

The Universal and Particular of Genesis 12:1-3

Genesis 12:1-3 can be understood as the hinge for the book of Genesis. What precedes this passage (Gen. 1-11) is an account of the primeval history, where God is best understood as Creator – creating the cosmos, world, and mankind - and providing for the needs of man to accomplish the mission of cultivating the world around them. This history establishes that God made the world, and He was happy with what He made (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 25, 31).

It also establishes that God gives man a task and mission within His world (Gen. 1:28). Man's mission was to spread the blessing of Eden throughout the rest of the earth. This mission gets frustrated by the sin of Adam and Eve, but not destroyed. We see a glimmer of hope in Genesis 3:15, where God promises that a "seed" of the woman will come and "crush" the serpent's head. The implication of this promise is that the "intruder" of sin and the devil will one day be defeated, and that someone from the lineage of our first parents will be the ultimate victor over a world ruined by sin. We see that man's sin continues to grow, and so God judges the world by sending a flood (Gen. 6), but also calls Noah to be a preservation agent in building the ark and stowing away his family and the animal kingdom to escape the impending danger. While this was a step in the direction of God providing an answer to the problem of the Fall, it was not sufficient, for man's wickedness continued to grow (Gen. 11), and so God would need to provide another answer to the problem of sin in the world.

Enter Genesis 12:1-3, where we have the Creator God taking on the role of Covenant God, as He comes to an aged old man living in Ur, Abram. God comes to Abram and promises him several things: blessing, land, nationhood and children/descendants. All of this is initiated by God, but it is contingent on Abram's obedience; nothing is going to happen if Abram stays put and does absolutely nothing in response.¹ What we have is God establishing a covenant with Abram that will result in a nation as God's treasured possession among the nations. Abram and his descendant/s (Isaac, Jacob; Israel as a nation) were to be the answer to the effects of the fall; they were to become the first installment of renewed human life as they lived in faithfulness to God in the midst of the world.

This installment of renewed human life was not to end with them only in mind. They were to exist for the sake of the whole world of mankind. The covenant establishes a people, and membership in that people carry both a privilege and a responsibility. They were to receive the privilege of being blessed as God's people (which is really the ultimate blessing) in order that they could carry out the responsibility of being a blessing to the rest of the world. They were blessed to be a blessing! The goal, end game, *telos*, of God's covenant with Abram as it is inaugurated in Genesis 12:1-3, which has Abram and Israel being blessed by God, is so that "all the families on earth" (v. 3 – or "all kinds of people) receive the blessing of Abraham – genuine relationship with God (cf. Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:17-18; 26:4; 49:10).

The promises to Abram which would carry down to his descendants involved not only a special, or particular, relationship with God, and all the blessings that entailed, but

¹ This covenant is unconditional in regard to merit; Abram doesn't do and cannot do anything to earn such a relationship. But it is conditional in regard to instrumentality, meaning that Abram won't receive or experience any such blessing unless he responds in faithful obedience to God

a particular promise of land; a geographic location to live out and experience God's blessing as His treasured possession among the nations. But these promises, again, were not an end in themselves; they were also a means to carry out their mission as God's chosen people. That mission was to "bless the nations" (Gen. 12:2), and Israel was to do this by showing off God's goodness, glory, and grace by their lives of devotion to Him in them midst of the rest of the world. Israel was to live their peculiar covenantal life within the presence of a watching world. The privileges they would receive would serve to put them on a stage for all the world to see just how good and great the Creator God of the Universe is to His Covenantal people (cf. Gen. 12:3; 22:12ff).

Later on in Genesis we see that God's redemptive answer to the problem of the fall (Gen. 1-11) would lie yet still somewhere in the future. Gen. 49 speaks with reference to a future "seed" of Judah, who will reign continually ("the scepter not departing from Judah,"). In this way, Genesis is the "headwaters" of the Messianic expectation, which holds out for us the promise that a king out of the line of Judah will be the ruler of God's chosen people, and to him will be brought the obedience of the nations (cf. Gen. 49:10b), reversing, or more properly, correcting the effects of the fall.

Ultimately, we know and see this "seed" is Jesus Christ, who rules over all of God's creation from His Father's throne (Hebrews 1:3-4, 13), and who commissions His covenant people to live out their relationship with Him throughout the world in order to bring them into a right relationship and knowledge of God (cf. Matt. 28:18-20; John 17:1ff).

The bottom line of the Bible, which we see in the context of the Pentateuch, and specifically in Genesis 12:1-3, is that God, the *universal* Creator of all things, chooses a *particular* covenant people, for the sake of affecting the whole world with His redemptive answer to the problem of sin, namely Jesus Christ.