

WHERE GOD'S PURPOSES BEGIN

Genesis 11:10–32 • Pastor Luke Herche

Please turn with me if you would in your Bibles to the Book of Genesis, Genesis Chapter 11 verses 10 through 32 will be our sermon text for this morning. Before I read Genesis, let's pray together:

Our Father, we thank you for the grace that you have shown us in your Son. We thank you that we can gather and rejoice in that, and we thank you for your Word that we can come, that we can hear, that we can listen to what you have to say to us through the Scriptures. And we pray, Father, that you would be with us right now that you would pour out your Spirit on us right now that you would give us ears to hear and eyes to see and minds to understand and hearts to receive all that you have to say to us in your Word. Father, we pray that you would pour out your Spirit on us to those ends. We pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

Alright, Genesis 11, beginning in verse 10:

These are the generations of Shem. When Shem was 100 years old, he fathered Arpachshad two years after the flood. And Shem lived after he fathered Arpachshad 500 years and had other sons and daughters. When Arpachshad had lived 35 years, he fathered Shelah. And Arpachshad lived after he fathered Shelah 403 years and had other sons and daughters. When Shelah had lived 30 years, he fathered Eber. And Shelah lived after he fathered Eber 403 years and had other sons and daughters. When Eber had lived 34 years, he fathered Peleg. And Eber lived after he fathered Peleg 430 years and had other sons and daughters. When Peleg had lived 30 years, he fathered Reu. And Peleg lived after he fathered Reu 209 years and had other sons and daughters. When Reu had lived 32 years, he fathered Serug. And Reu lived after he fathered Serug 207 years and had other sons and daughters. When Serug had lived 30 years, he fathered Nahor. And Serug lived after he fathered Nahor 200 years and had other sons and daughters. When Nahor had lived 29 years, he fathered Terah. And Nahor lived after he fathered Terah 119 years and had other sons and daughters. When Terah had lived 70 years, he

fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren; she had no child. Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran.

Have you ever seen the Pixar film *Up*? Close to the beginning of that movie, there is this four-minute montage that covers about 80 years. It moves from the couples meeting to their marriage. They're starting life together, they're buying and fixing up a house, they're picnicking and dreaming and living life and growing old and getting pregnant and losing the baby and prepping for the future and growing even older. Their dreams die and she dies (and we all start bawling). And in that 4 minutes, we've been brought up to speed for the rest of the movie. There's no words, no dialogue, just music and pictures for four minutes. Well, the montage was a kind of quick, creative way to fill in the gap between the opening scene and the rest of the film and gave us all the information we needed in the quickest way possible. And that is exactly what this genealogy does in Genesis 11. Genealogies, like this one called linear genealogies because they trace one line, they move the story forward quickly, but maintain continuity at the same time. Abraham doesn't drop out of the sky; he's connected with what came before. They create a tether, tying the present to the past as it were. And so, while our eyes glaze over when we come to genealogies like this, they do serve a narrative function. They move this story forward quickly while maintaining continuity; while connecting the present to the past. We're being set up for the rest of the film. And we've been out of Genesis for a few months now, but this section begins a new story, a new part of the story. Really we have two beginnings here, Genesis Chapter 11 verse 10 begins, **These are the generations of Shem**. And Genesis 11 verse 27 begins, **these are the generations of Terah**. You may remember in the Book of Genesis this phrase, "these are the generations of" marks the major divisions of the book. We find the phrase ten times throughout Genesis. Some of them begin major stories of the book. The story of Noah begins with "these are the generations of," and the story of Abraham, and the story of Jacob, and the story of Joseph. Others in between those contain concise genealogies, which act as transitions wrapping up loose ends, or like here, bridging gaps in time to connect the past to the present in the narrative.

So this is the function of such genealogies, though, doesn't mean we can safely ignore them. There are some important things here that are worth noticing. So first, this genealogy follows the story of Babel. Now we talked about Babel many months ago. It's been a while, but the story of Babel was a story of rebellion and curse. But this is the genealogy of Shem. Shem was one of Noah's sons, particularly according to Chapter 9 verse 26, the son who would be most blessed. Shem's name means "name," the very thing those who sought to build the Tower of Babel wanted but failed to get; they wanted the name for themselves, but they failed to do that. There would be a name to be had, but it would come from God's purposes and not man's. So this genealogy tells us that despite the failure of Babel and God's curse on humanity at Babel, God's purposes will continue; God's blessing will not fail. There will be a name exalted above all others.

Second, this genealogy tells us about God's purposes, tells us that God's purposes will continue in another, more subtle way. This genealogy parallels the one found in Chapter 5. Now I won't get into all the ways that that is true, but I want to point out one way in which it is not true. What is missing here is the phrase, "and he died," that's found eight times in Genesis Chapter 5. What's going on? Whereas in Genesis Chapter 5 the death that came from Adam's Sin was being highlighted. Genesis 11 is highlighting the hope that comes from the continued purposes of God despite Babel's sin.

Third, notice that the parallel here between Adam, Noah and Terah. Adam, if you remember, had three sons: Cain, Abel and Seth. One son was cursed (Cain), one son was blessed (Seth). The godly seed, or the godly line, came through Seth. Seth's genealogy in Genesis 5 ends with Noah, who has three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. One son is cursed (Ham), one son is blessed (Shem). The godly seed or line would come through Shem. Shem's genealogy here ends with Terah, who has three sons, Abram, Nahor, and Haran. One son dies (Haran) one son will be blessed. So the godly seed must come through one of them; the narrator is clueing us in, focusing us on these three sons, and particularly one of them. Remember, that is part of what we are doing in Genesis; we're kind of chasing down the seed of the woman who would come and crush the head of the Serpent. You remember that promise from Genesis 3:15 that God would send one, a seed of the woman who would crush the head of the Serpent? And so all throughout the Book of Genesis, we're looking for that one; we're waiting for that child. The writer of Genesis doesn't include every child that he could in this genealogy. I mean, there were millions of people on the planet at this time, but the table of nations in Genesis 10 records just 70. The writer is being selective. He's recording just enough to tell his story. It's not that he's making it up, but like any good historian, he includes only those details that are relevant to his story. Eight times in this genealogy, the writer mentions other sons and daughters, demonstrating the selective nature of the children that he does include. That said, it's no coincidence that he ends these genealogies of Adam and Shem with a father and

his three sons. Each time, we have the beginning of a new era, a new epic. Again, we are being set up for the rest of the story and our expectation should be roused. What will this next stage bring? What is God going to do to fulfill His purposes? And so, with our expectations roused, we turn to verse 27. And as we look at verses 27–32, we will see three things about where God's purposes began in Abraham's day and where they begin in ours, and it's probably not what you expect. God's purposes begin with sinful pasts and painful presents and false starts. God's purposes begin in the broken places. What we will see this morning is this: that that your past, your brokenness, your failure, do not limit you. But the reason is not because you can overcome those things, but because Christ has come to make you whole. Your sinful past, your painful present, your false starts do not limit you because Christ has come to make you whole. God's purposes begin in the broken places, but they do not end there. Which is why wherever we have been and wherever we are, we can continue to have hope.

So first God purposes begin with sinful pasts.

Terah, we are told in verse 28, is from the land of Ur of the Chaldeans. Later, he and his family settled in Haran (verse 31). What is notable about these two places is that they were centers of the cult of the moon god, Sin. Sin was the moon god's name; there's no relation to our English word "sin." Living in those places could be just coincidence. It's a little bit of guilt by association, but it's possible as well that the name "Terah" is actually derived from the Hebrew word for "moon," hence, highlighting the family's reverence for the moon. And the names "Sarai" and "Milcah" of Terah's daughter Sarai (Abram's half sister by the way), and granddaughter Milcah are named after the name and title of Sin's, consort and daughter respectively. Now all of this points to the fact that Terah worshipped the moon god. Terah and all of his family were idolaters. Now Joshua actually tells us this in the book of Joshua, Chapter 24 verse two. He says, **"Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.**" Terah, and by implication Abram his son, worshipped false gods. And this continued to be true of Nahor family. Nahor's son Laban Terah's grandson, who continued to live in Haran long after Abraham came to the Promised Land, we are told in Genesis Chapter 31 that he continued to worship household gods. And here's what all of this means: when God called Abraham, he himself was most likely an idol worshipper. Now it's true the text doesn't explicitly say that. Joshua 24 verse 2 simply says, **your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.** Now that "they" there could include, though it doesn't necessarily have to include, Abraham, but I think it probably does. Most naturally, if Terah was a worshipper of idols, his sons would be as well. But whatever the case, we can say this: Abraham grew up in an idolatrous home. He grew up seeing idol worship. He grew up around false gods. He

grew up in the cult of the moon god, Sin. And this is where God's purposes begin: in the cult of the moon god, Sin.

What I mean is this: God's purposes do not begin with clean, sinless people. God's purposes do not begin with those who knew nothing of idolatry. God's purposes do not begin with the righteous. Remember, Jesus came not for the righteous, but to call sinners to repentance. And this of course is good news. It's good news because none of us are righteous. It's good news because many of us have checkered pasts and skeletons in our closets. We have a record, either literally or figuratively, a record of sin and shame. What's in your past? Do you ever feel like your past defines you? Your family? Your sin? Ways people have sinned against you? Maybe you're embarrassed about your family. Maybe you grew up rejecting Christianity. Maybe you grew up an atheist or a Hindu, or a Buddhist, or a Muslim, or a Mormon, or a Jehovah's Witness. Maybe your college years were filled with sin. Maybe your first 50 years were filled with sin. Maybe you're afraid to even say what is in your past. Well, listen to this: your past is a starting point, not an end point. And your past is God's starting point. He comes to make things whole. You do not need to be limited by your past any more than Abram was. He became the father of the Jewish people. God used him to create a legacy of faith. Now it's true, you and I are no Abraham, but God can still redeem us from our past and do great things in our present, and give us hope of even greater things to come. So God's purposes begin with sinful pasts.

Second God purposes begin with painful presents.

There is a bit of painful drama in these few verses. Verse 28 tells us **Haran died in the presence of his father Terah**. The point being, he died before his father. It's always tragic for a parent to outlive their child. Haran left behind three children that we know of: Lot, Milcah, and Iscah. Nahor marries Milcah, Terah and later Abram take Lot under their care, Iscah we know nothing about. But the real tragedy of these verses is found in verse 30, **Now Sarai was barren; she had no child**. Now, if you know the story, you know that this is a set up for decades of drama. In the ancient world, family, and so children, were everything. Children, as they grew, helped you work your land, and so they grew your wealth. Children created your military and your police, so they protected your family. Children were your retirement plan; when you got too old to work, your children took care of you. And so if you had no children, you would most likely remain poor, vulnerable and alone, especially in your old age. Barrenness could mean being condemned to a lifetime of poverty and oppression without any way out. Now as I said, as Moses writes here, he is setting us up for the story to come. He is foreshadowing the tension in the plot. He wants us to feel a little anxious for Sarai and Abram. What's gonna happen? How will it all work out? What is God going to do?

Well, again, where is your present painful? Where are you unsure of what is going to happen? Where are there things not going according to plan? Where have things not worked "as they should"? Where are things hard and broken and hopeless? Where are you powerless to bring about change for good in your life? Sarai here is powerless. Abraham here is powerless. Things were not going according to their plan. There was no certainty about the future. But that is not the end of the story. Whatever your pain and brokenness and weakness, your weakness does not have to limit you. Which is to say that God works through our weakness by His power. He comes to make the weak strong. He comes to make the broken whole. Wherever you are, that doesn't have to be the end of your story; it can be the beginning. God's purposes begin in the broken places. That is where He meets us. That is where He acts.

God's purposes begin with our sinful pasts and our painful presence, and third, God's purposes begin with our false starts.

By false start, I don't mean that the sports term, I mean this: a false start is an attempt to do something that fails because you're not ready or able to do it. Notice the false start in our passage in Genesis 11:31, Terah took Abram and Lot and Sarai, and they left her to go to Canaan, but they settled in Haran. They made it halfway there. They did not finish their journey. What was going on? At first, I wonder "Why did they leave in the first place, and why was their goal Canaan?" I mean, even though God call to Abraham does not appear in Genesis until Chapter 12, it is clear that chronologically, God first spoke to Abraham while he was in Ur. In Acts Chapter 7 verse 2, Stephen says, **The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.** Stephen is fairly specific: when Abraham was in Mesopotamia before he lived in Haran, then God spoke to him. And so perhaps, God spoke to Abram in Ur, and Abram shared that with his father Terah and his father Terah decided to join Abraham for the journey. Or perhaps God spoke to Abram and Terah. Perhaps Terah too heard God's call to go. Perhaps Terah obeyed that call and left Ur for Canaan. The text tells us that that was their destination; that Terra was headed for Canaan. Somehow, however, it happened, Terah seems on board with God's plan. He has been caught up in the excitement of what God is doing one way or another. Which brings up the other question, why did they stop? I mean, if they began to head to Canaan according to God's call, why get waylaid in Haran? Now, I've already mentioned that this too was a center of moon god worship; that they had worship that was familiar and comfortable so why not settle down? But whose idea was it? Was it Terah's? Was it Abram's? Was it no one's in particular but it just happened? You know how that is sometimes; we don't make a conscious decision to do certain things, but over time, they just kind of happen. You know, few people make a conscious decision that they're going to stop reading their Bible or stop praying regularly, but it happens. You miss one day, you miss another, and next thing you know, you haven't read your Bible in six months. Well, whoever decision it

was or wasn't, Abraham was abandoning the call that God had given him. Within one verse, this small family leaves Ur with Canaan as their intended goal, but settles in Haran instead. Perhaps that was Abraham's idea, perhaps it was his father's; Abraham didn't like it maybe, you know, he didn't like what was happening, but what could he do? He had to honor his father (well, honoring his father in this case would have meant obeying God instead of man). So either Abraham is rebellious or he is simply passive, fearing man more than God. Either way, it's not a good beginning. But of course, it is only the beginning. And God is patient. He doesn't give up on Abraham. He doesn't say "Well, I told you to go to Canaan, you didn't make it. So we're through, that's it. One strike and you're out!" God is patient and He calls Abraham perhaps for a second time in Chapter 12. Abraham's false start is not an abrupt end. By the time we are done with the story, it's barely a bump in the road of his journey.

And so, let me ask you, where have you tried and failed? Where have you begun? And then given up where have you begun to think "This will never change. I've failed one too many times. I have great intentions, but they never seem to work out. I might as well stop trying." When you're in the middle of things, it may seem that false starts are premature endings, but your failure doesn't have to be the end. God's purposes begin with sinful pasts and painful presents and false starts. God wants to do something in the lives of His children and He begins where we are. His purposes are to make us like Christ, to glorify Himself and to give us joy in Him. God wants to make us happy and holy, and He will do that in Christ. He will conform us to Christ's image by the Spirit and give us communion with Christ through the Spirit. But you may lament, "I just don't see how. I mean, look at my sin. Look at my failure. Look at my weakness. Look at my brokenness. Look at my false starts and my empty promises, and my failed attempts. How can I ever get beyond these? How is it that these things cannot define me? How is it that I can see myself my life as more than my sin, and my brokenness and my failure?"

And the answer, of course, is you look at Jesus. Jesus' earthly beginning to most outwardly appeared unremarkable. Born to a poor, unwed mother in Bethlehem. Placed in an animal's feeding trough because the world had no room for Him. But that was not the end of His story. And Jesus' ministry, at times successful in the world's eyes, ended by Him being betrayed by one of His own, abandoned by His friends, denied by one who was closest to Him. He was then falsely accused, tried, condemned, and nailed to a tree. By all appearances, it was a waste. But that was not the end of the story. Jesus on the cross took our sinful past, our record of guilt, upon Himself. He bore our sin in His body, but that was not the end of the story. Jesus bore our painful present, our weakness, our emptiness, our powerlessness on the Cross. He knows what it's like. He's been there. He has experienced helplessness. He has experienced pain, betrayal, rejection, accusation, abandonment. He has experienced life being out of His control, though not out of the Father's control. He has

experienced a time when, humanly speaking, there was no good way forward. But that was not the end of the story. Jesus saw things through to the end. Unlike Terah and Abraham, He did not go halfway for the joy set before Him, He endured the Cross. He obeyed even to the point of death, even death on the Cross. But that was not the end of the story. Jesus took our sinful past. He bore our painful present. He saw things through to the end. He died and then He rose from the dead on the third day. Our past, our failure, our weakness did not limit Him, but God raised Him from the dead and seated Jesus at the Father's right hand in heaven. Our past, our present, our false starts will not limit us in Christ because that is our future: raised and seated with Christ. It is true now, in part, truly and spiritually, we are raised up with Christ and have been seated with Him in the heavenly places, but it will be true in fullness on the last day when we are raised up with Christ to dwell with Him in the new creation forever.

Wherever you have been, wherever you are, however, many false starts you've had, they need not define you. Look to Jesus, trust in Him, know that His power is at work in our weakness, His life in the midst of our death. The one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion on the last day. God's purposes begin with sinful pasts and painful presents and false starts. What will it look like for you to hope that God is at work in the mess; that He is able out of evil to bring good out of pain, to bring joy out of mourning to bring gladness? Maybe you're still skeptical. Maybe you're still wondering how that will all work out. Well, stick around for the rest of the Abraham story. We'll see how God did this for Abraham and how we can do it for us in Jesus.

Let's pray:

Our Father, we thank you that wherever we are, wherever we've been, wherever we are, this is not the end of the story. We thank you that you are at work in Christ and through Christ and by your Spirit. You're at work to draw us to yourself, to make us like Christ, and to glorify your Son fully and finally on the last day. Father, we pray that you would give us a hope in your work and in that last day. We pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.