

UNIT 3

+

I WILL MAKE

YOUR NAME

GREAT

“God Planned It for Good”

by Jamaal Williams

Esteemed and seasoned pastor-theologian Dr. Tony Evans describes divine providence as “the hand of God in the glove of history ... the work of God whereby He integrates and bends events in the universe in order to fulfill His original design for which it was created. It is God sitting behind the steering wheel of time.”¹

Whew! This description of providence makes me want to stop what I’m doing, close my eyes, open my heart, and turn from any cynicism and doubt toward the One who has His hand “in the glove in history.” We need to remember that if we are in Christ—if we believe the gospel—then God, who is sitting behind the “steering wheel of time,” is driving my life and yours to a beautiful end. God intentionally directs every believer’s life to the end where everything works together for our ultimate good and where His multicultural bride lives in perfect peace for all eternity.

Through the story of Abraham, we see the providence of God at work in powerful ways. I believe that part of what made Abraham’s faith memorable and foundational is that his faith became rooted in a deep belief that God is sovereign and providential. The writer of Hebrews talks about Abraham’s faith in a way that points to God’s ability to direct all events toward a certain end. He reflected: “[Abraham] considered God to be able even to raise someone from the dead; therefore, he received him back, figuratively speaking” (Heb. 11:19). Abraham took his one and only son of promise up a mountain to be sacrificed in obedience to the voice of God because he had learned to trust God through the most impossible of situations and circumstances. If God could provide a promised child through Sarah, who was 90 years old, and Abraham, who was 100 years old, then nothing is impossible with Him!

In other words, Abraham believed God as he experienced God's unmerited, unfolding, and unstoppable providence.

GOD'S UNMERITED PROVIDENCE

When we meet Abraham in Genesis 11 (whose name was Abram at the time), we know little about him besides that he was in the lineage of Shem. If someone were reading the Bible for the first time and had no idea who the progenitor of the Hebrew people would be, then he or she would have a very slim chance of guessing that person based on the list of names given through the genealogy in the latter half of Genesis 11. But that's exactly the point!

Abraham comes into the story seemingly out of nowhere. Yet in Genesis 12:1-3, God placed His unmerited favor on Abraham, or what Christians might call grace. Abraham was plucked like a grain of sand from the seashore, one among millions, and blessed ridiculously. And over the next few chapters of Genesis, God lavished specific promises on him and repeated them to remind Abraham of His faithfulness as a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. God promised Abraham:

- land (Gen. 12:7; 13:14-15,17; 15:7,18; 17:8);
- a great nation of people through him (12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:2,4-7,16,19; 22:17);
- the promise of a covenant (17:7,19,21);
- and that all the peoples of the earth would be blessed through him (12:3; 18:18; 22:18).

What's amazing is that the Bible never tells us exactly why God chose to reveal himself to Abraham. The Bible never answers why God revealed Himself to Abraham and Sarah at an older age. However, we do know that God did not call Abraham because he was a perfect man who impressed God. Abraham was a sinner like all of us. God kept His covenant despite Abraham's proclivity toward deceit. Abraham was called in spite of himself, and for all those who believe as he did, we share in the same grace God poured out on him. This is how God works (Deut. 7:7; Eph. 2:8-10; Titus 3:5). God in His providence saves people like you and me so that we cannot boast in ourselves but rather in Christ's finished work alone (Eph. 2:9).

God in His providence saves people like you and me so that we cannot boast in ourselves but rather in Christ's finished work alone.

GOD'S UNFOLDING PROVIDENCE

As you read Abraham's story, you see that although God told him the end from the beginning, God didn't give him all the details at once. God told Abraham that he would be a great nation, but He didn't say how or when. In fact, God allowed 25 years to pass before He delivered on the beginning of that promise. Within those 25 years, there were significant tests in addition to the pain of prolonged barrenness. There was internal family stress with Lot, Abraham's nephew, and there were numerous mistakes made on Abraham and Sarah's part because of a lack of faith in and patience for God's plan to come to pass.

Yet through all of this, God is glorified and we gain wisdom, warning, and encouragement from Abraham's story. As God's plan unfolded, Abraham experienced heartache, confusion, and pain mixed with joy. There were times when both Abraham and Sarah were tempted to doubt God's promises, but by His grace, they persevered. In the same way, we must learn to persevere when things aren't going the way we anticipate them to go. We know that God has a plan and, as Tony Evans has said, God is taking "what you and I would call luck, chance, mistakes, happenstance and stitching them into achieving His program."²

GOD'S UNSTOPPABLE PROVIDENCE

God promised to make Abraham's name great and to lead him to a new land

that would be for him and his offspring (Gen. 12:2,7). But a lot happened between God's promise and its fulfillment. There were many victories, but there were also many losses, such as the division between brothers, slavery and imprisonment, and disobedience within Abraham's lineage. Yet through the providence of God, everything that God promised came to pass or is still in the process of coming to pass.

God's providence can be seen throughout Abraham's family story but nowhere as strongly as in the story of Joseph. After all that Joseph went through at the hands of his brothers and the Egyptians, he concluded powerfully, "You planned evil against me; God planned it for good" (Gen. 50:20). Joseph's story reminds us that God is for us even when things are at their darkest.

Ultimately, as Christians, we know that God's providence is unstoppable because of the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Ever since the Fall, God has been orchestrating His perfect plan in the face of evil, human sin, and the weakness of His own people. Even against all of these things, God's plan to redeem those who place their faith and trust in Him came to pass. Any time you feel like your life is out of control, remember that in Christ, things are under control because God's providence is unmerited, unfolding, and unstoppable, and God is "behind the wheel."



A PEOPLE PROMISED

+ **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

God established a covenant people through whom He promised to bring blessing to the world.

+ **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Genesis 11:10–20:18

+ **SETTING:**

At this point, the world looked bleak. The people of the earth are still sinful, even after the flood of God's judgment. And now, after Babylon (or Babel), the people of the world are scattered and unable to communicate in a unified language. Will God's image-bearers ever be unified again, or will sin and judgment separate and destroy what God made very good? Enter Abram, a man whom God chose to receive a promise to answer this very question.

DAY 1

READ:

Genesis 11:10-32

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Genesis 11:27-30

NOTES

Over the course of Scripture, God uses people who commit terrible sins for His purposes. Murderers, adulterers, thieves, prostitutes, liars, and many other kinds of sinners cover the pages of the Bible. Not only that, it is easy to find examples of those who have lived terrible lives in our time yet the truth and power of the gospel has transformed their hearts and changed them forever. Still, we sometimes think that only the most elite are used in God's kingdom. We often are tempted to believe that it is those who are eloquent, winsome, charming, attractive, and have good connections that impact the world in Jesus' name.

This, however, is not how God tends to work. Instead, He uses people we would never expect to do His work. God used the family of Abram (likely a pagan idol worshiper; see Josh. 24:2-3) and Sarai (unable to conceive and have a child) to bring forth the nation that would ultimately bring forth the Messiah. Why does He do this? Because God has chosen to use the "foolish" and "weak" people in the eyes of the world to shame the "wise" and "strong" so that no one can even think about boasting in His glorious presence (1 Cor. 1:27-29).

We are all tempted to boast in our own skills and abilities, and we have skills and abilities because God has made us with them. Yet God chooses those who are insignificant and unlikely to bring about great things for His kingdom. The reason He does this is so gracious and kind. He does this so we are not able to boast. If we boast, then we put ourselves in the place of God and try to take credit for something we are not ultimately responsible for. When we boast in God alone, we trust that He is the One in control and He brings about anything that is significant and wise.

In what areas of your life are you boasting instead of recognizing and praising the work of God?

DAY 2

READ:

Acts 17:16-34

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 17:24-27

NOTES

In a monarchy, the queen or king is revered higher than any other person. If you read the lyrics to the British national anthem, you'll see how the people view the monarchy:

God save our gracious Queen,
Long live our noble Queen,
God save the Queen!
Send her victorious,
Happy and glorious,
Long to reign over us,
God save the Queen!

The subjects of England are (at least on the surface) happy to be the Queen's people. They sing the line "Long to reign over us" with booming voices at sporting events or royal weddings. Queen Elizabeth II has reigned for more than 68 years, the longest monarch in England's history and in the top five longest monarchies of all time. Those who are her subjects are so by birth or citizenship. Most of them did not ask to belong to her kingdom or fight their way in. The Queen did not go on any quests to gather more subjects for herself. Rather, she rules the people belonging to her nation. Her subjects seem happy and her reign has been long indeed.

However, we know that there is still disunity, disagreement, crime, and brokenness under the Queen's reign. We know she is not a perfect ruler, nor will she live forever. But God is the true ruler over all. His throne was not made with human hands, nor will His time as ruler ever fade (Acts 17:24-25).

It is this throne of God that will last forever, and He has done the marvelous work of inviting all who trust in Jesus to be members of His kingdom and to reign with Him forever. He began this work with Abram, and He will continue it until all His children are home (Acts 17:26-27).

Why is it important to remember that God is ruler over all?

DAY 3

READ:

Genesis 12

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Genesis 12:1-3

NOTES

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"When Abraham started, he asked no questions concerning how far or to what place he was journeying. He left that all in the hands of God. His faith put its hand inside the hand of its father, and he was content to be led wherever his father would lead him."²

—Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)

Jim Elliot and four other missionaries were martyred in Ecuador on January 8, 1956. These men and their families set their hearts on an unreached people group to bring the message of the gospel to those who desperately needed it. These men knew the risks they were taking and that the Wuaorani people might be hostile to their message. And still they went because, as Elliot wrote, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."¹

The rest of the world likely saw these missionaries' efforts as wasteful and foolish. Why would people risk not only their lives but the lives of their entire families just so some potentially dangerous people might hear an ancient story? Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully, Nate Saint, and Roger Youderian were not fools. They gave up their lives—something none of us can keep forever—and through their sacrifice, their families were eventually able to share the gospel with this tribe, and many souls were secured for eternity.

Sacrificing for God's glory and the salvation of others is never a foolish or wasted action. Abram may not have seen the fullness of God's plan when he left his father's land to obey God, but he did trust that he was not acting foolishly. We can trust that any time we are obedient to God's calling, we will gain something. It may not be riches or fame or anything else we want, but we will certainly gain eternal life with God, which can never spoil or fade. When God asks us to sacrifice something, we can trust that what we will gain will be a far better reward than what we are losing. Our Father knows what we need and what is best. If something hurts to give up momentarily, it will seem as nothing compared to what we gain in Christ Jesus.

Is there anything in your life you would be unwilling to give up if God asked you to sacrifice it, and if so, how can you grow as one who trusts that it is not foolish to give up anything if God asks?

DAY 4

READ:

Galatians 3

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Galatians 3:27-29

NOTES



ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #80: PEOPLE OF GOD

Scripture describes the church as “the people of God” (2 Cor. 6:16). Comprised of both Jew and Gentile, the church is created by God through the atoning death of Christ. The term “church” is used in two senses—of individual local churches composed of people who have covenanted together under the lordship of Christ and of the universal church composed of all believers in Christ in all times. As the people of God, the church seeks to live under God’s ruling care while we are protected and cared for by Him.

In the Marvel movie franchise, Thanos is introduced as the universe’s most powerful and destructive villain. His mission is to obliterate half of all life in order to restore “balance” to the universe. Thanos functions as a sort of anti-God figure. He even sacrifices the only one he has ever loved so that he might achieve his version of salvation. To some, he grants life, but to many, he punishes them with death. Contrary to his perception, there is no mercy, properly defined, involved in Thanos’s plan. He does not look to create a people who love him but demands a people who kneel and die to his stolen power. But the people of the earth do not want Thanos to reign, and eventually a massive army of heroes thwarts his plan.

This harsh, impulsive, selfish power is not at all what the real God is seeking when He creates a people for Himself. God possesses all power in and of Himself. He is not only all-powerful, but He is also loving and merciful. God shows His deep love through Abram, whom we know as Abraham.

God called Abram out from his family and land and promised him an heir, land, and that he would bless the peoples of the earth. Abram believed and obeyed, and all of his descendants receive the benefit, if they too believe. God does not seize the hearts of people by force but rather patiently, tenderly, and graciously shows His love for us, calling us to faith, repentance, and obedience (2 Pet. 3:9). God fulfills His promise to Abram by giving him a son and land, but even more than that, He fulfills His promise by blessing the earth through Jesus, Abram’s promised descendant. Now all those who receive Christ are recipients of the promise given to Abram (Gal. 3:29).

Why is it important that we remember God fulfilled his promise to Abram?

DAY 5

READ:

Genesis 15

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Genesis 15:1-6

NOTES

A broken promise can be one of the most hurtful things anyone can do to you. If you've ever been around children, you know that if they say, "I promise I won't ever do that again," there is a good chance they will not keep their promise. Is it malicious on their end? Maybe sometimes. But more often than not, they simply forget the promises they make. Adults are no different. Think of all the times you've said, "Yes, I promise I'll get that done!" about a project at work or to a friend and failed to do so. Even in marriages, promises that are made on the wedding day are not always upheld. We are not trustworthy people.

When someone makes a promise to us, we want to believe him or her but might be filled with doubt or distrust if we have experienced hurt before. No one on earth has ever kept every promise he or she has made. Whether as a child or as an adult, we are not people of our word, even if we really want to be! Distractions or even unpreventable circumstances that make it impossible for us to keep our promises may come up.

God is categorically different from us in the realm of promise-keeping, and we should be so thankful for this! God has never once broken a promise that He made. Even through seemingly impossible circumstances, God always ensures He will keep His word. Because He is perfect and holy, it is impossible for Him to be something that He is not. This means that He cannot be a liar (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). If God has made a covenant or a promise, it is the most trustworthy, unbreakable, perfect promise ever to be spoken.

What promises of God do you need to believe today, knowing that God will keep His word?

GROUP

NOTES

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"The blessings of God were not restricted to Abram and those who were good to him, but were to flow from him to all peoples on earth. This is the first hint of God's ultimate purpose for Abram and his descendants."³

-Jesudason Baskar Jeyaraj

POINT 1: God chooses to work through unlikely people (Gen. 11:27-30).

God began creating a people for Himself with Abram, an unlikely person from a family of _____ worshipers and a place marked by _____.



Why does God often choose unlikely people to carry out His plans?

Through Sarai's barrenness, we will see that God works through impossible circumstances to bring _____ to the world and _____ to Himself.



What are some ways God has used impossible circumstances in your life to bring Himself glory?

POINT 2: God promises a new people through Abram (Gen. 12:1-3).

God called Abram to leave everything he knew— _____, _____, and his _____ —to follow Him to a new land of promise.



What are some things God has called you to leave behind in order to obey Him in faith?

God's promises are trustworthy: He will bring _____ to the _____ through Abram—a step closer to fulfilling the promise of Genesis 3:15.

POINT 3: God uses imperfect people (Gen. 15:1-6,17).

God grants righteousness to those who _____ in Him. God's people are those with the _____ of Abram.

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #80: PEOPLE OF GOD

Scripture describes the _____ as “the people of God” (2 Cor. 6:16). Comprised of both Jew and Gentile, the church is created by God through the atoning death of _____. The term “church” is used in two senses—of individual local churches composed of people who have covenanted together under the lordship of Christ and of the universal church composed of all believers in Christ in all times. As the people of God, the church seeks to live under God’s ruling care while we are protected and cared for by Him.

NOTES



How can we, as imperfect people, grow in faith and believe that God will keep His promises to us?

MY RESPONSE

Because we are brought into Abram’s family of faith through Jesus Christ, we live as a united people used by God to proclaim the greatest blessing—salvation—to the world.

- **HEAD:** How will you address the areas in your life where you are doubting God or working to earn your salvation instead of trusting in Jesus?
- **HEART:** When you are tempted to sin and disbelieve God’s character and faithfulness to you, how can you remind yourself of God’s trustworthiness and eternal commitment to you?
- **HANDS:** Who in your life needs to hear about the promised Savior, Jesus Christ, and how will you encourage them to have faith in Him?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“Abraham leaned wholly on the promise of God and the God of the promise. We are not saved by making promises to God but by believing the promises of God.”⁴

—Warren Wiersbe (1929-2019)