# Blessing and Faithfulness in Genesis: John Goldingay

“Write something on being faithful and becoming a blessing in the Old Testament,” Paulus said, “because that’s Janti’s theme for her retirement service.” For me, another reason would be that Janti was an embodiment of faithfulness and blessing to me and my family. Janti and Paulus arrived in the United States at the same time as my wife Ann and me. Ann was wheelchair-bound and couldn’t do anything for herself; I needed someone to help me care for her. Janti was that person for four years. I thank God every time I think of her.

## Blessing

Blessing is a recurrent theme in the first part of Genesis, the story of the word’s origins. It’s then also a key theme in the second part, the story of God’s dealings with Abraham and his family.

### Blessing as God’s Creation Purpose

Blessing is one of the first things that God does in the Scriptures. On the Thursday of his week’s creative work, the first object of his blessing is the sea creatures and birds: “God blessed them, saying: Become fruitful and become many, fill the water in the sea; and birds are to become many in the earth” (Genesis 1:22; the scriptural translations in this article are mine). On the Friday, the second object is the human beings: “God blessed them, and God said to them: Become fruitful and become many, fill the earth and subdue it” (1:28). God’s blessing works by means of words that change the things or people he is speaking to. Blessing someone is like appointing them to a position, or forgiving them for something wrong they did to you, or firing them from their job: the words change the person. What God’s blessing does is convey the capacity to be fruitful.

At the beginning of Genesis, we may perhaps assume that God also blesses the land animals earlier on the Friday, but the story is hastening on to the creation of humanity. Subsequently, there is one more creation blessing: “God blessed the seventh day and made it sacred” (2:3). In some way blessing must now have different connotations. In the Scriptures, it is more or less invariable that the object of blessing is someone or something alive. Blessing conveys fruitfulness, and only things that are alive can be fruitful. By blessing, God gives over something of his own life-giving capacity. Perhaps the implication of the words about Saturday is that God makes the Sabbath fruitful, which is a suggestive idea. On the Sabbath you do nothing, and consequently it is fruitful! But God does not go on to tell the Sabbath that it is to be fruitful (as he does the creatures and the human beings), and the implication may be different. Later in Genesis (24:48), Abraham’s servant blesses God, and the Psalms often bless God. Presumably we are not making God fruitful. “Bless” there means “praise” (which is the NIV’s translation in a passage such as 24:48 and in the Psalms). Perhaps what God is doing on the seventh day is praising the Sabbath.

As the theme of blessing recurs in the chapters that follow, it interweaves solemnly with the theme of cursing.

1:26, 28 God blesses fish, birds, human beings 3:14, 17; 4:11 snake, ground, Cain are cursed

5:2 God blesses humanity 5:29 God curses the ground

9:1, 26 God blesses Noah and Shem 9:25 Canaan is cursed

Cursing is the opposite of blessing. The implication is not that it takes away fruitfulness. It does bring another kind of fruitfulness, a negative kind, as it issues in hostility, thorns and thistles, toil, and servitude. Curse comes by God’s will, yet it is not an activity that is as natural to God as blessing. When the verb “bless” occurs, God is each time the subject. God is the one who blesses. When the word “curse” occurs, only once is God the subject (and then it is Lamech who says so: maybe he is not right!). God is not by nature one who curses. God is not equally balanced between blessing and curse. Curse is his strange, alien work, as Isaiah says that acting in anger is his strange, alien work (Isaiah 28:21). He can do it, but doesn’t come naturally to him. Blessing is what comes naturally to him.

I should note one other statement that God makes in the context of the blessing of Noah: “I will never again put down the ground because of humanity” (8:21). English translations use the word “curse” here, but it is a different word, one that carries the double connotations of the English expression “put down.” You can put people down by your words and by your actions. But God takes up this verb only to say he won’t do it.

Nevertheless, the anxiety-making question raised by Genesis 1 – 11 is whether blessing or curse is going to win out in the end.

### The Promise of Blessing

With Genesis 12 we get the answer to that question as God says to Abraham:

Get yourself off from your country,

from your homeland, and from your father’s household,

To the country that I will let you see,

and I will make you into a big nation.

I will bless you and make your name big—

and be a blessing!

I will bless the people who bless you,

and the person who puts you down I will curse.

They will gain a blessing through you—

all the families on the land. (12:1 – 3)

Back at the beginning God had implemented his purpose to bless the world, to make it fruitful. His purpose had been partly frustrated in Act One of the story, in Genesis 1 – 6, and that had eventually led to the great deluge. It had been partly frustrated again in Act Two, in Genesis 6 – 11, and that had eventually led to the scattering of peoples. But God has not given up on his purpose. He has tried Plan A and Plan B; he will now try Plan C. He will take one family and bless them, make them spectacularly fruitful, in such a way that the whole world will be affected.

There are some subtleties and some ambiguities about God’s promise. God’s words demand close attention, and require people to keep thinking about their implications. First, there is a fact from the previous chapter in Genesis. Abraham is married to Sarah, and Sarah has not been able to have children. So God chooses this man to bless, which means to make him fruitful, to turn him into a big nation. But his wife can’t have children! It’s as if God likes making things difficult for himself. But how impressive then is the result, even by the end of the Genesis story: at the beginning of Exodus, “the Israelites were fruitful, they swarmed, they became many, they became very numerous” (Exodus 1:7). God has brought about a fulfillment of his intention in Genesis 1.

Second, there is that phrase “be a blessing.” It’s a command. But it’s the kind of command that is a veiled promise or encouragement or invitation, as is the case when someone says, “Come and have dinner!” So the NIV translates it loosely, “and you will be a blessing.” And it’s a command that indicates God’s purpose. So the NRSV translates it loosely, “so that you will be a blessing.”

There’s a hymn in which we pray:

Make me a blessing, make me a blessing,  
Out of my life may Jesus shine;  
Make me a blessing, O Savior, I pray,  
Make me a blessing to someone today.

And one can see how Abraham became a blessing to people, when he rescued Lot after he had been kidnapped, and when he prayed for Sodom (Genesis 14; 18). Yet Genesis doesn’t actually say that he was being a blessing when he did those things. The implications of God’s saying “be a blessing” likely come out more when God goes on to say that people “will gain a blessing through you.”

Admittedly, it’s also not immediately obvious what that means, but it becomes a bit clearer later when God repeats his promise to Abraham and reworks the wording slightly. Instead of saying people “will gain a blessing through you,” he says they “will bless themselves through you” (22:18; if you know any Hebrew, the first version has a niphal verb, this one has a hitpael verb). “Bless themselves” is a striking expression. It means praying for blessing for yourself. So if people bless themselves by Abraham, it suggests that Abraham has become a standard of blessing or an embodiment of blessing. God’s blessing of Abraham will be so spectacular that people will pray to be blessed in the way Abraham was blessed. In that form of words, God clarifies how people will gain a blessing through Abraham. And he also clarifies how Abraham will be a blessing. He will become a prayer.

There’s one more (double) element in God’s original promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1 - 3. People will bless Abraham. Again, there may be more than one implication in that idea. Perhaps people will pray for him to be blessed. Perhaps they will be a blessing to him in the sense that we use the expression in English—they will be thoughtful and accepting and committed to him. Perhaps they will bless him in the sense of praising him. Whichever it is, God promises that it will rebound on them: they will then find that they are blessed in the same way.

On the other hand, Abraham may find that some individual or other “puts him down.” Genesis again uses that other word that can be translated “curse” but that means cut down to size, in words or in actions. Rather positively, whereas God imagines a number of people blessing Abraham, he envisages only the odd individual putting Abraham down. After all, they would have to be stupid. When you see that Abraham is blessed, it would be much more sensible to make Abraham your standard in praying for your own blessing. But some individuals are stupid, and they will try to put Abraham down, and God promises that it will backfire on them. God will put them down. God is promising Abraham a protected life and inviting Abraham to live in the confidence of that promise of blessing. (God will not use either the word “curse” or the word “put down” again in Genesis, though Isaac will use the first word when he reformulates God’s promise as a prayer in 27:29, and Jacob will use it in connection with the violence exercised by two of his sons in 49:7, while the word “put down” will feature in the stories of Sarah and Hagar and of Jacob and Rebekah in 16:4 – 5 and 27:12 – 13.)

Not only has God’s promise of increase found spectacular fulfillment by the beginning of Exodus. Without using the word blessing, in effect the exodus story tells of how the promise of blessing for the nations finds immediate expression in the recognition of Moses’s God by his Midianite father-in-law, who blesses God (Exodus 18:1 – 10), and in the way an ethnically-mixed group joins Israel in escaping from Egypt (Exodus 12:38). The foreign prophet Balaam blesses Israel and individuals such as Rahab the Moabite and Ruth the Canaanite are representative foreigners who come to share in that blessing. In praying for a king like Solomon, Psalm 72:17 asks, “May people bless themselves by him, all nations count him fortunate!” Late in Old Testament times, the Edomites (who have been threatened with annihilation) come to acknowledge Israel’s God. And Israelites who have become forced migrants all over the known world meet to worship their God, and they attract Gentiles (the “God-fearers”) to join. Many of them in due course experience “Abraham’s blessing” when it comes to Gentiles through the gift of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3).

## Faithfulness

The Old Testament has several words that overlap with the English word “faithfulness.” I am going to use the words truthfulness (to translate *sedaqah* and related words), trustworthiness (to translate *emet* and related words), and commitment (to translate *hesed*).

### Faithfulness as Truthfulness or Doing the Right Thing in Relation to People

There are no references to God’s faithfulness in Genesis 1 – 11, though one could certainly say that God shows his faithfulness there in persisting with the world when it has forfeited any right to his faithfulness. He shows his faithfulness in staying true to the world, in showing commitment to the world, and in doing the right thing by the world in light of his commitment to it. But the only actual reference to faithfulness comes in the Noah story, when it is predicated of Noah. Whereas the world was characterized by violence and wrongdoing, “Noah was a truthful man, a person of integrity in his generation” (6:9; cf. 7:1). English translations have Noah being a “righteous” man, which is true, but it doesn’t capture the essence of the word. The English word “righteousness” points to someone’s personal uprightness, whereas this Old Testament word points to living rightfully and truthfully in relationship with God and with other people, to doing the right thing by God and by other people.

In Genesis a spectacular example of this connotation of the word comes in the story of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar (38:1 – 30). After the death of his first son, Er, and his second son Onan, Judah has failed to keep his promise to allow his third son, Shelah, to marry Er’s widow, Tamar. It is a convention in many traditional societies, to make it possible for them to have a son who would in effect count as Shelah’s, would keep his name alive, and would look after Tamar in her old age. So Tamar pretends to be a prostitute, Judah goes to see her, and she gets pregnant and exposes him. It convicts Judah, who declares, “she is more truthful then me” or “she is the truthful one, not me.” In being engaged in the sex trade she has not been righteous in the English sense, but she has done the right thing by Shelah in getting Judah to make it possible for her to have a child who will count as Shelah’s (actually two, it will turn out, one of whom will be an ancestor of Jesus).

Noah’s world is one in which relationships have broken down, as the Cain and Abel story shows straight after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden, and it is a world full of violence (6:11, 13). Noah is the one exception to this rule, the one person who is truthful in his relationships and does the right thing by people, the one person of integrity (6:9). For this second expression, English translations traditionally have “blameless,” but that translation is misleading. The word (*tamim*) does not suggest the absence of any faults, as if Noah were sinless. It suggests the positive presence of a quality of moral wholeness and honor (it’s closer to righteousness, in fact). Because he is characterized by truthfulness and integrity, Genesis goes on, Noah can “walk with God.” Obviously you can’t do that if you are a person who lets people down in your relationship with them, if you are someone God can’t trust.

God’s own faithfulness in the form of truthfulness comes into focus in Abraham’s prayer for Sodom (18:23 – 28). God has heard terrible cries from Sodom. To judge from what follows, the cries may come from the people around who are the victims of Sodom’s trading domination, inequity, and self-indulgence. God has to respond to such cries, but he checks things out before he takes action, and he is on his way to investigate the accusations. He tells Abraham what he is planning, on the basis of his intention to bless Abraham and make his people numerous. The logic is that this intention also entails Abraham having some responsibility for truthfulness in the way authority is exercised (what English translations call “righteousness and justice”; 18:19).

Ironically or amusingly, but tellingly, God’s informing Abraham about his plan leads Abraham to ask questions about the plan. If “prayer” is the appropriate description of what follows, then it provides a significant description of what prayer means: it involves asking God questions. Is God really going to annihilate Sodom? What if there are some truthful, faithful people there? Picking up God’s own words to him, Abraham points out that the God who has authority in the world has to exercise that responsibility in a faithful, truthful way. (God of course knows that, as he knows what is going on in Sodom without coming to have a look, but that fact doesn’t stop him involving himself in the world by coming to have a look rather than staying in the heavens, and it doesn’t stop him hanging about to invite Abraham into a conversation about the question of truthfulness and faithfulness.)

No, God replies, if there are just ten truthful people there, he won’t destroy the city. But there are not. Abraham’s challenging question to God recurs later on the lips of the king of Gerar, who implicitly contrasts his own people’s faithfulness with some economy over the truth on Abraham’s part (20:4). And for all Jacob’s earlier deceptiveness and his later cunning in his relationship with Laban, Jacob claims to have shown truthfulness in his work relationship with him (30:33: English translations have “honesty”).

### Faithfulness as Trustworthiness

In response to the king of Gerar’s confrontation, Abraham Ironically goes on affirm that in all “trustworthiness” Sarah actually is his sister (20:12—that is, his half-sister). And God has commented on the fact that she has in effect questioned whether in all “trustworthiness” she is going to get pregnant (18:13).

Genesis has already brought together trustworthiness and truthfulness in a spectacular and unequivocally positive way. Given that Sarah can’t get pregnant, Abraham himself also can’t see how God is ever going to fulfil his promises (15:1 – 3). God affirms that Abraham really is going to have a son, and invites him to go outside and look at the stars. They might be very bright and numerous in a Middle Eastern sky. And that’s how many descendants Abraham is going to have. “And he trusted in Yahweh, and he counted it to him as truthfulness” (Gen 15:6).

The word “trust” is clear enough. It’s the verb linked to “trustworthiness,” one of those words for faithfulness. It indicates that Abraham believed in, trusted in the outrageous promise that God has reaffirmed in a spectacular, high definition form. He has treated God as trustworthy. The verb will come twice more in Genesis, when Joseph needs to establish whether his brothers are trustworthy (42:20; cf. 42:16) and when Jacob can’t believe that they are trustworthy in telling him that Joseph is still alive (45:26).

But there is an aspect of the statement about Abraham’s trust that must make readers think. “He counted it to him as truthfulness” Who is the “he” who does the counting, and whose truthfulness does the statement refer to? Paul assumes that God is counting Abraham’s trust as truthfulness or faithfulness or righteousness (Romans 4:3). It is because Abraham trusts in God (rather than because he does something for God or for other people) that God sees him as right with God. That fits with the way Genesis also thinks. As the Noah story shows, it’s important that people live faithful lives if they want to walk with God. But the thing that starts them off on that life of faithfulness is God’s reaching out to them and their trusting in God.

But one can just as easily understand Genesis to be saying that Abraham is doing the counting: he is counting God’s promise as an expression of God’s truthfulness or faithfulness or righteousness. That also fits the way Genesis thinks.

Maybe it doesn’t matter which conclusion we come to: both ways of understanding the text work. Augustine once said that the test of good interpretation was whether it encouraged love of God and/or love of one’s neighbor (see *On Christian Doctrine*, Book I, chapter 36). Both interpretations could pass that test.

Either way, however, what on earth now made Abraham trust in God’s promise? Old Testament stories, like movies and television programs, sometimes give readers a summary and then follow up with the details on how things had happened, and Genesis 15 works that way. The continuation of the story (15:7 – 20) tells how God commissioned Abraham to engage in a ritual that is another aspect of the way things can work in a traditional Middle Eastern culture. If you want to get people to take your promise seriously, you tear an animal in half, walk between the halves, and pray that you will be torn apart like the animal if you break your promise. God engages in that ritual. That’s what convinces Abraham and makes him affirm that God is trustworthy.

### Faithfulness as Commitment

The person who talks most about trustworthiness is Abraham’s servant who goes off to find a wife for Isaac. He is also the person who talks most about commitment. For this word (*hesed*)translations use a variety of expressions, such as steadfast love, lovingkindness, goodness, kindness, and mercy. But commitment is the nearest equivalent. The word comes again and again in the Psalms. In Genesis, it is the quality God shows to Joseph in giving him favor with his jailer (39:21) but the quality Joseph looks for in vain from a fellow-prisoner (40:14).

The Old Testament uses this word in two connections. Lot uses it first, and puts us on the track of one of the two aspects of its meaning (19:19). He speaks of the way God’s supernatural aides (his “angels,” as English translations put it) who rescued him from Sodom have shown him favor or grace and also have shown him commitment. In other words, they had no obligation to Lot and he had no right to expect anything from them—so the rescue issued from grace or favor. And this grace or favor expressed itself by their commitment in action. Commitment, then, can denote an act of generosity or magnanimity that someone undertakes when they were under no obligation. In this sense, commitment does not presuppose any existent mutual relationship. It’s just an amazing free act.

Commitment can also denote an act that presupposes a relationship but goes beyond anything anyone could have expected, in the magnitude of what it does or in the extent of time that it operates or in its ignoring the fact that the other person has forfeited any right to any faithfulness. In other words, it is an extreme form of faithfulness. The word for commitment may thus appear in association with the word for faithfulness that suggests trustworthiness and keeping one’s word (32:10 [11]). I’m not worthy of it, Jacob acknowledges, but please show it anyway. On his deathbed Jacob asks Joseph for that kind of commitment and trustworthiness in seeing that he gets taken back to Canaan so he gets buried in the promised land (47:29). Abimelek challenges Abraham to act with commitment rather than being deceptive and not keeping his word (21:23). Abraham uses the word in this sense when he asks Sarah to show commitment to him in pretending to be just his brother and thereby imperiling her sexual integrity (20:13).

But it is Abraham’s servant who talks most about this faithfulness that takes the form of a commitment that goes beyond anything that one could have asked for as a right, as well as about trustworthiness (24:12, 14, 27, 48, 49). Abraham commissions his servant to get a wife for Isaac from back home in Aram rather than from among the Canaanites. It is a really responsible commission; the fulfillment of God’s promise depends on it, the promise with implications not just for Abraham’s immediate family but for the nations that are designed to find blessing through Abraham. So the servant needs God to show trustworthiness and commitment – not so much towards him as towards his master. And he does.

## Conclusion

People in Indonesia and Britain and the United States: we have all come to see the fulfillment of God’s purpose to bless the nations. We live our lives in the context of God’s blessing. And we live our lives in the context of an assurance that God will complete his intention to bless Abraham’s people and to bless the nations. Further, we live our lives in the context of the God of Israel being one who is faithful in the sense of being truthful and trustworthy and who keeps his commitments. And we accept a calling to mirror him: to be truthful and to be trustworthy and to keep our commitments.

One could make links between blessing and faithfulness. God is faithful in pursuing his intention to bless, or God blesses because he is faithful. Genesis doesn’t make that point, though it would be a logical one. We need to be faithful if we want to see God’s blessing. Genesis doesn’t make that point, and there is something in it, but it could be more dangerous. God blesses because that is his nature, not because we earn it or deserve it. Indeed, most of Genesis works with the opposite implication: God blesses despite the fact that people are not faithful. Fortunately for us, “if we are faithless, he remains faithful, because he cannot deny himself” (2 Timothy 2:13): it is his nature!

There is another link that Genesis doesn’t make but that we could safely make: because God blesses and because God is faithful, we are faithful in response to God—faithful to God, and faithful to one another.