

BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

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CALLED TO BE A BLESSING

Genesis 12:1—9

By John Ebert

“Nothing is really lost by a life of sacrifice; everything is lost by a failure to obey God’s call.”
Henry Parry Liddon

“Greatness in the kingdom of God is measured in terms of obedience.”
John Stott

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AIM OF STUDY

- To learn that God can bless the world through ordinary people who trust in Him.

KEY VERSE

“You will be a blessing...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”
Genesis 12:2b and 3b

PREPARATION

The authors suggest you read over the notes on “How to Teach the Bible in Small Group” and “Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual* if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Then, before you read over the Scripture text, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then read through the passage keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, read through the Bible study below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. **Therefore, use this Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means, you will need to**

- Go over the questions and **choose** which ones you want to emphasize and which you will eliminate since your time is limited.
- Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (*). Rather than leaving all of these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives.
- Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could **summarize** some of the passage and then go to the final questions.
- Select **one application question** you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to put into practice should be the focus of your final question.
- Feel free to suggest that your group **continue** a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. You want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don’t feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!
- Also, you may want to create your own introduction by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members’ thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We

highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

PREPARATION RECOMMENDATION

All leaders need to bring to the small group meeting resources listing opportunities to participate in or partner with the missions work of our church. If you already support or engage in missions work endorsed by our church, then you or someone in your group should bring current news from your missionary, along with a map, a list of prayer requests, information on how to support them financially, etc. If your group has not yet “adopted” some type of mission work, bring a list of our church’s short and long-term mission projects as well as ways to participate in them. You may find this information in a current issue of *The Mix*, our magazine, or on our website. For more specific details, contact the Administrative Assistant of the Missions Ministry.

OPENER

In February of 1885, seven young men sailed from England to China. They were known as the “Cambridge Seven” because through evangelistic meetings at that university, and the workings of the Holy Spirit in these men, they all responded to God’s call to serve as missionaries to the Chinese people. Among the seven was a Cambridge graduate and England’s most famous cricket player, Charles Thomas Studd. [He would have been as well known and respected as the USA’s Michael Jordan in the sport of basketball or Mohammed Ali in the realm of boxing.]

Charles, often called “C. T.,” came from a wealthy English family. When his father was converted, he began to pray for and work on his sons as well. A preacher visiting their home confronted C. T. about his salvation, and led him to Christ. But six years went by in which C. T. was only nominally involved in Christian circles. C. T. and his two brothers did well in school and were all outstanding cricket players. But when his brother George became deathly ill, C. T. wondered, “What is all the fame and flattery worth...when a man comes to face eternity?” He realized that living for the things of this world would not last and that living for eternity was all that mattered.

He began witnessing fervently and helped his other brother organize students for missions. Finally, after hearing the needs of the Chinese people and being stirred by the Holy Spirit, C. T. offered himself as a candidate to Hudson Taylor, the pioneer and director of the China Inland Mission. Before leaving England, C. T. and the other six men spoke at meetings all over England and Scotland seeing people not only converted to Christ but also get swept up in enthusiasm for missions.

While serving in China, C. T. turned twenty-five and under his father’s will, inherited a great deal of money. Before he even knew the exact amount, C. T. decided to give it all away. He donated some to George Mueller’s orphan work, some to Dwight Moody whom he’d heard speak, and some for missions. When he learned what he still had left, he gave the final portion to his fiancée shortly before their wedding. She joined him in believing that God would provide for them, and gave that final sum away as well.

For ten years, C. T. served in China until his health forced him to return to England. He spoke at student meetings and in a few years sailed with his family to South India to pastor for six years. There he saw many conversions among the British officials and local residents. Then, once again returning to England for health reasons, C. T. felt called to serve in Africa. Without the doctor's approval, without support from his previous mission board, and without funds, he managed to travel there and worked from 1910 until his death in 1931.

Shortly before his death he wrote a letter home saying, "My only joys therefore are that when God has given me a work to do, I have not refused it."

C. T. Studd and fellow missionaries all had several things in common: a willingness to surrender their entire lives to Jesus Christ and follow Him wherever He led them. Each of them gave up family, comfortable if not lavish lifestyles, successful business or military careers, and much more. Why do some people seem so eager to obey God's call and leave everything for unknown lands and unforeseen futures? Perhaps our study of God's similar call to Abraham in Genesis 12 will shed some light on why these and countless other Christians leave home and set out on a journey that would change eternity.

[Primary source information for this story came from Norman Grubb's book, *C. T. Studd, Cricketeer and Pioneer*, Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1933, which was cited by numerous website authors.]

Pray that the Holy Spirit would open your eyes to see the significant calling we have to bless others with all that God has given us.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This is background information for the leaders. You may decide how much to share with your group members.

Genesis is the first book in the Bible. The first eleven chapters, sometimes known as the primeval history, recount events that affected the entire world, including the creation of the world, the fall into sin, the judgment of the flood, the salvation through Noah's ark, and the development of the various nations. In Genesis 12, the focus shifts from the whole world to the history of one man and his family. The last thirty-nine chapters of Genesis are all about Abram, his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. The passage in this study, Genesis 12:1–9, introduces us to Abram and gives us some insight into why he is significant in God's purposes for the rest of the world, and how he is an example of the way God works in and through His people today.

At the end of Genesis 11, Abram's immediate ancestors are introduced. We find that Abram started out in Ur of the Chaldeans. Ur was somewhere in the fertile valley of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in what is today known as Iraq. At some point, Abram's father Terah decided to migrate towards the land of Canaan, which is where Israel is today. He moved his family up the river to Haran, which was about half way from Ur to Canaan. Haran was actually north of the direct route from Ur to Canaan, but following the river north allowed

them to avoid the desert that the direct route crossed. The Bible does not tell us why Terah decide to migrate to Canaan nor does it record why Terah stopped in Haran and did not continue the journey to Canaan.

In Genesis 12, Abram is the name of the main character. Later, in Genesis 17:5, God changes Abram's name to Abraham. Since then, in the rest of the Old and New Testament and throughout history, this man has been known as Abraham. In this study, Abram and Abraham refer to the same person.

Because this study is the first in the series "Blessed to Be a Blessing," it focuses on the nature of God's call to Abraham, the blessings that resulted, and how God can bless others and us through our obedience.

STUDY THE PASSAGE: Genesis 12:1–9

- 1. Ask someone to read Genesis 12:1–9. If the whole passage seems too long, have one person read verses 1–5 and another read verses 6–9.**

What did God tell Abram to do in this passage (vv. 1–3)? What did God *not* tell Abram?

In verse 1, the Lord tells Abram to go to the land God will show him. It's not clear why the NIV translates this, "The Lord had said." Simply "the Lord said" would probably be a more accurate translation.

The Hebrew idiom used in the command "leave" implies separating oneself from others (Cassuto, pp. 309–311, Wenham, p. 274). The mention of leaving country, people, and father's household emphasizes this. In America today, leaving one's family and moving somewhere else is a frequent occurrence. People do it all the time. However, in Abram's day, the tribe or clan was the social security system. They were the people who would protect each other from thieves and attackers. They would care for those in the group who were sick or old or otherwise unable to work. They would also celebrate one another's successes. Since the tribe or clan was built on family relationships, one couldn't simply move to another place and join another clan or tribe. In Abram's time, to leave one's tribe or clan was risky, dangerous, and lonely. So when the Lord asked Abram to leave, it would take Abram more faith to do this than it might for us today.

Note the call's vagueness. If the group members do not recognize it on their own, briefly discuss the specifics of what God told Abram (to leave), and what He did not tell Abram (where, how far, etc.). Abram had to decide whether to obey or disobey based on faith rather than "data."

Optional Question:

***Have you had an experience where you knew you had to choose to obey or disobey God before you understood details about the call? Briefly relate what happened and what you learned about hearing God's call.**

2. In verses 2 and 3, identify whom God will bless if Abram is obedient.

In verses 2–3, the Lord promises to bless Abram with a new homeland, to give him descendants so large that they would constitute a nation, and to bless others through Abram and his family. Placing the blessing after the request to leave connects the two and implies that the blessing depends on Abram’s response to the request (Wenham, pp. 266, 275). It might be better to understand this not as a command with an implied threat, “Leave or I will not bless you,” but as an invitation, “Leave so that I may bless you.”

God assures not only that He will bless Abram, but also that **Abram will be a blessing and a source of blessing to all the people of the earth. Emphasize this phrase from verse 2, as it is key to the theme of this entire study series. As we are obedient to God, He will bless others through us.** In verses 2 and 3, God speaks more about blessings to others (vv. 2b and 3) than about blessings to Abram (v. 2a).

Also keep in mind that the greatest blessing and assurance of blessing is God’s presence (Wenham, p. 275). Therefore, today, as we obey God, He not only will be present with us but will demonstrate that to others **so that they might come in relationship to Him and enjoy His presence as well.**

Most scholars emphasize a three-fold blessing to Abraham: land, a nation of descendants, and a blessing to all peoples on the earth. However, some take each phrase and see seven separate promises in this blessing (vv. 2–3, Cassuto, p. 312, Wenham, p. 275). Seven is the number of perfection or completeness, so a sevenfold blessing would be a complete blessing. It is not critical that your group go through these details. Again, the main point is that God’s blessing is not just for Abraham and his family but that in blessing Abraham, God’s greater purpose of extending His blessings to the nations of the world would occur.

Information for leaders, which does not have to be covered in the group discussion:

- “I will make you into a great nation” — The Hebrew word for nation, *goy*, indicates a political unit of land, language and government (Wenham, p. 275). This promise encompasses not just a large number of descendants, but a cohesive group of descendants dwelling together in the land.
- “I will bless you” — Four of the seven promises use words based on the Hebrew root *barak*, which means, “to bless.” *Blessing* means “good fortune” and “success.” It means that things will go well and get better. As Cassuto describes it, “the concept of blessing signifies the bestowal of all good, protection from all evil (in the priestly benediction, Numbers 6:24 ‘The Lord bless you and keep you’), the granting of grace (ibid., v. 25 ‘and be *gracious* to you’), and enduring happiness and peace (ibid., v. 26 ‘and give you *peace*’). No ordinary life shall be vouchsafed to you and to your descendants, but a life that is blessed of the Lord” (Cassuto, p. 313). In this phrase, God promises to prosper Abram both materially and spiritually (Boice, p. 20).

- “I will make your name great” — Abram’s name will not be forgotten, but will be renown throughout the world (Cassuto, p. 313).
- “You will be a blessing” — The prosperity and favor shown to Abram and the fame of Abram’s name will be such that people will use Abram as an example when blessing others, saying ‘May God make you like Abram’ or ‘may God make you as blessed as Abram’ (Cassuto, p. 314, Wenham, p. 276).

If we walked obediently with the Lord, and regularly expressed gratitude and joy for all God has done for us, then our lives would powerfully witness to others that they will **not lose but gain** so much by surrendering their lives to Jesus. While many think that the cost of discipleship is very great, and balk at yielding totally to Jesus as Lord and Savior, Dallas Willard points out that the cost of non-discipleship is much greater because of all that a person forfeits when refusing to live as a disciple of Jesus (p. 262).

- “I will bless those who bless you” — In this phrase and the next one, God promises to act on Abram’s behalf (Wenham, pp. 276–277). Here the blessing on Abram will be so great that it will overflow to bless everyone who shows favor or honor to Abram.
- “Whoever curses you I will curse” — This phrase is the opposite of the previous one. Those who seek to dishonor or injure Abram will have their evil returned on them by God. There are a couple of curious features in this phrase in the Hebrew. Although, in the previous phrase, the same root is used for the blessing from others to Abram and the blessing from God to those others, different roots are translated as curse in this phrase. The word for those who curse Abram might be better translated as dishonor, a milder term than the curse that God will give to those who treat Abram this way. In addition, a plural form is used for those who bless Abram in the previous phrase, but in this phrase, the one who curses Abram is singular. This may imply that those who curse Abram will be fewer than those who bless Abram and that their punishment will be more severe than what they try to do to Abram (Wenham, pp. 276–277).
- “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” — This is the climax of all God’s promises. First, God promised to bless Abram alone. Then, God promised that Abram’s name would be used as a blessing. Next, God promised that those who blessed Abram would be blessed. Now, finally, God promises that Abram will be a source of blessing to all peoples on earth (Wenham, pp. 277–278, Cassuto, p. 315).

All these blessings were promised to Abram if he would step out in **faith** and **obey** God. Faith is unnatural because God often does the opposite of what we would expect. In human terms, if we wanted to make a great nation of ourselves, achieve prosperity, make our name great, or any of the other things God promised Abram, we would probably stay in one place and gather other people together to increase our

strength, as humans did at the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). But God’s way is different. For Abram, faith “meant leaving his country, family and household, all of which might have been thought necessary to achieve the very blessings God was promising if he left them” (Boice, pp. 29–30). To human eyes, Abram looked like just another landless wanderer, but through his obedience to God, God blessed the whole world (Wenham, p. 282).

3. How did Abram respond to God’s invitation (v. 4)? Who went with him (v. 5)? What risks do you think were associated with Abram’s obedience?

In verse 1, Abram hears the Lord speak to him and in verse 4, he does what God asked him to do. Abram does not question God or make excuses; he just obeys (Cassuto, p. 316). A straightforward reading of this passage might cause us to think that Abram heard a voice one day and then just did what the voice said. We could speculate about the details of how God called Abram and about Abram’s decision-making process, but for the purpose of this study we will focus on the basic facts that are revealed:

- God clearly spoke to Abram in some way, and
- Abram chose to obey God.

Verse 4 states that Abram was seventy-five years old when he left. Verse 5 adds that he had a wife and that he had acquired possessions before he left. From this, we can conclude that Abram was not a young man with few responsibilities to tie him down, but an older man who was more established in his community. According to the times and ages specified in Genesis 11:26 and 11:32, Abram’s father Terah was still alive when he left (Cassuto, p. 316). Depending on his father’s condition, Abram was either leaving his father, who as head of the family exercised ultimate authority, or abandoning his responsibility to care for his aging parent. Adding this to the risks of leaving the safety of the tribe or clan, with one brother already deceased, we can only imagine how difficult it must have been for Abram to uproot himself and go out in obedience to a vague command from God.

In obedience to God’s command to leave his people and his father’s household, the only family members Abram took with him were his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot. Perhaps Abram had taken responsibility for Lot after Lot’s father, Haran, died. The Bible says that Abram’s family served other gods (Joshua 24:2, Cassuto, p. 301, Boice, p. 13). This may be why God told Abram to separate himself from the rest of his family. By separating himself from his tribe and clan, Abram separated himself from their gods. After leaving, Abram could no longer rely on his tribe or their gods for protection and blessing. **He was placing all his trust in the true God.**

4. When did Abram encounter God again (v. 7)?

Finally in verse 7, the Lord appears to Abram and confirms that Abram has arrived in the land that the Lord promised to show him in verse 1. God promises the land to

Abram's offspring. It had to be a relief for Abram to find out that he had gone in the right direction (Cassuto, p. 328).

In the passage, there is no record of God speaking to Abram from the time he left until he arrived in the land of the Canaanites.

***Have you had a similar experience where you acted in obedience to what seemed like a clear call from God, and then had to wait for confirmation that you were doing the right thing?**

Summarize:

In verses 6—9, we learn what Abraham did in the new land. To summarize, Abram first obeyed God, then he worshiped God, set up reminders of God's presence, and continued to press on to receive all that God had for him.

Information for leaders, which does not have to be covered in the group discussion:

Verse 6 records that Abram traveled as far as Shechem; verse 8 says he moved on to Bethel and stayed there, and verse 9 reports that he journeyed on in the Negev. Shechem was an important crossroads in the northern part of Canaan, and Bethel was another important crossroads farther south (Cassuto, p. 330). The Negev is the area at the south end of Canaan. Even though the Lord appeared to Abram at Shechem and told him that this was the land He promised to give him, Abram did not stop there. He continued through the whole land of Canaan, from the north to the south (Wenham, p. 281). Practically, he might have needed to keep moving to find food for his large flocks of animals. Symbolically, he was surveying the whole land, not stopping at the first thing that God was giving him, but pressing on to claim everything that God had for him.

In verses 7—8, Abram built altars at Shechem and at Bethel. Although the passage does not say that Abram offered sacrifices to God at these altars, building altars implies offering sacrifices (Wenham, p. 280). At the beginning of this passage, in response to God's command, Abram obeyed God. Now that God had brought Abram safely to the land He promised, in response to God's blessing, Abram worshipped God. While we are used to the idea that God is present everywhere, in Abram's time, most gods were local to a particular place or group of people. Building altars was a way for Abram to indicate that the God who spoke to him in Haran was also present in Canaan. Also, because altars are permanent structures, they would remain after Abram left as reminders of God's promise to give Abram the land and as memorials of God's presence in the land (Boice, p. 38).

We should realize that Abram did not see most of the promises fulfilled in the passage. He had to continue on by faith. However, the blessing, "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you," is seen as a prophecy about Jesus, who descended from Abraham (Matthew 1:1—17, Boice, p. 22). Through Jesus, Abraham's descendent, salvation has been made available to all peoples on earth. And through those of us who follow as Jesus' disciples, we can help extend this blessing to the nations.

5. Let's look at Galatians 3:6–9 and Hebrews 11:8–16. Based on what these passages say, what do you think God meant by the last of the seven blessings on Abram, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”?

Throughout history, the Jews have often thought that those who were descendants of Abraham were the ones who would participate in the blessing of Abraham. This is supported by the assertion from God in Genesis 12:7 that “to your offspring I will give this land.” However, the blessing in verses 2–3 does not refer to Abraham’s offspring, except perhaps in the first phrase about becoming a great nation. In fact, the final phrase expands the blessing to include “all peoples on earth,” not just Abraham’s direct descendants.

A more obvious way that this part of the blessing has been fulfilled is through Jesus Christ, a descendent of Abraham who brought salvation to “all peoples on earth.” In Galatians 3, Paul points out a different way that God has blessed all peoples through Abraham. According to Paul, “those who believe are children of Abraham” (v. 6) and “those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham” (v. 9). In verse 8, Paul describes the promise in Genesis 12:3 that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” as the Gospel (Hays, p. 256). The “good news” that has been made known through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is that **salvation and blessings from God are not obtained by doing good works, by diligently keeping all God’s laws, or by offering appropriate sacrifices, but the same way that Abraham obtained favor with God — by faith.** “The blessing of Abraham is ultimately intended for the whole world (not just the Jews) and Abraham’s true children are those whose identity is rooted in trusting God’s promise” (Hays, p. 256). When we trust in God and step out in obedience to His summons as Abraham did, then we participate in the blessing of Abraham, by grace through faith, just like Abraham. **And just like Abraham, God’s blessing on us is not just for us, but will overflow to bless others around us and around the world.**

Hebrews 11 further develops this theme. Abraham went out in faith, in obedience to God. As mentioned earlier, the blessing God promised did not come to Abraham immediately and much of it did not come in his lifetime. Abraham lived his whole life in faith towards God, looking forward to a future fulfillment of God’s promises, not just on earth, but also in heaven with God. The ultimate blessing is not earthly prosperity or renown, but God’s presence (Wenham, p. 275). Abraham lived in God’s presence on earth and looked forward to the continuation of life with God in heaven. Like Abraham, all peoples on earth including us can live in God’s presence now by faith and later in heaven by sight.

Note the acts of obedience identified in Hebrews 11:8–16. As we saw in the Genesis passage, Abram had faith, and it impacted his actions.

Hebrews 11 lists a role call of faithful men and women from the Old Testament. Many of the men of faith in the Old Testament had unique or rare roles, like Moses who received the law from God, David and others who were kings, Joshua and others who led armies, Elijah and others who were prophets. Abraham was none of those

things — he was just an ordinary person. As Boice points out, “although we cannot be lawgivers, kings, generals or prophets, we can be what Abram was — a man who heard God and believed that God can be trusted to do what He says He will do, and who based his entire life on that conviction” (p. 12). In this way, too, Abraham blesses “all peoples on earth,” as an example of an ordinary person who trusted in God. We don’t have to be anyone special or have a special role in order to receive God’s blessing and bless other people. Like Abraham, all we have to do is listen to God and obey His voice.

*** How have you been blessed through God’s blessing to Abram?**

APPLICATION

***Do you sense God inviting you to act in faith, like Abram, to risk letting go of something that makes you feel safer, so that God can bless others through you?**

Optional Question:

***If it’s been a long time since you heard a clear call to obedience, is that an area for prayer?**

As a leader, you will have to determine if there is time for this question and if it is appropriate to your group. The main application of this study should involve the group serving together, so beware of focusing on someone whose situation might divert attention from the entire group. If you determine that someone wants further prayer about this, you could arrange to talk and pray outside the group meeting.

***How might our group be a blessing to someone else that needs to see and hear about the love of God through Jesus Christ?**

Take time to discuss and pray, but also make concrete plans to serve someone outside your group. This could take place by participating in a ministry of the church or by reaching out with practical expressions of love to a person that your group members know is in need. Pray for the people you will encounter, that their hearts will be open to the love of our Savior. Pray that your group members will develop an outward focus as you put your plans into practice.

***How are our lives involved in furthering God’s blessing to the nations? Is there a way we together could bless others who serve the Lord in a cross-cultural situation?**

Since this is the first in our series of studies on God's heart to bless the nations, come prepared with either examples of how the group is already involved in cross-cultural blessing, or with a list of possible ways to become involved. If your group is already actively assisting a missionary that the church supports, then take time to update those at this meeting on any answered prayers or new prayer requests. Since you may have first time guests, it would be helpful to have on hand a map, photo, et al of this missionary or team so everyone feels more familiar with the ministry you are discussing.

Otherwise, bring to this meeting a list of some of the missionaries and short-term mission trip teams that our church has sent out. See the Preparation Recommendation at the beginning of the study for further hints. Pray together that the Lord would help you determine how you can regularly bless one of these efforts.

Optional Question:

***Have you rejected a clearly heard call in the past and feel the negative results of that decision? God is ready to give you another chance. Perhaps you should ask for prayer about how God wants to re-involve you in faithful obedience.**

As a leader, you will have to determine if there is time for this question and if it is appropriate to your group. The main application of this study should involve the group serving together, so beware of focusing on someone whose situation might divert attention from the entire group. If you determine that someone wants further prayer about this, you could arrange to talk and pray outside the group meeting.

WRAPPING IT UP

In the human view of things, we usually think that only really special and important people can make a difference in the world. And some who have followed God's call seem extraordinary to us. But the example of Abraham provides a counter-example; God can use anyone willing to obey Him. There is nothing particularly special or notable from an earthly perspective about the details of Abraham's life. He was just a nomad wandering around the land of Canaan like many other people have before and after him. By grace, God chose Abraham and called him to be a blessing to all peoples. By faith, Abraham chose to obey God and to become the blessing God promised. Abraham provides us with a reminder that God does not value the things our culture often values. Abraham is a prime example that those who trust and obey God can make a bigger difference in the world than they will ever know on this side of heaven.

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