**The Promise**

Genesis 12:1-4

Play out this scenario. You leave church with your family and have a big lunch at Chilis. You have one of those big, juicy burgers with fries, so an hour later you’re sitting on the couch watching football and you feel some discomfort in this area (middle chest). The discomfort turns into something closer to pain - some tightness, some difficulty breathing, some nausea.

Now, you have a sensitive stomach, and after a big meal you often pop a couple of tums or chug some pepto. That’s your first thought in this case. Try to calm down the old stomach juices.

Basically you are **DIAGNOSING** yourself with heartburn and **TREATING** yourself with antacids. But in the back of your mind you wonder - could this be something more serious?

***Severe heartburn can look a lot like the beginning of a heart attack.*** Even doctors can have a hard time figuring out which it is without running some tests. The point, of course, is that ***your DIAGNOSIS determines your TREATMENT***. If you are pretty sure it’s just heartburn, you keep watching football, take your Tums and hope it goes away. If you think it might be a heart attack, you have your wife drive you to the ER, or - if it gets serious all of a sudden, you call 911.

**Diagnosis determines treatment**.

So many people in the world today think they just have ***a little spiritual heartburn***. They diagnose their condition as not that big a deal - they just need a little advice from time to time, a little pick-me-up at the holidays. So they go to church at Christmas and Easter to get their ***little dose of spiritual TUMS***, and aside from that they watch football, eat hamburgers and go about their business.

But what if, as we saw last week, the problem people have is much bigger than a little anxiety or some periodic depression. ***What if the problem is a deep and chronic HEART condition that can only be fixed with radical spiritual surgery?***

Diagnosis determines treatment. If people believe they are mostly fine, mostly good people who just need a little encouragement, a little wisdom, a little prayer from time to time, then that diagnosis leads them to the treatment plan of very minimal engagement with God, the Bible and church.

But what is the real diagnosis? ***Are people basically good?*** Look back at Genesis 6.

**What’s Wrong with the World?**

“The wickedness of man was great in the earth, and every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Genesis 6:5

And is that just an Old Testament diagnosis, just during the terrible days before the Flood? Listen to Romans 3.

**What’s Wrong with the World?**

“None is righteous, no, not one… All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” Romans 3:10,12

Whoa. Ok. So ***what is the Bible’s diagnosis of the human problem?*** According to God, what is wrong with the world? Do people just need a little advice, a little education and encouragement to keep going along their way? No. People are not basically good, they are basically evil - intrinsically selfish, God-denying, Law-resisting rebellious idolaters.

The Bible makes it clear that the human problem boils down to one single word - and I’m sure you all have already filled it in.

**What’s Wrong with the World?**

* **Sin** in our own hearts

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:23

Let’s get this right in our own minds. **What’s wrong with the world is what’s wrong with ME** - what’s wrong with YOU. If you think the main problem with the world is something ***OUT THERE***, you have mis-diagnosed the problem and your treatment plan will be misguided and ineffective. ***You will be spraying antibiotics on the rainforest***, instead of ingesting it into your own body.

The main problem in your world is YOU - **your own heart**. Jeremiah the prophet wrote this down hundreds of years before Paul wrote Romans.

**What’s Wrong with the World?**

* **Sin** in our own hearts

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick.” Jeremiah 17:9

Think about what this means for your life.

* ***In your marriage***, the problem is not your husband or wife - the problem is the sin in your own heart. Stop trying to cure the other person and get to work on your own selfishness, pride and failure to show love and respect.
* ***In your life***, the problem is not lack of advancement opportunities or an unsupportive boss or rude co-workers, the problem is the impatience and sin in your own heart.
* ***In our church*** (I know that no one thinks this way here at Oakwood, but humor me), the problem is not in the leadership or in the song selection or the bad preaching (which no doubt you have to endure sometimes… like when we have guest preachers from the outside...) - the problem in any church is the sin in the hearts of the people. That’s where worship wars come from; that’s where relational conflict comes from; that’s where factions form so the older saints feel the need to battle for resources against the younger families and vice versa.

**Diagnosis determines treatment.** Every time. If you misdiagnose the problem, and think it’s somewhere outside of you, any treatment you attempt will at best only alleviate some symptoms, and at worst it will aggravate the whole situation.

To quote a pastor I like: ***“The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.”***

The good news is that the Bible gives us a clear diagnosis AND a clear treatment. There literally is **a CURE for our heart disease** - it’s called the GOSPEL. The blood of Jesus can wash away your sin and give you a brand new heart! But that’s getting ahead of the story. Let’s open up to **Genesis 12** and enter **the life of Abram** from Ur of the Chaldeans.

When we meet Abram in ***Genesis 11*** we only learn a few details about him.

* He was the oldest of three sons.
* One of his two brothers died, leaving Abram a nephew named Lot to take care of.
* Though Abram had a nephew, he had no child of his own because his wife, Sarai, was barren - she could not have children.
* The family set out to relocate from Ur on their way to Canaan but they only made it to Haran where they settled.
* And then Abram’s father died.

So Abram, at the age of seventy-five, had buried his brother and his father, and was coming to terms with the fact that he could not have children of his own. ***He was a man who understood hardship, pain, suffering and loss.*** He had experienced the fallenness and brokenness of our world. Disease, infertility, death.

But he was also **a man who knew God**. Look at verse 7 of Genesis 12.

“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.” Genesis 12:7

When God spoke to Abram in verse 1, **Abram knew who the voice belonged to**. He didn’t say, “This is Abram, may I ask who’s calling?” Abram knew the Creator. He knew about the flood, and the consequences of sin. He had learned the proper way to approach the Almighty, holy God - by offering an animal sacrifice as a covering for your sin.

So with that background information, let’s study what God said to Abram and what that tells us about our problem and God’s solution to it. Genesis 12 shows us the **three essential treatments** to our heart disease called sin.

**Treatment 1** - Hear God’s **Promises**

“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country… And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you.’” Genesis 12:1-2

What was at stake for Abram here? His father was dead. One brother was dead. All he had was one other brother - who, we know from later in Genesis, went on to have a family because Abram’s son Jacob would marry Nahor’s granddaughter Rebekah. So, on the one hand it’s always a big deal to pull up stakes and move. But on the other hand, ***there wasn’t much to keep him where he was.***

And listen to what God says to him.

**Treatment 1** - Hear God’s **Promises**

“Go… 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.” Genesis 12:1-3

**Five times God says, “I will.”** One command, to go. Five promises, “I will.”

* I will show you where to go.
* I will make you into a great nation - even though now you are old and infertile.
* I will bless you so things go well for you - so far things had not gone so well for Abram.
* I will make your name great - so far Abram’s name meant disappointment.
* I will make you a blessing to others - so far Abram had needed support from others.
* I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you - God was promising to be on Abram’s side, to protect him and help him, even against strong enemies and great dangers.

The point of this repetition is that ***our problems need a*** **GOD-Sized solution**. God did not give Abram a 10 step plan to better himself. **God did not** chisel out the ten commandments, toss them to Abram and say, “Listen, when you learn how to obey these 10 rules I’ll come back and arrange some blessings for you.” God did not give Abram the design for the tabernacle so he could start worshiping with more care and precision. God didn’t even give Abram an improved template for an altar. Significantly, God did not - at this point - demand that Abram get circumcised.

All God asked of Abram was **one step of faith**. And based on that one simple act - leaving home - God made five dramatic, history altering promises.

Seminary students debate about the Abrahamic covenant - was it **CONDITIONAL or UNCONDITIONAL**? Were these blessings conditional upon Abram’s obedience? On one level, yes - if he had not left his home and extended family, God would not have been able to bless him. But on the other hand, no - the blessings God described were not conditional on anything Abram did. Amazingly, ***there were no stipulations in this covenant***. Well, just the one - “Go.”

But as we’ll see, that leaving of home and family was not a “work” in the sense of a duty to perform, it was simply ***an expression of Abram’s FAITH***. So the only CONDITION for the blessings God promised to Abram was FAITH. **Faith alone**. ***Not one single work.***

That is why Abram - later renamed Abraham - is **the model for New Testament salvation**. We’ll look at Romans 4 in a few minutes. He shows us the first essential treatment for our heart problem is to HEAR the promises of God.

For Abram to “be saved” or “justified” as Paul says in Romans, he first had to hear God’s voice. He had to listen to God’s voice and understand what God was offering.

And this remains ***true for everyone today***. People cannot get the treatment God offers for their sinful hearts until they hear of the salvation cure God has promised. People have to **HEAR the good news** of the promises of God! They have to hear and understand and know that God has promised to forgive their sins and cleanse their hearts.

This is so important as we think about **our neighbors and the nations**. All of them have this universal heart disease called sin. Not one person has a chance of treating that disease apart from hearing what God offers them in Jesus. Hearing is the necessary prelude to trusting. We cannot expect people to deduce from our cordial friendliness that God has promised them eternal life in a reconciled relationship with Him. All friendliness communicates is that you are a nice person. It does not allow someone to hear and understand the promises of God. That requires words.

The ***leadership at Oakwood*** have been working on this for over a year now. COVID enabled us to slow down enough to really think about how we train followers of Jesus by our example and by our teaching. We realized pretty quickly that we were not very good at modeling or teaching or training people to share the gospel. So as leaders we committed to learning about this and growing in it.

And the results have been encouraging. We have been more intentional in our neighborhoods, more active in the workplace, more present in the community - and all of this not just so people think we are nice, but so we can share the gospel. People have to HEAR the words of what God has promised.

That was the first essential treatment for Abram. Hearing set up the second treatment: trusting.

**Treatment 2** - Trust God’s **Provision**

“I will bless you… and ***in you*** all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Genesis 12:2-3

At this point in history, ***the hope of the world was still INSIDE of Abram***, literally. He had no child, and the child he would one day have was still 25 years in the future. Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was finally born, Sarah was 90. It was God’s way of making it tremendously clear that this baby was a miraculous gift from God - no amount of human effort could have produced Isaac. And if you know the story, all of ***the “human effort” Abram put into that process just made more of a mess***.

Over time, God clarified and expanded on His promises to Abram.

**Treatment 2** - Trust God’s **Provision**

“***In your offspring*** shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” Genesis 22:18

These words from God are doubly meaningful. Of course we now know ***they refer to Jesus*** - the great, great, great grand-son of Abraham. The distant offspring of Abraham brought the greatest blessing of all to the world - indeed every spiritual blessing - forgiveness, eternal life, relationship with God, love, joy, peace, patience - all of that.

But remember what happened in Genesis 22. **Isaac had been born**. After 25 years of waiting and sinning and doubting and wondering, and wandering and waiting - finally Isaac was born! ***The long awaited child of the promise!*** He was finally with them. But then God told Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Can you imagine!?!

This child you prayed and longed for for 25 years, and really for 100 years of your life - now slaughter him on an altar. Kill your beloved son - your only legitimate son. ***By laying Isaac on that altar, what was Abraham doing?*** He was trusting - completely trusting - with absolute abandon - in the provision of God.

He told Isaac this as they walked to the mountain. The young boy asked his father, “I see the wood and the fire, but where is the sacrifice?” Abraham wisely and prophetically said, ***“The Lord will provide the lamb.”*** Hebrews shows us Abraham’s deeper internal reasoning.

**Treatment 2** - Trust God’s **Provision**

“By faith, Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac… He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead.” Hebrews 11:17,19

Abraham had walked with God for decades by that point. God had already given him Isaac when his body was as good as dead. His wife’s womb had been dead and barren their whole marriage, until God suddenly opened it up. ***Abraham and Sarah knew the Lord as the God of resurrection.*** So, as he lifted his boy onto the altar; as he tied Isaac to the wood; as he raised the knife over Isaac’s heart - in his heart and mind, Abraham was desperately trusting the God of resurrection to provide.

And, of course, God did. At the last second the angel shouted at Abraham to stop. The tremendously relieved old man embraced his son, lifting him from the altar. Then both Abraham and Isaac looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. The Lord not only provided Isaac “back from the dead,” He also ***provided an animal sacrifice*** to take his place.

So Abraham shows us what faith looks like - and **Isaac shows us what God’s provision looks like**. When the time came for God to fulfill His promise to Abraham - that through his offspring all families on earth would be blessed - it was through ***a miraculous birth*** like Isaac’s.

* Mary was not barren like Sarah was, but she had never been with a man - ***so the birth of Jesus was miraculous to another level***.

Isaac was Abraham’s only legitimate son, his only son with his legal wife, Sarah.

* ***Jesus was God’s only Son*** - the only begotten Son of the Father!

Abraham brought Isaac to the holy mountain and placed him on the altar, prepared to kill his son in obedience to God’s command. Remarkably, Isaac went along and allowed his father to tie him to the altar and did not try to escape when Abraham raised the knife over him.

* ***Jesus marched up the hill called Calvary***, carrying his own wood for the sacrifice - the cross on which he would die - and he allowed the Romans to drive the nails and raise him up onto that old cross.
* But in this case ***God the Father did not withdraw the knife***. The razor sharp knife of judgment, wrath and fury fell on Jesus in all of its infinite agony as the weight of your sin and mine killed the righteous Son of God. The knife that killed Jesus was called sin - and the hands that plunged that knife into his heart were yours and mine.

Our problem is the sin in our own hearts. God promised to bless us by forgiving that sin if we will trust in His provision - the Lord Jesus Christ. Listen to Romans 4 and what happens when you trust in this provision:

**Treatment 2** - Trust God’s **Provision**

“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” Rom. 4:3

Here is a single word that encapsulates the gospel: **JUSTIFICATION**. To be justified is to have your faith COUNTED to you as righteousness. This is where Abraham’s example is so instructive for us. Paul draws this out explicitly. How was Abraham justified? Was it before the Law or after? Long before! Hundreds of years before Moses and the Law. What about circumcision - ***was Abraham justified before or after circumcision?*** The striking and significant answer is **BEFORE**.

Now, I’m sure you’re all grateful that we don’t spend a lot of time thinking about **circumcision**. But it was a big deal in the Jewish world and in the early church so we have to briefly consider what it represented. Circumcision became ***the bloody, physical mark of being Jewish*** - a descendant of Abraham and member of the chosen people of God. Usually it was performed on babies when they were eight days old - obviously just the boy babies - so they were marked with blood from their earliest days as belonging to God in His covenant.

But ***the PROMISES*** of Genesis 12 - the promises Abraham believed and it was counted to him as righteousness - ***came BEFORE the circumcision*** of Abraham in Genesis 17. So based only on Abraham’s FAITH, God counted Abraham as righteous. Abraham was JUSTIFIED by faith alone. **He had not done anything to earn this pronouncement**. He had not even been circumcised; he had not offered a sacrifice; he had not devoted himself to God’s Law; he had not celebrated Passover (which was still 500 years in the future).

So what was the purpose of circumcision?

**Treatment 2** - Trust God’s **Provision**

“He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.” Romans 4:11

Circumcision was **a SIGN and SEAL** of Abraham’s already completed JUSTIFICATION. Just as baptism for the Christian is a sign and seal of your salvation in Christ, so was circumcision for Abraham. I like to say that ***baptism is the wedding ring*** for the Christian. You become one with Jesus at the moment you commit your heart and life to Him. But you announce that to the world, and demonstrate your commitment to Jesus publicly by being baptized. It’s your visible SIGN and the SEAL or confirmation of your covenant union.

That’s what circumcision was for the Jews. ***Circumcision did not MAKE YOU Jewish, it was the physical sign that you WERE Jewish.***

Have you HEARD the promises of God to you? Have you trusted in God’s provision for you in Christ? Have you made those vows, and settled that reality between you and Jesus? It’s as simple as **praying a prayer** - “Lord Jesus, I know I am a sinner - my biggest problem is the sin in my own heart. Please forgive my sin and come into my life to take over. I believe that you are the Savior and I commit to you as my Lord.”

**But if you haven’t yet been baptized**, then it’s like being married but never wearing your ring. At some point, people are right to wonder what you mean to communicate. Are you not *really* married? Do you not *want* to be married?

Baptism is the sign and seal of salvation - the mark of one who belongs to Jesus by faith. It is the first step of obedience for the follower of Christ. And obedience is our third essential treatment for the problem of sin. Obedience is not what saves you, but it is what shows you are saved. And don’t deceive yourself into thinking you can overcome sin in your heart without a rigorous commitment to obey the commands of Christ.

**Treatment 3** - Obey God’s **Commands**

“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.’” Genesis 12:1

This was the command that started everything for Abram. Had he not obeyed this single command, he would not have been the Father of Israel, he would not have been justified by his faith, he would not have become an example for us of the faith that saves.

**It wasn’t Abram’s obedience that saved him** - he was saved by faith alone. But ***his obedience proved the fact that he had faith.*** This is why James can write, “Faith without deeds is dead.” True faith produces good works. It has to.

When you really believe in Jesus, you love Him and you want to follow Him - you want to obey Him.

***Why does a child obey her parents?*** Because she HAS TO?

Yes, that’s how it works with a TODDLER. You have to establish your authority, using reward and punishment to compel obedience. But as children grow up, they should begin to obey you because they WANT TO - they want to please you; they want to live up to the family’s values. **They love mom and dad**, they know the family is important, so they help out - they do chores, they tell the truth, they come home on time.

How many of us are ***SPIRITUAL TODDLERS?*** We follow God’s rules to avoid punishment and in the hopes of getting little prizes. But God our Father wants us to grow up! He wants us to WANT to please Him - not because we HAVE TO to avoid punishment, but because we WANT to out of love for Him.

Don’t raise your hands on this one. Do any of you have children that you put up a chore list at the start of the week and at the end of the week, if they didn’t do enough, or didn’t do it well enough, ***you kick them out of the house?*** You say, “You’re no son of mine - with the haphazard way you loaded the dishwasher, your sloppy handwriting, your messy bedroom and sassy attitude…” Do you determine membership in your family by PERFORMANCE?

I sure hope not! But doesn’t membership in your family come with the expectation of some kind of effort? ***It’s not the “good works” in the home that make you a part of the family*** - but helping out, being kind, showing up for meals - it’s just what we DO in the family.

**Treatment 3** - Obey God’s **Commands**

“So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.” Genesis 12:4

Because Abram HEARD God’s promises - because he trusted in God’s provision - he obeyed God’s commands. **His faith led him to obey.** And the obedience was the completion of the faith.

This was true ***when Abram set out from Haran*** and made his way to Canaan. Each literal step he took away from his homeland and toward a new land was a step of faith and obedience.

It was also true ***when Abraham placed Isaac on that altar*** and raised the knife over his son. Had Abraham backed out - even at the very last second - it would have betrayed a lack of faith. That’s why the angel waited until the last moment to stop Abraham. ***Good intentions were not enough.*** Abraham had to bring his obedience to completion. He had to bring the knife, sharpen the knife and raise the knife fully intending to plunge it into his son’s heart.

Again, we know this practically in our families. ***INTENDING to take out the trash is not obedience.*** On Monday night, you either took the container to the curb or you didn’t. When the rumbling garbage truck wakes you up at 6:30 a.m. it’s too late to rush out and catch them. You either took out the trash or you didn’t. You can tell that’s one of MY jobs, can’t you? I need to delegate more.

* Intending to do your homework or study for a test is not obedience. **DO or DO NOT**. ***There is no try.***
* In football the receiver either ***runs the assigned route***, or he doesn’t.
* At work, you either ***complete the project*** on time, or you don’t.

At some point, intentions don’t matter - **action is what matters**.

If you really trust Jesus, you obey Him. Period. If you don’t obey Jesus it means you don’t really trust Him. Faith is the root of the tree. Obedience is the fruit of the tree. If the tree of your life doesn’t produce the fruit of obedience then your root is not healthy. Obedience doesn’t save you, but it shows that you are saved.

The application for us is our summary today:

| **What’s wrong with the world?** | **What can we do about it?** |
| --- | --- |
| * **Sin** in our own hearts | 1. Hear God’s **Promises** 2. Trust God’s **Provision** 3. Obey God’s **Commands** |

If you get the diagnosis wrong, you’ll never get the treatment right.

But once you realize that the biggest **problem in the world is the sin in YOUR HEART**, you have taken the first step toward getting the treatment you need. You are ready to hear God’s promises to forgive you and change you on the inside.

You have then realized that what you need is not a couple of spiritual Tums - ***what you need is a heart transplant*** - and only Jesus can give you that! But then you hear that forgiveness and eternal life is available in Jesus - the long awaited offspring of Abraham, the one through whom blessing has come to the world! You hear these promises and put your trust in them.

You take that essential step of faith by which you commit yourself to Jesus, trusting Him as God’s provision to cover your sin and reconcile you with God. And the sign that you have heard God’s promises and trusted in His provision is that you begin to take steps of obedience to His commands.

This is what we see Abraham doing in Genesis 12 and on through his story. I hope you can see these essential steps toward salvation in your life and that you are regularly inviting others to take these steps as well.

Let’s pray.