

Series: **BETWEEN THE TREES - May 2, 2010**

SO. WHAT IS A BLESSING?

Genesis 12:1-3

1. The word **ble**ss, or **ble**ssed, or **ble**ssing is a word that gets thrown around a lot. People use it for everything from having a lot of money and stuff - to something you say after a sneeze. Televangelists say that you will be **ble**ssed if you send them money. People got into confessional booths and say, "**B**less me Father, for I have sinned." It's found in songs - everything from **Ble**ss the Beasts and the Children - to **C**ount Your Blessings Instead of Sheep.

-Everyone who's ever heard the word has at least **some** sense that being blessed is a really good thing. In fact, there is the general sense that, apart from overtly religious meanings (like making the sign of the cross)—everyone **wants** to be blessed. It has this connotation of plenty; of peace and prosperity—of being in a pleasurable, happy, contented, good place in life.

-How many of you would like to be blessed? How many of you have a really, **really** clear picture of what it means to be blessed, and where blessing comes from—and what brings blessing—and what cancels blessing? Well, I'm hoping that I can at **least** add a little clarity to that—for **our** sake, for **your** sake—and for **my** sake!

-My sense is that when God showed up in Abraham's life—4000 years ago, and told him he was going to **ble**ss him, Abraham had a pretty good idea of what that meant, and it was really, **really** good news. Let me reread that for you:

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."
(Genesis 12:1-3 TNIV)

- a. If you look at the original accounts of creation—which Abe would've had--you can see how the word **ble**ss and **ble**ssed was used. God's blessing over creation is for it to increase and fill the earth. God blesses the seventh day—and sets it apart from all the rest so that people can take a break. But God also issues a blessing when he creates humans.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."
(Genesis 1:28 TNIV)

The clearest thing in these records—and all through the Bible—is that **ALL** blessing comes from God. It comes, not because they deserve a blessing—but because God chooses to give it—and loves to bless all of his creation.

b. And I think we understand this concept of blessing.

*When someone says, **God has blessed us financially**—what does that mean? Well, it usually means that a person has prospered financially. They have plenty—more than enough resources to take care of daily life, pay their bills, and put food on the table

*When someone says, **God has blessed our family**—what they usually mean is that their children are healthy—and making good progress in life and not creating too much chaos in the home—**yet!** Everyone seems to be a good, even trajectory.

*When someone says, **God has blessed us with good health**—it means that they haven't suffered any major illnesses—and have the physical strength to do what they need to do and want to do.

*What are you praying for when you ask for God's blessing on a trip? That God will get you there safely with no set-backs--no accidents, no flat tires; that if a guy is driving the car, he will have the humility to ask for directions!

2. When Abraham first heard God's calling to leave his home and relatives—and that God would bless him, make him into a nation—and make him and his descendents a blessing to all people—I'm sure his ears must've perked up. See, he **knew** that God's original blessing on humans was to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. He and Sarah had likely already had their golden anniversary—with no children! And God had said, "I will make you into a nation!"

-You can trace the blessing of God in a variety of ways with Abraham. God's blessing enabled him to prosper. The narratives tell us that he became rich in livestock, silver and gold. In fact, he and Lot became so wealthy they needed space between them and needed to part ways.

-God's blessing also came in the form of protection. At one point Abraham went into battle to rescue Lot and his family—and was victorious. Even though Abraham struggled to trust God—He protect him when they lived in foreign lands. And finally—**finally**—God blessed Abraham and Sarah by giving them the child they longed for. And you can trace the effects of this blessing to Isaac and his family, to Jacob and his family—and right on down to Joseph's life. And the blessing moved horizontally to the people around them--to Laban and his family; to Potiphar's household—right into Pharaoh's palace being managed by Joseph.

-The curse sin had brought made **everything** difficult and hard and painful. It still does. The blessing of God doesn't necessarily make things easy—but it does bring goodness, healing, prosperity. One of the key words in the Bible when it comes to God's blessing is—**shalom**. Shalom is more than peace; it's where **things are the way they're supposed to be**.

-Sin **destroyed** shalom—the peace and cooperation between everything and everyone. God's blessing restores it. When there's shalom, we are at peace with

God, we are at peace with others, we are at peace with ourselves—and we are also at peace, working well with, the land, the marketplace, in all our dealings.

-And this **shalom** isn't something we can work up, demand or earn. Shalom—as in all blessing--comes from God. Something else you notice—and that is that the blessing of God is not like some good luck charm that keeps everything bad away. Remember the story of Joseph from last week? The presence of God with him didn't keep him from the hatred, anger and revenge of others—it came **despite** what others did. God worked so profoundly in his situation—and blessed him so thoroughly—that what others did to him strengthened him and ultimately brought good things—right in the middle of his suffering. And the presence and blessing of God also brought reconciliation to the family—and a place where they could grow into a nation. That's **shalom**.

-One of the key blessings from the Bible—one I use a lot, especially at weddings, **asks** for this.

"May the Lord bless you and protect you. May the Lord smile on you and be gracious to you. May the LORD show you His favor and give you His peace (i.e.—shalom)." (Numbers 6:24-26 TNIV)

- a. Think about that for a minute. This is calling on the God who created **everything**—who created this planet and all the life on it, who holds the past, present and future in His hands—who owns everything, knows everything, and exists **everywhere**—to bless, to bring goodness your way. To protect you from all the things, all the predators **outside** that would try to harm you—as well as the microscopic viruses and bacteria inside that can harm you.

-Imagine what it would be like to have the God of the universe **smile** on your life—and show favor to you? Imagine the One who is the Giver of every good gift noticing you, taking pleasure in you, following you—and giving you the ability to make good choices. **Imagine** that!

-How many of you parents **favor** your children over other people's children? Rightfully so. To **favor** someone means to single them out for a special relationship; to **choose** them and take responsibility for them. When my children were little, I used to kneel by their beds and pray for them—and then tell them, "If I could line up all the little girls in the world—I'd choose **you!** If I could like up all the other boys in the world, I'd choose **you!**"

- b. But this **shalom** blessing goes further. There are a lot of people in this world who have plenty of food; plenty of money; plenty of stuff—in fact, everything they touch seems to prosper. They're beautiful, handsome, sought after. People are lining up saying, "Ooo, choose **me!** Choose **me** as your friend, your companion, your lover!" They have people who protect them, clean up after them, create press releases for them—life seems **blessed!** Then you find out that they **anesthetize** themselves with alcohol or drugs or work or sex.

Sometimes, in their own personal misery, they take their own lives. Why? They appear to be blessed in every way?

-It's because this final part of this blessing is missing. The *shalom* of God. It's having a life that has *meaning* to it. It's having a soul that is right with God—at peace with God. At peace with a past that's been forgiven; at peace with a present that is under the watchful eyes of the One who rules everything; at peace with a future where there's hope and life—if not in this lifetime, then in the Kingdom that is yet to come. It's being at peace with a God who is at work *everywhere* and in *everything*.

- c. That's the blessing God gave to Abraham—and told him to pass on to his family—and then to all the peoples. *That's* what God started with Abraham when he chose a people who would pass that on down through the eons of time. *That's* what the prophecies of the Old Testament said would happen when the Anointed One, the Messiah, would come.
- d. And it's fascinating. Jesus shows up, Son of David, descended from Abraham, the lineage of Judah—and in his very first message, his very first word is...*Blessed!* And it's not to the fortunate, the good-looking, the upright and moral, the religious, the people who, in their own eyes, deserve a blessing because of their performance; it's *Blessed are the poor in spirit*. The spiritual zeroes. The people who are unblessed. The people who have nothing to offer, nothing to give back—no record of doing good and righteous things. The people who have blown through all their opportunities and have only pain to show for it.

-And when Jesus left, he told his little scraggly band of followers to go and bless the world—in concentric circles—starting in Jerusalem and spreading out from there. His final blessing was sending them the Holy Spirit—to actually give them the power to be a blessing.

- 3. Historically, people have sensed that blessing comes from somewhere outside of themselves—from gods or deities—or from the forces of nature. Religion—whether idol worship or something more transcendent—has been an attempt to get the gods or forces of nature to provide abundance, fertility, good luck—i.e., bless them. What they tried to do—and what different forms of paganism still try to do—is work a form of magic to manipulate the gods—or the forces of nature—or the forces of the universe. In general, they viewed these deities as reluctant to give the blessings of abundance, health and fertility—but they believed there were special rituals and sacrifices that would either force a blessing—or avert disaster. All in all, it was a form of *blessing yourself*.

-But the God of the universe—the God we serve—is does *not* respond to magic and rituals. Please get this; God does *not* respond people who are trying to *bless themselves*. And it's impossible to *earn* His blessing—or *manipulate* Him into giving His blessing. It's clear from everything He promised to Abraham and what He proclaimed through Jesus—that He wants His blessing to spread to *everyone*. Now,

this is a **huge** subject—worthy of probably several books. But it does raise some issues.

- a. One of those issues is—why does it seem that some people are **blessed** and others **aren't**—and that sometimes, **good** people aren't blessed, and people who don't even **try** to be good—are?

-Asaph, the author of Psalm 73 had that struggle. He says that seeing people who don't even **think** about God live carefree, painless lives **almost** caused him to lose his footing and defect into bitterness. It grated on him—frustrated him—until he understood that he was just seeing a **tiny** smidgeon of life—and not what came **after** life.

-It's interesting to watch Abraham's family from this perspective. While Abraham and Sarah **agonized** over their infertility for half a century—Lot had two daughters, and his brother had 8 sons! Isaac, the son of the promise was **still** struggling with infertility while Ishmael had **12 sons!** Joseph, who honored God and lived his faith even when it was tough went through **horrible** suffering—**even though God was with him!** His brothers? Apart from Judah, it would appear that they just went on with their lives!

-What you realize, in each of these instances, is that you often only see blessing in the **long** view of things. If the **blessing thermometer** had been used too quickly in any of the lives of Abraham's descendents, it would've been off. And the blessing follows a curious trail; the agony of infertility; the unfavored son—gets blessed; the unloved wife carries the son through whom the ultimate blessing will come.

- b. And that directly relates to the question we sometimes ask ourselves; "Why am I not prospering? Why aren't my kids doing well? Why did God heal them...and not **me?**" Sometimes we tell the stories of people where God quickly answered their prayers; people who struggle with unresolved pain quietly ask, "Is there something wrong with me?"

-Here's the truth; God is God—and He doesn't tell us everything we want to know. God is a person—not a blessing machine. There is no magic involved; there are no secret handshakes or rituals—and God **will** not be manipulated. He works differently—for different reasons--and over differing lengths of time in every single situation. The question He asks is, "Will you trust me? Will you still believe that I'm **good** even if you don't get what you so desperately want? -But He **is** inclined toward blessing—and we are the heirs of the same promises that were made to Abraham. Listen to what Paul, an early church leader, said:

Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Galatians 3:8-9 TNIV)

- c. One more thing. There is no blessing without faith and obedience. Jesus Christ has made the blessing of **His Kingdom** available to **all people**. The blessing comes through the forgiveness Jesus made possible by dying for us. The blessing comes through **faith** in God's Son, Jesus.

-That's important to know—because, see, there are a **lot** of people trying find a blessing in life without Jesus. You can't bypass Jesus and the life He calls His people to and find your own blessing. The **Good News** is that Jesus has defeated Satan and death—and offers His power and leadership and grace to **everyone** who will follow!

-There **is** ultimately no blessing without walking in God's way. I'll tell you why; the way of rebellion and disobedience—which screwed everything up in the first place—is under the curse and wrath of God. God is God and his ways are perfect and right—and any **other** way destroys what it touches.

4. There's one final piece. I want you to notice that Abraham wasn't just called to be a recipient of God's blessing. To be a kind of giant bowl to collect all of God's blessings in. He was commanded by God, the giver of all these blessings, to **be a blessing**. In fact, to **bless all peoples**. To pass on the blessings he had received. Somehow the nation God created through Abraham somehow never got never got the fact that they weren't just a giant **container** for God's blessings; they were intended to be like this teapot—live with a spout!

-The tragedy is—that instead of carrying the blessings of the God who had formed them, cared for them—and blessed them—they actually started worshipping false Gods—and feeling superior to others. This wreaked havoc—and eventually brought the punishment of God on their entire nation.

-Jesus is the One through whom **all peoples** on this planet are blessed. Through **Him** God takes the curse of sins off of our lives; through **Him** we are transformed. And because of **Him**-- the Spirit of God takes up residence in us. And there is no excuse for us **not** being a blessing—not with the One who raised Jesus from the dead living inside us!

- a. Please hear me this morning; if you want the blessing, the smile and the **shalom** of God on and in your life—and shown **through** your life, there's only one way. It's through Jesus, the Jewish Messiah—the Son of God. Jesus said that Heavenly Father gives sunlight to both the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust. It's simply an act of love.

-But forgiveness? Peace? Eternal life? Power to change? The joy and grace of living? They only come through Jesus—and his sacrifice on the cross to take the curse our rebellion brought to everything. If you want the curse of sin removed from your life—Jesus is the only way. Have you ever received Him? Have you ever just stopped trying to bless yourself and earn God's favor—and received the kingdom Jesus came to bring—with it's grace and kindness and power and healing and life. Have you ever chosen to follow Jesus and live His way?

-See, we are now the heirs of Abraham's original blessing—but it **doesn't just happen!** You have to **choose** it—and, just like Abraham, receive it by faith.

- b. Does God want us to enjoy His blessings—all the goodness and fullness of life? Of **course** He does! Every good thing we enjoy ultimately comes from Him!

-How many of you have ever enjoyed the beauty of being on one of the gorgeous lakes we have here in Canada on a summer day?

-Has anyone here ever been really, really sick—and through medical intervention—or the healing power of God begun to feel well again—and sense life and energy come back into your body?

-Music is an **amazing** gift! Anyone ever heard a song that really moved you—and thanked God for the gift of music?

-Has anyone here ever had your heart filled with shame and regret and sadness—and experienced the **amazing grace**—and the sheer exhilaration of forgiveness? Or have you ever had someone you've **really** hurt—simply...**forgive you!**

-Has anyone here ever been filled with anxiety and dread about the future—and turned it over to God and found this amazing, inexplicable peace wash over you—and the worry just drain out of you?

-Has anyone here experienced the birth of a child—and felt this sense of awe and holiness and wonder in the middle of all the chaos and crying and stainless steel? Of course, that child grew up, turned 14, and the wonder **totally** disappeared!

-These are **all** just a few of the blessings of God. He gives them because He loves us! He gives them because He is a **good** God—and because He is a God of abundance, not scarcity. He doesn't have to cheat anyone else to bless us! He gives them because He has blessed creation; because He is a Good Father—and loves to give good gifts to His children!

- c. But here's the deal. If you make it your goal in life to **be blessed**—to grab the blessings and run, it will make you selfish—and sick. It's a form of idolatry. See, blessings were **never** intended to be hoarded. And that brings us to one **final** blessing I haven't mentioned. It's the **blessing** of making a difference. Of giving. Jesus said, **It's more blessed to give than to receive.** If we think our only calling is to just be kind of an empty bowl and **receive—stockpile** all the blessings of God—then we've missed the point.

-Remember the teapot? God **gives**—pours blessing after blessing into our lives—so we can **bless** others—not so we can just be rich, successful, happy, forgiven, healthy and filled with peace until we finally get scooped up to Heaven.

-Read Abraham's promise; he was **commanded** by God to **be a blessing.**

And if we inherit this blessing because of Jesus' sacrifice—we also inherit the calling. **Be a blessing.** What did Abraham's blessing mean to him? Well, it meant a blessing on his resources. He prospered. He had plenty. When you read through the Bible, it becomes clear that part of the command to be a blessing means sharing what we have with others in need. In fact, on numerous occasions it's specifically stated, **You will be blessed IF you do this!**

-This call to bless others with what we've been given, friends, is **all through the Bible!** God is generous—not stingy—so the blessing is on our generosity; our looking for ways to help others. To make sure they have food and clothing and shelter. I think we could be a blessing to a **lot** of people by doing that!

- d. How many of you are glad for the blessing of fairness; the blessing of living in a country where people can't just take advantage of you because they **feel** like it? It's a **blessing**—and we are simply called to look out for others in a way that we hope and pray someone would look out for us. Being a blessing to the people of this world means engaging—doing what we can in the places of our world where evil and injustice and unfairness rule—and bringing hope. Doing all we can to stop the mistreatment and racism and oppression. That's what it might mean for us to **be** a blessing—and live out our calling.
- e. One of the focal points of Jesus' life was the way He healed people. There were days when that's **all** He did. How many of you think that if Jesus were walking this planet, he would still care about the diseased? The kids who die from preventable diseases? The scourge of AIDS and malaria and TB? Well, I think He would. And he would also care for those who lives and hearts have been broken by life.

-As His people—called to **be a blessing**—we can't just ignore those needs—and bask in the wonder of free health care, can we? We can **enjoy** the gift of good health—and then pass it on.

- f. But it goes deeper than that. If we help people find help and warmth and wholeness and enough to eat—and fairness, those are **all** good things. But they need something else that is **very** important. They need the Good News that Jesus' kingdom is here. **Right now!** That through Jesus, God offers life and hope and forgiveness and peace and eternity to every heart. If a person has all their needs met—and misses this—they have ultimately missed **everything!**

-But the Good News of Jesus is best carried—like Jesus carried it—along the lines of compassion and generosity and healing. Practical love—love and blessing in action—help people to understand the Good News.

Q & A

5. Friends, the calling on our lives as followers of Jesus—devoted to Him and His Mission in this world—moves us **way, WAY** beyond our open, cupped hands—to

actually **being** the Good News, to **bless** others. That's what Jesus was like. That's what His earliest followers were like. Our world doesn't usually see Jesus' followers as **Good News**? One bumper sticker put it quite crudely; **Jesus loves you, but everyone else thinks you're an...** I can't actually use the word here, but it refers to a part of the body south of the equator in the eastern hemisphere. Tragedy, eh?

-But you can tell who has a true honest dose of the Spirit of Jesus—because they have this generous, healing, loving, compassionate influence wherever they are. There are people who, when you're with them—are **Good News** to be around. When they're in a neighborhood—they're a blessing; in other words, they are **Good News**. People who live next door to them feel blessed to have them as neighbors. People who work in the same office with them would say, "It's **Good News** that they're here. I **look forward** to being with them!"

-These are people who, when they get hurt—don't bite people's heads off. They don't need to win every argument, throw the last knife, get the last word. They forgive. These are people who don't power up on you, or act superior to you, or promote themselves—they're Good News to be around. These are people who don't flip out in tough times; they spread peace. People **want** to be them with when things aren't going well—they're a blessing.

-There are people whose first thought **isn't** about themselves; it's about kindness and goodness. They're a **living representative** of the Good News. A blessing.

-We said, at the beginning of TOB, that we wanted to be one of our community's greatest assets. Imagine an army of people—who spread out into the GTA and beyond every week—who take their calling to bless—to be **Good News**—as seriously as their desire to **be blessed**?

-I am **called** to bless and be a blessing—**Good News!** Not just when I'm on duty—all the time. You are called to bless—be Good News—wherever you go. We both have the power—through the Spirit of Jesus—to **be** that. The question is—will that actually be **true** of me...or you?