

Special Series

the Call of God – Abraham

Prayer

Powerful and generous Lord, come into our lives to deal with the problems that beset us. Expose the Devil's grip wherever it has taken hold, break the bondages that have held us back from doing what is right, and liberate us into the light and blessing of the Holy Spirit You have given us. We praise You, Lord God, we praise You: ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Take the time to pray and ask the Lord whether your life is heading in the right direction for the future

On-going prayers

- ***Pray for persecuted Christians*** *Pray today for Christians persecuted in China, and for protection from harassment by the authorities*
- *Pray for young people at school thinking about 'what to do next'*
- *Give thanks to God for the security of your home*

Continue to pray for Haiti in the aftermath of its tragedy

Meditation

As we begin our work today;

- Give us a heart to seek peace with each other;
- Give us a mind to seek the truth with each other;
- Give us the strength to work well with each other;
- Give us the hope to have confidence in each other;
- Give us such love that is ready to forgive one another;
- Give us a desire to share fully with one another;
- Give us compassion to care properly for one another;
- Give us the emotions to truly feel for each other;

And so may we honour You this day.

Bible passage – Genesis 12:1-9

¹ The LORD said to Abram, 'You must leave your country, your people and your father's home to go to the land I show you. ² I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you and make you well known and respected. You will become a blessing; ³ I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse whoever curses you; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.'

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he left Kharan. ⁵ Abram took Sarai his wife and his nephew Lot, all the possessions that they had acquired, and the people who had joined them in Kharan; and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land as far as the site of the oak of Moreh at Shechem. At that time, the Canaanites were in the land.

⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, 'I will give this land to your descendants.' So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he moved on to the hill country to the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east. He built an altar there to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. ⁹ Abram then journeyed on stage by stage towards the Negeb.

Bible Study

Review

These verses from Genesis 12 are very important for our understanding of the Old Testament. They contain the story of the call of Abram (later renamed Abraham), the forefather of the people of Israel whose story begins here and continues to chapter 25. The beginning of the story seems simple enough, though it soon turns into an amazing saga. Abram's father Terah had been told by God to leave the pagan lands of Mesopotamia and head for Canaan (11:31,32), and after the death of his father in Kharan (11:31,32), Abram took on himself the burden of this call. He was obedient to all God said to his father, and this is what is meant by verse 1 of our passage today. After the story of humanities arrogant collective effort to build Babel (11:1-9), this story strikes us with its richness and human interest (12:1), for we read that God chose one humble servant to be the source of eternal blessing for all people (12:3). So, instead of allowing people to find Him by reaching up, God chose to reach down and touch a single individual, a man named Abram, and work with him to achieve His will.

There are some important themes here, and they help us understand how God calls people even today. Firstly, Abram was asked to leave everything behind to follow God. Undoubtedly there would have been much more to the story of Abram's move to Canaan, but the Bible has only passed down to us the fact that Abram was obedient, and he completed the journey begun by his father Terah by following the Lord. Abram is often described as a nomad, moving from place to place with his family and tent, and this is what is described here in this text (see 12:5,6,8,9). However, we should not be quick to jump to conclusions. Scripture says his family came from the city of Ur (11:31), but his journey was only temporary, and he eventually settled in the southern regions of Canaan, near Hebron (and possibly Beersheba, see chapters 22-25)), where he stayed for a long time.

Secondly, we are told that Abram was 75 years old when he left Kharan (12:4). This is an important piece of information, and although people appear to have lived longer back then, Abram was undoubtedly old. We do not know why God chose Abram at that age, but his call has always been an inspiration to people of older years. At his age, Abram would have been concerned about who would receive his possessions and wealth when he died, and this may be why he took Lot with him, for he was his nearest relative. However, it was God's intention to change the nature of Abram's inheritance, as we will find out, and Abram had to start where he was, as an old man being obedient to his God.

Thirdly, Abram was asked to believe God's promises not knowing what they could mean for him or for his future. He was told that he would become a great nation, be blessed and respected (12:2), and be a blessing to others (12:3), even the whole world! Then, a few verses later, God also made the highly significant long term promise to Abram that He would give him and his descendants the land of Canaan (12:7). This is remarkable, because all this constituted a new inheritance for Abram, granted by God. Of course, Abram had to receive this in faith. He could not have known how his future generations would fare, indeed he had no heir at all because his wife Sarai was barren (11:30); so Abram's faith in God for the unknown was genuine personal trust and faith.

Through this faith, Abram accepted the greater good of God's unknown future. This was powerful faith that trusted all to God, and Abram expressed it in two ways. Firstly, he did what God told him and travelled into Canaan, even though he could not have known why this was necessary. How could Abram bless anyone by travelling through an obscure and small area of land? Abram also showed his faith by spontaneously worshipping of God at Shechem (12:6,7) and near Bethel (12:8). Obedience and worship are the evidence of true faith in God.

This is how God's plan of salvation began; through Abram's call and his faithful response.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The call of God
- The three blessing

- Faith, and obedience to God's call

Going Deeper

The call of Abram is one of those passages which is very rich in meaning, and preachers find a variety of ways to present its powerful message. We will now look briefly at some of the details of this passage, and as we do this we will find the themes mentioned above will be further highlighted, and we will also find some other major themes which deserve our consideration.

The Call of God (12:1-3)

There is some debate as to when Abram was first called. At first reading, it was Terah who first set out from Ur (11: 31), though God is not mentioned. The first sentence '*the Lord said to Abram*' (12:1) is a past tense in Hebrew and could well imply that Abram received the call described in verses 1 to 3 prior to his move from Kharan, perhaps while he was in Ur. This is what was believed in New Testament times, as Stephen made clear in his famous speech to the Jews '*The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abram when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Leave your country'*' (Acts 7:2-3). All this heightens the sense of patient faith exercised by Abram, giving the impression that he did not simply walk away from his family alone, but headed in the direction of God's call and had to be patient whilst family members left him, rather than he leave them!

When God called, he required Abram to change his identity. This is something we who travel about the world might find hard to understand, but in moving away from his family, his own people and his own homeland of Ur (12:1), Abram would have been left with little. The closest we can get to what he may have felt would be a situation in which we were in a foreign land, felt that we had no 'place' to call home and had no close family to support. It would not have been easy, even for a nomad, and if this was what God wanted of Abram, then He needed him to hear and embrace His promises, which eventually come thick and fast (12:2-4).

The three blessings

The initial blessings were threefold. Abram was firstly told that he would become a great nation (12:2), which was an extraordinary thing for God to say to someone who, as we have already seen, knew that he would have no child. Abram may have been planning to make his nephew his heir (the only logical reason to take him, given the call to leave all his family). However, the matter of the inheritance was important to God, and the promises given to Abram in this passage are repeated many times over (17:20, 18:18, 21:18) and later to his grandson Jacob (46:3). Previously, God had chosen to work through one line of ancestry from Adam through to Abram. Now he was prepared to allow Abram's descendants alone grow into a nation in order to achieve His purposes of salvation. Looking back, God was not doing a 'new' work, so much as being consistent in how He dealt with people.

The second blessing received by Abram was a personal promise that he would himself be blessed by being made '*well known and respected*' (12:2). The Hebrew for '*blessing*' literally means 'great'; not necessarily 'wealthy' and certainly not 'famous' in the sense that we use that word today. It refers to a man who has earned the respect of his peers and will earn the respect of future generations. Abram certainly achieved this in his own lifetime, but at the time the promise was given, this was not at all obvious. Abram had just left his family and he may have felt rather alone; he was travelling with a relatively small family, a wife, a nephew and a few servants but no children. The promises of God may well have seemed to be too distant to believe, but we are told that Abram accepted God's promises and acted according to what he had been told.

The third blessing initially sounds strange, because it is extended in an unusual way, '*You will become a blessing; I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse whoever curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*' (12:2,3). God promised that Abram would himself become a blessing to others. This promise contrasts with the second blessing, which was a personal encouragement to Abram. It returns to the theme of the first promise (that Abram would be made into a great nation), for God knew in advance that he intended to bless the whole world through the ancestors of Abram, the people of Israel, and ultimately through his greatest ancestor Jesus Christ. Without this perspective, much of this story is meaningless for Christians today.

Faith, and obedience to the call

Verse 4 describes Abram's obedience to the call of God as he left Kharan. However, we should perhaps ask whether Abram was as obedient as was required by God. He took with him a family member, Lot, and also the goods he had come by in his travels, and others (12:5), probably not family members but servants of various kinds as befitted an apparently affluent nomadic group. However, we should not be surprised that Abram was not perfect in every detail, and we will discover that the long story of Abram's time in Canaan (Gen 12-24) is full of awkward moments between him and God. It could be argued, for example, that the delay in the fulfilment of God's promises to Abram (i.e. the birth of his own son, see 21:1f.) was caused by

his disobedience and untimely impatience (see ch 16 and the birth of Ishmael). Nevertheless, Abram remained obedient to God's call at heart, and God was certainly faithful to His promises.

The first stopping place to which Abram came in the land of Canaan was Shechem, a settlement between two large hills or mountains, Ebal and Gerazim. There was an early Canaanite shrine here, and from ancient times it was known as a 'place of decision' (see Deut 11:29, Josh 8:33). This is the significant place at which God first said to Abram 'I will give this land to your descendants (12:7), and it is the first clear indication that this was indeed the land that would become the home for God's people in future times. Abram appears to have had no difficulty with the local Canaanites in setting up an altar with the purpose of making sacrificial acts of worship to God (12:7). Abram's worship of God would have seemed very different from the normal (Canaanite) religion practiced there, but we should not read back into this story the later history of conflict between Israelite and Canaanite, which would eventually tear the country apart. Later generations would see great conflict between the descendants of Abram and the Canaanites who already had a shrine at Shechem (this is known about even in the field of archaeology), and there was also conflict later on between the peoples of Israel themselves. After the time of Solomon, the tribes of Israel separated between north and south, with Jerusalem as the capital of southern 'Judah', and Shechem as the capital of northern 'Israel' (1 Kings 12:25) a site chosen probably because of its association with Abram (the capital was later moved to Samaria).

From the central highlands of Canaan, Abram then journeyed between Bethel and Ai, where he built an altar and worshipped again before moving south to the Negev (12:8,9), the southern rocky and desert like regions to the south of the Dead Sea which archaeology tells us was more populated in Abram's days than later. The story is now set to describe the way in which Abram is obedient to God and God fulfils his promises. Much is yet to come.

Application

The story of the call of Abram is the Old Testament's introduction to 'faith'. The word 'faith' is not found in this story because it comes from the New Testament; but we use this word because it is the one that enables us to see what is happening through the general perspective of Scripture. Faith has its roots in the hand of God on someone for His purposes, and this is clearly the case with Abram, but the response to this is also important. Abram responded to God with obedience. He was obedience to God despite the uncertainty shown by his attachment to Lot and the possession of an extended household (12:5); so obedience was a basic ingredient of Abram's faith, and it is a basic ingredient of ours, today. Another ingredient of faith shown by Abram is worship, as indicated by his building of altars to God in the land of Canaan. Abram is often regarded as a rather colourless character because we do not discover much about the details of his life, or of his thoughts and feelings, but what is described is enough for us to agree with both Paul and James, who say he was a man of faith and also a man of action (Rom. 4:2,3; James 2:20-26).

Another aspect of Abram's faith is this; God works through people of faith to bless others. This was fundamental to the calling of Abram, but we should not think of blessing as 'being nice'. The blessing God gives is the blessing of His touch and presence, and this is a sign of His work through individuals to bless the world. God does not grant someone a 'blessing' for their own comfort or vanity, but so that other people may be blessed. This is clearly what God intended by declaring that Abram was 'blessed' and that through Him, He would bless the world.

Nothing of which we have spoken, that is, faith, obedience, worship and blessing, is here in this story of Genesis to create a religious system so that in future, people might feel they have done their duty to God by being a faithful Jew or a Christian. Everything is the result of God's work to begin the salvation history of the whole world, and to bring it back to its Creator with the terrible consequences of the Fall overcome. The call of Abram and the faith that he showed in responding to it are the starting point of the great story of God's work of salvation in the world, and it points us to much that is to come.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Why did Abram have to leave everything behind in order to follow God? Is this required of all who follow God's call today, and what does this mean?
2. How does the call of Abraham help you understand how God calls people today?
3. Abram worshipped spontaneously. How may we worship God spontaneously, and how can this be done within the context of the worship of God's people on Sundays?

Topics covered by this text

- *The call of God*
- *Blessing*
- *The promises of God*
- *The 'Promised Land', and Canaan*
- *The faith of Abraham*

Personal comments by author

The great story of the call of Abram is capable of prompting us in many ways. Each of the issues mentioned above, faith, obedience, blessing, worship, and other features of the story are all important for our discipleship. I find it deeply humbling to read about these events of thousands of years ago, and think that God began my salvation at that time. It is amazing to think that Abram is my own ancestor in faith, and it makes it feel a little strange writing about it all!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Listen to God and ask Him what He is saying to you from this passage. Then, as a result of what God has said, form a plan to put what He has said to you into action, using the 'lifestyle challenges' worksheet available from the relevant page in this website.*
 - *Pray for the work of God's people, the church, and ask the Lord to bless His people today as they exercise faith in everyday life.*
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Final Prayer

Glorious Lord, thank You for the unreserved help You have given us throughout our lives. May we give ourselves without reserve to the work of Your Kingdom and its priorities of helping the poor, declaring the Word and setting captives free. Help us in this task we pray. AMEN
