

ABRAHAM AND THE CALL OF GOD
GENESIS 12:1-9

INTRODUCTION

Hebrews #11 v. 6 (PROJECTOR ON--- HEBREWS 11:6) says, “**And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.**” Without faith it is impossible to please God.

We live in a material world where people must feel, hear, see, or smell something to believe that it is true. (PROJECTOR OFF) Then they are inclined to respond to those truths only to the extent to which they will receive some personal benefit.

We who are Christians follow a God we have never seen, and we worship a Savior who lived on earth two thousand years ago. We identify ourselves with a teacher who said, “Deny yourself,” and “Whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it.”

It is a challenge for us who are Christians to live in an increasingly secular and materialistic culture. But it is also an opportunity, because men and women of faith stand out in such a society. What we need is models of that faith, examples of godly individuals who live successfully in an unbelieving world and a culture which promotes values at odds with those of our Creator.

So today we are going to begin a study of the life of Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. In our study of Galatians we saw that the Apostle Paul regarded him as a model of faith. He was a godly man who lived in a pagan culture. He was a man of faith. The Book of James calls him “the friend of God.” In the New Testament book of Hebrews Abraham is listed among the Biblical heroes of the faith. We are told in #11 that by the end of his life he believed that God could even raise his son from the dead.

Our study has additional relevance because Abraham’s descendants are once again under attack from enemies who would seek to destroy them. Abraham’s model faith was not instantly acquired. It was only achieved over time in the school of hard knocks. In this there is encouragement for us.

I.

We are going to begin in Genesis #12 as we consider from vv. 1-3 **ABRAHAM AND GOD’S CALL**. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. ABRAHAM AND GOD’S CALL) The time setting is roughly 2000 years before the coming of Christ. Prior to Abraham God’s rules and promises and blessings applied to mankind as a whole. People, however, had not responded well. Adam and Eve blew it in the Garden of Eden. Later the people of the world became so corrupt that the Lord decided to destroy everyone except Noah’s family. After that the people refused to spread out over the earth and instead built a

tower to make a name for themselves. So God confused their language. Now God changes His program with humanity as He begins to channel His blessings to the world through one family.

The last six verses of #11 describe the family background of Abraham, whose name originally was Abram, which means “exalted father.” I will use the two names interchangeably. But we need to keep in mind that Abram was his name for the first 99 years of his life. I wonder if he was resistant when God called him to change his name. What’s wrong with Abram? Wasn’t it good enough for most of his life. But God told him to change it. Why do you suppose that he did that? Perhaps it was so Abram would have a more effective testimony to his community. Interesting! Perhaps it is OK to change names if a new name will have a more effective testimony to the community.

The verses at the end of #11 help us to put Abram’s family tree together. (ABRAHAM’S FAMILY TREE) It looks something like this. Abram, Nahor, and Haran are all brothers. We find out later that Abram’s wife Sarai, whose name is also changed later, is Abram’s half sister. They are both children of Terah, but they have different mothers. Also Lot is Abram’s nephew.

We read in v. 31 of #11, **“Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there.”** (UR MAP) There were several cities in this ancient time that were named Ur, but probably Ur of the Chaldeans is the city to the east in the lower Tigris Euphrates River valley in what we know today as Iraq.

The family headed to the west to Haran. (UR MAP) Verse 32 tells us that Terah died there at the ripe old age of 205. The Genesis account tells us that early in Biblical history people lived much longer lives. By the time of Abram those life spans were still long from our perspective but rapidly decreasing in comparison with the earlier Genesis stories.

In v. 1 of #12 we get to the specific call of God to Abram: **“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.’”** This call of God may have come to Abram at Haran. But if it did, it was a repeat of God’s earlier call that was given when he was in Ur.

For we are told in Acts #7 vv. 2-4 (ACTS 7:2-3), **“The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3 and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ (ACTS 7:4) Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.”**

So God told Abraham to leave his home in Ur and his friends and his relatives. This was a considerable sacrifice on several levels. Ur had a rather advanced civilization.

Excavations were undertaken of this ancient city back in 1922. (UR CITY) The city was surrounded in Abram's day with thirty foot walls. It had a moat. The streets were paved. It had a port which connected to the river and then to the sea. It was a commercial center. It was the capital of the Sumerian empire. It had a population of about 250,000 people.

The people were polytheistic, but there was special attention given to the moon god Sin. (UR TEMPLE) Sin had a large temple area with a ziggurat, or tower, which was estimated to be about 150 feet tall. The base of that temple is still visible today.

The houses in Ur (UR HOMES) were often two stories tall with kitchen facilities, plumbing, and sewer systems. Some 100,000 business documents have been discovered in the ruins, indicating that Ur was indeed a major commercial center. God wants Abram to give all of this civilized city life up to go to a land that He will show him. The book of Hebrews suggests that Abram didn't know much of anything about what that land would be like.

Ur was also a pagan city. There is no evidence that there was any worship of the one true God. The people were polytheistic. Their chief god seems to have been this moon god. Abram and his family were participants in this religious system. (JOSHUA 24:2) For we read in Joshua #24 v. 2, **“Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.”**

Did God choose to bless Abram because he was seeking the one true God? There is no indication that this was the case. Abraham and his family members were pagans. They worshiped false gods. God chose to bless Abram as an act of grace. It was the sovereign, gracious choice of God.

(HARAN MAP 1) So Terah and Abraham and family moved to Haran 600 miles to the west. Haran was also a civilized city. It was a regional center of commerce and agriculture. It was also into worship of the moon god Sin. (HARAN RUINS) Terah lived out the rest of his life there. Perhaps the call of God again came to Abram there.

Notice in v. 2 of our text that there are three things that God promises to do if Abram will leave his land. (3 PROMISES) The Lord first promises to make of Abram a great nation. Abram did not have any children. Verse 30 in #11 says that Sarah was barren. Verse 4 in #12 says that Abram was 75 when he left Haran. People did live longer at that time. But many years have passed and Sarah has been unable to bear children. Her biological clock was ticking into overtime. The foundational promise to Abraham is that he will have descendants. In order to have a great nation, in order to be a blessing to the other nations of the world, in order to possess a certain territory, in order to have a really great name, Abram needs to have children, or at least one child. This is Abram's primary test of faith. Will God accomplish something that a material world says is impossible?

Second, God promises to bless Abram. Obviously that is not a very specific promise. It would seem to refer to a general kind of prosperity. In that ancient Middle Eastern culture any understanding of prosperity involved having a large family.

Third, there is the promise to make Abram's name great. Back in #11 we are told that the people of the earth built the tower of Babel so that they could make their name great. We have no idea today what the names of any of these people were. But we do today know about Abraham, because he sought to make the Lord's name great. In turn the Lord made of Abram a great name. Besides being called the friend of God Abraham is also referred to in the Scriptures as a prince of God, a prophet of God, and the servant of God. He is known as the father of the Jewish people, and even Arabs claim him as their revered ancestor.

At the end of v. 2 there is a second command from God followed by three more promises. Most of the translations have "and you will be a blessing." But a verb of command is actually used; "Be a blessing!" Three additional promises follow from that. (3 ADDITIONAL PROMISES)

Right from the beginning Abram is given a responsibility toward other people. He is to be a blessing to them. In the fulfillment of that responsibility God promises to bless those who bless him. They will likewise prosper. On the other hand those who curse Abram will in turn be cursed by God. Hamas and other radical Islamizes groups have not yet learned that lesson. Then, third, all peoples on earth will be blessed through Abram. He and his descendants will be a channel of blessing to the rest of the world.

It is not that God has decided to forget the rest of the world. He wants to see the rest of the world come to know Him and be blessed by Him. But the Lord has decided to use Abram and his descendants as the vehicles of that testimony and of that blessing. Ultimately this promise to Abraham is fulfilled to the greatest extent in Jesus Christ, a physical descendant of Abraham, and, as we saw in Galatians, the spiritual ancestor of all true Christians.

II.

Verses 4-6 go on to describe ABRAHAM AND HIS OBEDIENCE IN MOVING. (II. ABRAHAM AND HIS OBEDIENCE IN MOVING) Verse 4 tells us, **"So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran."**

Abram must have had many questions: "Where are you taking me? Why do I have to leave civilization? What about the rest of my family? I am a city dweller. How am I going to survive in this wilderness area? When am I going to start having children? Some of us Christians who have moved to this area from other parts of the country have had our doubts about moving near to Sin City and to the desert.

The Lord did not answer all of Abram's questions. As is often the case in our dealings with Him, He tells us what we need to know. He doesn't tell us everything that we would

like to know. Abram only knew about where he was supposed to go and what assurances God had given him about his future there.

We are not provided with an explanation as to why Abram settled in Haran for a time. Verse 26 of #11 says that Terah was 70 years old when he bore Abram and his brothers. Verse 32 says that Terah was 204 years old when he died in Haran. Chapter 12 v. 4 says that Abram was 75 when he left Haran. So Terah may have lived another 60 years in Haran after Abram and Lot left town.

Verse 5 says, **“And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan.”** The word for “people” is literally “souls.” Some scholars think that this is a reference to servants. Usually, though, the word for “souls” is not used of slaves. So other commentators suspect that these “souls” were proselytes. These were people whom Abraham had been evangelizing and convincing that God had given him a special commission. He was telling them, perhaps, about the one true God and recruiting them for a divine mission.

In v. 6 they reached the site of Shechem. (SHECHEM MAP) At this time Shechem appears to have been an unwalled village. One day it would become an important Jewish town. The text says that they came to the “oak of Moreh.” “Moreh” means teacher. The “oak” was actually a terebinth tree. (TEREBINTH TREE) These trees were often used in idol worship. So this place may have been some kind of well known Canaanite religious shrine.

The author adds the simple but important statement at the end of v. 6: **“At that time the Canaanites were in the land.”** (CANAAN MAP) Canaan is the land which God has promised to Abram. But somebody else is living there. The presence of Canaanites presents a challenge to Abram’s faith. How can Abram claim this as his land? The Canaanites are there. They will prove to be obstacles to Abram’s descendants for hundreds of years. These Canaanites lived in small independent city-states that would join together in times of war. They were united by a common religion that was polytheistic. They worshipped many gods. One of the chief gods was Baal, who would become a problem and a temptation for Abram’s descendants.

Still today there are people in the promised land of Canaan who threaten the descendants of Abram. To whom does the land really belong? Who is going to be the object, and the channel of God’s blessing?

III.

Abram obeyed God’s call and moved to Canaan. In vv. 7-9 we learn about ABRAHAM AND HIS OBEDIENCE IN WORSHIP. (III. ABRAHAM AND HIS OBEDIENCE...) In v. 7 God appears to Abram again. Perhaps it is in a dream. Perhaps it is as an angel. The message is this: **“To your offspring I will give this land.”** (CANAAN MAP)

There are many Canaanite city-states in this land. There are thousands and thousands of people in them. They control the land. Here is Abram--- a foreigner--- 75 years old--- no kids--- not one. Did it take faith to believe God's promises? Abram trusted God. That trust is expressed in worship. He built an altar to the Lord. In the midst of challenging and difficult circumstances will the people of God continue to worship Him?

In vv. 8 & 9 Abram continues to travel south through the land promised to him. It is possible that a famine mentioned in v. 10 was responsible for that passage from the north to the south as Abram sought a place to set up camp. But again in v. 8 we see him build an altar and call on the name of the Lord. He was acknowledging the characteristics and activities of the God who had appeared to him and guided him. He expressed his faith in worship.

IV.

(IV. THE APPLICATIONS) We come then to THE APPLICATIONS. What are lessons which we might find here for us?

A.

(IV. APPLICATIONS A. OUR RESPONSIBILITY IS TO...) First, OUR RESPONSIBILITY IS TO RESPOND TO GOD'S CALL WITH SAVING FAITH. God's call to Abram was not simply to move to a different place. It was primarily a call to trust Him.

This was a sovereign, gracious call. In Joshua #24 vv. 2 & 3 (JOSHUA 24:2) the descendants of Abram are told, "**Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.** (JOSHUA 24:3) **Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many.**" Notice the sovereign work of God in this. "God took..." "God led..." "God made..."

Abram did respond to the sovereign working of God in saving faith. In Genesis #15 v. 6 (GENESIS 15:6) the narrator tells us, "**And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.**"

So it is that we saw the Apostle Paul quote this verse in our study of the Book of Galatians. In #3 vv. 6 & 7 (GALATIANS 3:6) he wrote, "**...just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'?** (GALATIANS 3:7) **Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.**" God's call to salvation is compelling. Our responsibility is to believe in Jesus.

The Apostle Paul references this compelling call to salvation In Romans #8 v. 30. There he writes, "**And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.**" Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins. Our responsibility is to believe in Him.

B.

A second application which I find coming out of this passage is that OUR RESPONSIBILITY IS TO FOLLOW GOD'S DIRECTION IN OUR LIVES. (IV. A. B. OUR RESPONSIBILITY IS TO FOLLOW...) God clearly directed Abram to go to the land of Canaan. He did and eventually he was blessed.

Our responsibility is to likewise follow God's direction in our lives. As we saw from our study of Galatians, it is faith in Jesus that gives us eternal life. That is a gift from God. It is not a work on our part. Our motivation that follows from that should be appreciation of what God has done for us in Christ. We are also promised rewards for our obedience. Then also life just goes better for us when we follow His direction in our lives. We will see from the life of Abram that life gets complicated and sometimes painful when he does not follow God's direction in his life.

The primary thing for which we are responsible in terms of following God's direction in our lives is the Bible. When we are following God's directions in the Bible, we can be confident that we are headed in the right direction.

The subject of the message today is God's call on Abraham. We often speak of God's calling in terms of a vocation. Christians often talk about people who are called to ministry. Sometimes Christians speak of other vocational callings. I don't find anywhere in the New Testament where the word "call" is used in that way. It is used in the simple way that we speak of someone calling out to another person. It is used in the sense of Romans 8:30 of God's sovereign calling upon the elect to become His children.

The word "call" is also used in the New Testament in the sense of Jesus' call to people to follow Him as disciples. Thus in Mark #1 v. 20 (MARK 1:20) Jesus calls James and John to follow Him. That verse reads, "**And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.**" In this sense we can say that Jesus calls all of us to be His disciples.

So while the Bible does not use the terms "call" and "calling" in the sense of a vocation, in the sense that God has called us to a particular job, we can perhaps make a case from the sovereignty of God that He puts us in particular roles and in particular situations in life. (PROJECTOR OFF) He gives us certain talents and skills. The Holy Spirit hopefully directs us in our path in life, which includes things like jobs and careers and family situations. But the key thing for all of us to understand is that our primary accountability is to the Bible. God's direction in life comes primarily from the Bible. The Bible does not tell us specifically how to make every decision in life. But we can be confident that if we are following the Bible, God will be directing us and accomplishing His purposes for us.

C.

The third lesson which I find coming out of this passage is that OUR RESPONSIBILITY IS TO GLORIFY GOD. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. A. B. C. OUR RESPONSIBILITY IS TO GLORIFY GOD.) Abram responded to God's call by moving and by worshiping God. Because he exalted and glorified God, we remember him today.

From the perspective of history, Abraham has an interesting legacy. Who was this guy? A great political leader? He led a small tribe of only a few hundred people. He never owned any property other than a gravesite. A great military leader? We only know about one battle in which he was involved. A great writer? We don't have any writings from him that were left behind. A great scientist? No. A great philosopher? No. A great musician or singer? We don't know that he could carry a tune? A great artist? We don't know that he ever painted or sculpted anything. In one sense Abraham was simply a man chosen by God who was faithful to respond to God's call and to glorify His name.

We human beings all have a natural desire to be significant, to have some importance in this life, to know that our lives have counted for something of eternal value. The lesson from Abraham is that if we make it our priority to glorify and exalt God, then He will take care of giving our lives some measure of eternal significance. We can exalt God's name by worshiping Him, by witnessing to unbelievers about him, by leading lives that are consistent with Biblical principles, by using our spiritual gifts and natural talents, by praying, by giving of ourselves and our resources, and by serving others.

William Carey (WILLIAM CAREY) was a man who was attentive to the call of God. He looked at the call of Jesus Christ at the end of the Book of Matthew for His followers to make disciples of all of the nations of the world. He also looked around at his world in the 1700s and could not figure out why Christians did not seem to have an interest in bringing the good news about Jesus to other nations of the world. He could see from Jesus' words in the Bible that this was God's revealed will. So he adopted a motto that went like this (MOTTO...): **"Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God."**

William Carey lived in England. He was a shoe cobbler by training with a sixth grade education. But he was a very intelligent man. He taught himself Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. He also picked up enough to be conversant in Dutch, Italian, and French. Not bad for a sixth grade education.

More importantly William Carey responded to God's call by becoming a missionary to India. By the end of his life he made six complete and 24 partial translations of the Bible into various languages of India, he opened mission stations in India, Burma, and Bhutan, he started several schools, he became the foremost authority on horticulture and agriculture in India, he became the chairman of the language department at a British college in India, and he aroused the English speaking church to the importance of the task of world missions. Today William Carey is known as the Father of Modern Missions. In coming weeks we will not only learn about the development of Abraham's faith but also the development of William Carey's faith.

As we look at the life of Abraham and William Carey, I hope that our own faith in God will be stretched. I hope that William Carey's motto might become ingrained in our own lives: **"Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God."**