome statement about God. God's greatest delight and greater purpose is to bless every person on this earth, every ethnic group, every language, all of it. God wants it all. Genesis 12 is the beginning of this storyline of God's greater purpose.

It runs from Genesis to Revelation. Prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, they saw it. God sent Israel into exile because they refused to be those mediators and because they adopted the awful practices of the nations around them. Jesus picks up the greater purpose in his ministry and then he commissions his disciples to go and do it. His command to go to the nations is the only command in all of the gospels and in the Book of Acts, the only one, that gets this kind of attention. God calls this man Abraham, and then a nation, Israel, and then a savior, Jesus, and finally, the church to rescue and redeem all peoples on the earth.

You see, knowing God's purpose, that aligns our passions with his. That came from me when I was on sabbatical in my previous church. About halfway through that sabbatical, I was taking this class called Perspectives on the World Christian Movement. It rocked my world, because it was there that I learned about this greater purpose. Not in seminary. I paid a lot more money in seminary than I did for this class. Let me tell you. Suddenly, the Bible became for me more than a collection of loosely connected books and stories. It had a storyline, God's greater purpose, that ran from Genesis to Revelation.

Man, God lit a fire in me, I think I still have it a little bit, to mobilize this church into God's greater purpose. I flew back to Seattle. I walked into my house and there on my desk was this letter from the pastor search committee of Bellevue Presbyterian Church. They were looking for a missions pastor and they wanted me to apply. I so was not expecting that, but here I am. There's a lot more to that story than I have time to tell you. My wife and I spent a lot of time praying at that crossroads to trust Jesus or not to trust him. What do we do? We had to leave a great church. We had to leave good friends.

We had to leave our kids' schools. We had to leave our fears that this could not go well. Who knows? We had to leave those behind too. Leave it all behind so that we could go to the land of Bellevue. That was 23 years ago, man. And since that time, God has opened so many doors. Many of you who are listening today, you've gone through those doors with me, to Rwanda and to the Middle East, to Congo, to Cambodia, to Guatemala. You have gone on those trips, or you've prayed for those of us who went on those trips. You've sponsored kids in those places. You've given to the special offerings.

A few of have even moved there and lived there. Been called to do that, so they did. A few of you have met new people and formed lasting relationships with Christians in those other places. You've prayed with them, cried with them, laughed with them, served alongside of them in ministry. Joy, such joy, God's greater purpose, because we have seen people surrender their lives to Jesus and get set free from the oppression of these other religions, free from hatred and resentment, free to love, free to serve, free to worship God. All over the world, God is rescuing his people. Jesus, if that is what you do, who's in?

For many of us, that may not mean going physically, though I believe God is calling some of us to go and do just that. But we can all of us develop a global attitude that aligns with God's greater purpose. That could mean praying for the nations, and there's books like Operation World. I meant to bring it. It's sitting on my desk at home. Just imagine this, here's this book, Operation World, right here. Really cool book, meant to help us be able to pray for the nations. You can come hear Vula, who you heard earlier at noon in S140. She will testify to the amazing things God is doing among Muslim refugees that are coming through Greece.

That's S140 at noon today. Shameless plug. You can teach your kids about people in another country. You can help refugees who are coming to this area resettle. You can go on a short-term mission trip. Here is your homework, Belle Pres. This week, pray this prayer. Jesus, show me,

show me what you want me to do in your greater purpose. Because finding God's greater purpose, it helps us discover our own. Jesus, we pray that prayer. We pray that you would show us, show us our purpose, show us how we can align in your greater purpose. We thank you and praise you for your love for all the nations.

It's not a passive love. It's a restless love. You seek until you find. And when you find, you restore and you renew. You are the God of the nations. Father, we understand that as you've blessed us and filled us, you've done it with a purpose to be a channel of blessing to the nations. Jesus, give us eyes to see. Give us ears to hear your nudging. Give us courage to step forward, to leave the things behind that we need in order to experience a joy of life in you, your greater purpose. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- When God sent Abram to Canaan, he was being sent away from a place he knew to somewhere that was entirely unknown to him and his family. All over the world, God calls his people to new places to share the good news of Jesus. Where and how do you feel God is inviting you to partner with him in the work of blessing the nations? What is a first step you might take this week to move towards God's next assignment?
- Looking back over your life have you ever felt anxious, fearful, or reluctant to be sent into something new or unknown? What were your fears? How did God meet you in them? What was the outcome?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.