The Seed of Promise Jan. 19, 2025
3 of 11 in *The God Story* Gen. 12:1-3, etc.

Today, we continue with *The God Story*, a sermon series designed to provide you with a high-level overview of the story of all stories— the Bible.

Throughout the series, we encourage you to read the corresponding chapters in the book, *The God Story*, by Alain Emerson and Adam Cox. Doing so will greatly enhance your learning and growth. We also encourage those of you in small groups to use *The God Story* small group study guides, which have been emailed to all small group leaders.

Yes, the Bible can be a challenging book to make sense of. But when we explore some of its main contours, key themes and important characters— like we're doing in this series— the Bible not only starts to make more sense to us— it starts to make more sense of *our lives*.

As we've been saying, it's not unlike how we find our bearings as we stand before that big directory map at the mall— the one with the big red star on it that's underscored by those three helpful (and hopeful!) words: "You are here." Here is the big picture, and this is where you are in that picture. Now you can find your way.

Similarly, once you become familiar with the big picture of the biblical story, and where you stand in relation to it, you can find your way. In fact, that is:

> **Cornerstone's 2025 Ministry Theme**
> **FINDING OUR WAY IN GOD'S STORY** [pls leave on screen thru to the bottom of the page]

And this applies not only to our personal lives. It applies perhaps especially to local church families like Cornerstone. You see, as a church family, we get to share together in being co-authors with God in this congregation's part of how The God Story will continue to unfold right here in Markham-Stouffville, and beyond. True, our part may be a small one in the grand scheme of The God Story, but it's eternally significant, nonetheless.

Along these lines, 2025 is a year we've dedicated to discerning the direction God has in mind for Cornerstone's next chapters. *The God Story* series is one of several ways we're intentionally positioning ourselves this year to be able to receive that direction from God. What are the next major moves God would have us make when it comes to living out the Vision and Mission he's entrusted to us as a local church?

- Is there an under-served people group or a justice cause God would call us to embrace?
- Are there special needs in the greater community God would have us meet?
- Are there new ministries God would have us launch?
- Is there a new church God would have us plant?
- Would God call us to make more space for others by expanding this facility, this campus?

It could be one or some of these things, or something else. We're not sure just yet. But we're confident that through prayer and by God's guiding grace, we will find our way in God's story. As we're reminded in this series of the big picture of God's plans and purposes for this world and for his people, we trust

that the next chapters God has in mind for Cornerstone— and for you personally— will start coming into sharper focus.

Such clarity probably won't come overnight, but it surely won't take as long as it did for Abram— better known as Abraham— whose faith journey we'll be exploring in today's installment of *The God Story*.

When Abram enters The God Story in Genesis chapter 12, a bright ray of light pierces the darkness that has dominated the narrative since the Fall in chapter 3, which Pastor Jeremy talked about last Sunday.

The text we are about to read is one of the most important passages in scripture, and a major turning point in the narrative. Bible scholar John Stott goes as far as to say that this is "the text that the rest of the Bible expounds." [1] Please follow along as I read it:

> The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household 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."
> 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. [2]

This text shows us that in spite of the Fall, God still longs for human beings, who bear his image, to partner with him in filling the whole earth with his loving presence and glory. Except now, God narrows the focus of his strategy.

He will make a particular group of people his own distinct community, so that through them, "all peoples on earth" could ultimately be blessed. And this divine plan of universal redemption and restoration finds its beginning with a nomad called Abram.

Back in Genesis 11, we are told that Abram's original homeland is a place called Ur of the Chaldeans. [3] Few people appreciate how significant that is. Ur of the Chaldeans was basically the heart of Babel, a.k.a. Babylon, which is portrayed throughout the Bible as the ultimate rival to God's design for human flourishing. So as Emerson and Cox point out:

> God's decision… to choose a man from this city is not accidental or coincidental. It's overwhelmingly redemptive! God is choosing a man from the epicentre of an idolatrous and

[1] John R.W. Stott, *Understanding the Bible*, p. 51.
[2] Genesis 12:1-4 (NIV)
[3] Genesis 11:26-30

> rebellious civilization, to begin the process of redeeming broken humanity and transforming all nations. Wow! [4]

This shows that no matter your background, no matter your past, God can make you as his partner in his mission to bring his blessing and restoration to a fallen world.

Indeed, in Genesis 12, we see that Abram— and by extension those who would become his ancestors— have been blessed to be a blessing**.** Let's read God's promise to Abram again:

Blessed to be a Blessing

> "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…
> and all peoples on earth
> will be blessed through you." [5]

Here's the thing about this pivotal part of The God Story. It has tremendous implications for those of us who follow Jesus. Because as The God Story unfolds, we learn that God does indeed make a great nation out of Abram's offspring (or *Abraham* as he is later renamed). This nation would be called Israel, and they too were blessed to be a blessing— called to be a distinct community that reflected God's glory and beauty and lovingkindness and justice to their neighbours in such a winsome way that the surrounding nations would be drawn to God. But for the most part, Israel fails to live up to this calling.

Still, it is through Israel that God would provide the ultimate fulfillment of his promise— Jesus, the Messiah. And it is through Jesus— his life, death, resurrection, and the mission of his Holy Spirit-empowered church— that all nations, all peoples of earth, will ultimately be blessed.

When we get to the New Testament, we learn that through faith, those of us who follow Jesus have actually become part of Abraham's family tree. We read in Galatians:

> And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children [*seed*] of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you. [6]

What this means, among other things, is that in Christ, Abraham's baton has been passed to us, and we too are now blessed to be a blessing.

With this in mind, I'd like to ask you to do something: Make sure you don't hit your neighbour in the face, but I'd like you to stretch your hands out sideways, as if you're embracing this whole congregation in your arms, and repeat after me:

> ***We are blessed to be a blessing.***

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[4] Alain Emerson and Adam Cox, *The God Story: Encountering Unfailing Love in the Unfolding Narrative of Scripture*, p. 41.
[5] Genesis 12:2, 3b (NIV)
[6] Galatians 3:29 (NLT)

Yes, we are. It's why we exist as a church, and it's also why you exist as a follower of Jesus.

As the spiritual children of Abraham, we do not exist to keep all the blessings we enjoy in Jesus to ourselves. We have been blessed to be a blessing to the people around us. We have been blessed to be a blessing to the greater community in which God has placed us. We have been blessed— both as a church as well as personally— to be a blessing to the wider world, for the sake of God's mission to restore the world through Jesus.

The premise of this series is that the overarching narrative of the Bible— The God Story— is the story that makes sense of our own stories. It is the story in which we find purpose, meaning, direction and orientation for our lives.

And to be reminded that God has blessed us *as a congregation* so that we can be a blessing is incredibly orienting. To be reminded that God has blessed *you* to be a blessing— whether as part of this congregation, as part of your family, as part of your neighbourhood, as part of your workplace, as part of your school— that's also incredibly orienting. It gives you a sense of why you're here.

You're not here to accumulate blessings for self-serving purposes. You are here— and collectively *we* are here— to be a blessing. Remembering this will help us find our way in God's story.

Turning back to today's part of *The God Story*, in an act of radical obedience, Abram leaves his homeland and the life he had always known to follow God toward an uncertain destination. God had promised to bless the whole of humanity through Abram's offspring. But this nomad was already 75 years old, he had no children, and his wife, Sarai, was barren, unable to conceive.

Before Isaac, their son of promise, would finally and miraculously be born, they would have to wait. And wait. *And wait…*

Has your heart ever become weary in waiting for God? Well, by the time we get to Genesis 15, a decade has passed, and Abram is still without a son. It is at this point that God shares with him a core lesson— a lesson that we also do well to learn in our own seasons of waiting. It's the lesson that:

God himself is our ultimate reward.

> After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:
>
> "Do not be afraid, Abram.
> I am your shield,
> your very great reward." [7]

In essence, God is saying to Abram, "In your waiting, I am more than enough for you. I myself exceed anything I've ever promised you.

All too often, you and I see God as a means to some other end that we hope to obtain— like acceptance to a certain university, a promotion at work, or a special relationship with a significant other. But God is

[7] Genesis 15:1 (NIV)

not a means to our own ends. God *is* our end, our all in all. As the text says, God himself is our very great reward, and he desires to give himself to us, in holy intimacy.

You would think God's self-giving words would have been of immediate encouragement to Abram:

> But Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." [8]

Abram's response is not that of a spoiled child who isn't getting his way. It's just that ten long years of waiting have taken a heavy toll, and Abram's faith muscles have become sore and weak. But God answers Abram with patient love and clarity:

> Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars— if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. [9]

In describing this passage, Emerson and Cox invite us to:

> Imagine Abram's heart suddenly starting to beat again, as he sees his destiny in the myriad of stars lighting up the night sky… The One who spoke the universe into being, calling each star by name, is expanding Abram's heart to carry what he could never have imagined carrying: stewardship of God's own dream for the world. Bewildered, Abram somehow offers up his trust to God: "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." This is the biblical language of wholehearted trust and full surrender in the goodness of God when you don't know the details of your future. [10]

As you listen to Abram's story, where is God calling you to wholehearted trust and surrender, in spite of the fact that you can't see the details of your future? Do you see God himself as your ultimate reward, or as a means to some other end you have in mind?

In the remainder of Genesis 15, God initiates a covenant with Abram. [11] In making this sacred commitment through a powerful ceremony, God irrevocably binds himself to Abram, and affirms that in spite of the afflictions that Abram's descendants would endure, they would indeed inherit the land God had promised them.

But even after this profound encounter with God, Abram makes a terrible mistake. [12] Conspiring with his wife Sarai, he turns to his own methods in order to realize God's promise. In a shameful abuse of power and position, Abram sleeps with his wife's maidservant, Hagar, who is forced to conceive. Nine months later, Ishmael is born.

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[8] Genesis 15:2-3 (NIV)
[9] Genesis 15:4-6 (NIV)
[10] Emerson and Cox, *The God Story*, p. 43.
[11] Genesis 15:7-21
[12] Genesis 16

Have you ever been tempted to make your own shortcuts on the way to realizing God's promises for your life? Have you ever attempted to "help God out a little" with your own clever solutions, trying to make your way in your own strength, only to make things worse? Mercifully, as was the case with Abram, God does not give up on us. God had made a covenant with Abram, and will stick with him for the long haul.

But before we move on, we must speak of God's encounter with Hagar, Sarai's maidservant, the mother of Ishmael. She is no outliner in The God Story, as some might assume. God makes sure Hagar's story is told.

Bravely she flees, refusing to remain in her master's household, where she had been used and discarded. And here's what's especially remarkable: God pursues her into the desert. There, he meets her, and promises that her son Ishmael would himself become a great nation. Her fear and shame melt away, as she encounters the One who is Love, the God who would seek out an abused servant girl in the desert. Hagar is utterly astounded by this. The text says that:

> She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." [13]

Friend, Hagar was no outlier in The God Story, and neither are you. Everyone matters, everyone counts in the eyes of the One who will redeem all. No matter your past, no matter the fear, hurt or shame you may carry, know today that even if it feels like no one else sees you, *God sees you*.

As we come to Genesis 17, it's almost 25 years after God's original promise to Abram, and it's 14 years after Ishmael had been born. Abram is now 99 years old, and has matured in trust. It seems that God has used the years to "carve Abram's heart into a holy receptacle now ready to carry God's dream for the world." [14]

God appears to Abram in glorious splendour, forever ratifying his covenant with Abram and his descendants. [15] The covenant would be marked by circumcision, a visible reminder that their family's fruitfulness is the gift of God. It is at this time that God changes Abram's name to Abraham, and Sarai's name to Sarah. In this renaming, God is giving them a new identity as "the father and mother of many nations," even though their son Isaac had not yet been conceived. Emerson and Cox explain that:

> This is a central theme in The God Story. We become people of promise before we inherit the promise. Identity precedes destiny. And continual trust [in God] is needed every step of the way in [this] "becoming". [16]

Who is God shaping you to become? How much are you trusting him in the process?

A year goes by, and Isaac is finally born— the son of laughter. Sarah had once laughed at the absurdity of people their age becoming parents, but now she and Abraham laugh with joy at how miraculously, God had fulfilled his promise.

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[13] Genesis 16:13 (NIV)
[14] Emerson and Cox, *The God Story*, p. 46.
[15] Genesis 17
[16] Emerson and Cox, *The God Story*, p. 47.

A number of years pass by, and the story comes to a point where the depth of Abraham's love and faith toward God would face its ultimate test:

> Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"
>
> "Here I am," he replied.
>
> Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." [17]

These words are meant to create a visceral reaction within us. God is asking Abraham to do the unthinkable. What kind of God *is* this, anyway? But we see that Abraham proceeds in obedience. As profoundly as he loves the gift—the son of laughter that God had given him— he has come to love and trust the Giver of that gift even more.

As they go up the mountain, young Isaac asks his father where the lamb for the sacrifice of worship is.

> Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." [18]

And God the provider— *Jehovah Jireh*— indeed provides a lamb, which is sacrificed in Isaac's place. And we hear God declare to Abraham:

> "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." [19]

Of these words of God, Emerson and Cox write:

> Imagine the holy pause in the throne room of heaven. Feel the weight of God's words to Abraham, "Now I know." … Abraham, who received the promise many years ago and has not always fully believed, is now presented to us as a son who totally embodies the essence of The God Story— only those who die to themselves know how to truly live; only those who give up the gift can truly receive the Giver; only those who lay down the promise can receive the fullness of his presence. [20]

The rest of Genesis unfolds and the seed of God's promise multiplies. [21] Through Isaac and his son Jacob (also known as Israel), God's dream for the redemption and restoration of the world unfolds into the next generations. I encourage you to read Genesis 23-50, and/or chapter 3 of *The God Story* book, to fill in the parts of the story that we didn't have time to cover in this message.

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[17] Genesis 22:1-2 (NIV)
[18] Genesis 22:8a (NIV)
[19] Genesis 22:12b (NIV)
[20] Emerson and Cox, *The God Story*, p. 50-51.
[21] Genesis 23-50

Just before we celebrate a baptism, let me remind you that the Bible is a unified story that ultimately points to— *Jesus*. The same God who provided a lamb for Abraham and Isaac on the mountain is the same God who provides his own Son— Jesus, the Lamb of God— to be sacrificed for our redemption.

With this in mind, I close with the words of Tim Keller, who says that:

> Jesus is the true and better Abraham who answered the call of God to leave all the comfortable and familiar and go out into the void… to create a new people of God.
>
> Jesus is the true and better Isaac, the son of laughter, of grace, who was not just offered up by his father on the mount but was truly sacrificed for us all. And when God said to Abraham, "Now I know you love me because you did not withhold your son, your only son whom you love, from me," now we can look at God taking his son up the mountain [of Calvary] and sacrificing him and [we can] say [to God], "Now we know that you love us because you did not withhold your son, your only son, whom you love from us."

With that, we're excited today to be baptizing someone into her new identity in Jesus, the Son of God, and into the part that God has for her in The God Story…