

## Genesis 12: 1-9

With the completion of our series on the book of Colossians last week, we are beginning this morning with a *new* series on a familiar book - the very *first* book of the Bible - **Genesis**. Those of you who have been with us for some time will remember that not too terribly long ago we made our first study of this very important book, starting with the creation accounts in chapters 1 and 2 and finishing with the story about the Tower of Babel in the opening verses of chapter 11. If you missed out on that series and want to get "caught up" so that you can better understand the storyline, then you can go to our website where you will find the first series in its entirety. Today, however, we are going to forge ahead, picking up where we left off and have our first look at what will be the focus of our time in this series - *the Life of Abram/Abraham*.

In taking up this study my hope is that we will come to better understand some of the most foundational things about who we are and what we believe as the people of God which, after all, is what the book of Genesis is all about, isn't it? It is the book of *beginnings*.

And after starting out with the beginning of *creation*, and then the beginning of *humankind*, and the origins of the world's *sin* and broken-ness, and God's first *covenants* with man, and then the various nations and languages, we arrive, finally, at the beginning of one *particular* nation, and one *particular* people - all of which began with one special person, and God's promises to bless that person and his descendants. And that person is/was Abraham. And so what you see, as the storyline of Genesis has progressed, is this sort of narrowing focus until all of our attention is given to this one man and the events of his life.

Now, as with the account of every other life in the Bible, the material that we have here on the life of Abraham is very *selective*, just as it is with the life of Moses, and David, and every other Old Testament character. And that is because the main focus in every Bible account, the main story *behind* every other story, is always *the story of God*, and what He is doing, and why He is doing it. And so, even though we will be hearing a great deal about the life of Abraham, the reality is that Abraham is not the main character in this story. And so, because he is not the *ultimate* focus, it doesn't matter that we don't know everything about Abraham's life. What *is* important is that we know about *those parts of Abraham's life which help us to get a clearer picture of what God is up to*.

And so, we have here a mere handful of stories about Abraham's life, arranged for us in a historical, but memorable manner so that they stay with us. You may remember me saying something about this in the previous series on Genesis - that there is often a great deal of structure to the way that these OT accounts are arranged, precisely because they were intended to be given as a kind of *theology to-go* - a highly portable form of teaching and instruction, much like a catechism. We saw this sort of structuring in the creation accounts, and we see it here in the life of Abraham as well.

The scholar that has been the biggest help in seeing all this is a Jewish man by the name of Cassuto. He points out, for example, that the account of Abraham - which runs, roughly, from chapter 12 through chapter 22 - contains ten (10) significant events which parallel one another in some interesting ways. The first main event - which we will look more carefully at in a moment - concerns God's call on Abram to forsake his home and family. The tenth main event - in chapter 22 - is concerned with a similar sort of thing - God's call on Abram to forsake his own son.

The second and third main events in the account of Abram show God's promise to Abram being threatened - firstly by a pagan ruler who takes Abram's wife, Sarai, away, and then by a conflict that arises with Lot - his nephew - who would receive Abram's inheritance and blessing, should Sarai fail to produce an heir. On the other end of the Abraham account, the eighth and ninth main events in Abram's life are concerned with remarkably similar things. The promise is again threatened as Sarai is taken a second time by another pagan ruler, and then there arises a conflict - not with Lot, but with Hagar, whose son Ishmael, remains a continued threat to Sarai's son, Isaac. So 1 parallels 10 and 2 and 3 parallel 8 and 9.

The fourth main event in the account of Abraham shows Lot getting into trouble and having to be rescued by Abraham. The seventh account in this cycle shows Lot once again getting into trouble and needing to be rescued from Sodom and Gomorrah.

We then arrive at the central two stories/events in the account of Abraham. Main event number five is concerned with Hagar and her son and a promise that is made about descendants that will come from her. The sixth main event is about Abraham and Sarai and concerns the son that has been promised to them, and the many descendants that will follow.

Now, to be sure, these sorts of summaries do not describe *everything* that happens in these accounts. There are other things going on which we will see as we proceed. Still, the presence and sequence of events in these accounts, on the whole, shows a great deal of order and design and parallelism. And the accounts which we have, which have been arranged in such a memorable fashion and which God sovereignly authored through Moses, all serve an important purpose of pointing us to the Creator God who is still moving forward, still moving ahead with his plans and purposes, including those plans which concern the human race, which he has made in his image - which image he intends to fully redeem and restore. With that brief and inadequate introduction to these texts, let's pray and ask God to come teach us by His Spirit, and then we'll look at the first passage together .....Let's pray.....

*Father in heaven, we stand on the threshold of these marvelous words - these truths which you have authored and you have preserved and which you wanted us to have, and saw to it that we DID get them. And so here they are. And here WE are. Would you now finish this transaction? Would you close the gap between us and your word - a gap that would be un-bridgeable, except for your Spirit? Would you do everything that is necessary to make this happen? Shake us to our very foundations if that is what needs to happen but please come and open our eyes to see wonderful things in your Word...*

(Read Genesis 11:27-12:9)

The first thing I want you to notice here is *God's sovereign decision to bless Abram*. After a very brief description of Abram's position in the line of descent from Shem, one of the sons of Noah - after that brief description the very next thing that happens is that God tells Abram to get up and get moving to a place to which God is taking him because He has decided that He is going to bless Abram in all sorts of ways.

Now we know virtually *nothing* about Abram at this point. Sure, we know where he came from, and we know that he is married, and that his wife is barren. But that's it. We know nothing else about his person or character. We don't know what sort of life he has lived. We don't know anything for sure. But we do know **THIS**: *God has decided to unload some serious blessings upon him*. And not just him, but his whole line of descendants, and even the whole world.

Now, if you had just started reading the Bible at this point, chapter 12 of Genesis, then you might be forgiven *for* thinking that these amazing promises - which we'll look at *more* closely in a moment - have come to Abram out of the blue. But they haven't, have they? There is a context *for* these promises that reaches back into the early chapters of Genesis.

In chapters 1 and 2, God makes man and woman in his image and commissions them to certain tasks. In chapter 3, the man and woman, deceived by the serpent, rebel against God's rule and authority and fall *into* a state of sin which affects not only them but - as Paul shows in Romans 5 - the entire human race, *for* all time.

And, yet, in the midst of their misery and sin, God comes to his wayward creatures and, along with a description of the curse that has now fallen upon them, still gives them some words of hope in chapter 3, verse 15. And, while there are a number of things to see in this verse, the one that I want you to remember is the promise that the serpent - *who* has deceived the woman and *who* represents Satan - will be destroyed in the end. And the one *who* will deliver this decisive, destructive blow will be a descendant of the woman, one of her godly offspring.

And you see, after a pronouncement such as that - as brief and cryptic as it may seem - the stage is now set and the search is on, *for* the remainder of the Old Testament, to discover *who* this very special offspring will be. Now, we know because we live many years down the road, that the one that God was speaking of, and the one who was foreshadowed in *those* words was the Lord Jesus Christ himself, as Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 makes plain.

But this is where the account of Abraham and the promises made to him fit into the storyline. This is why the promises to Abraham really aren't coming to him "out of the blue", because one of the things that is going on in the journey from Genesis to Jesus is that the Old Testament is tracing the continuation and expansion and development of this line of descent - the offspring of the woman spoken of in Genesis 3: 15 - from which will come the eventual deliverer *who* will destroy Satan himself. We have already traced the line of descent through to Noah, and through Shem, his son, and to Terah, a descendant of Shem. And now we arrive at Abraham, where the telling of this *story* really begins in earnest and we start to see, in increasing depth and detail, the outworking of God's promise, starting with God's address to Abram in Genesis 12,

God begins his speech to Abraham with a command to get up and leave the land in which he was living, and to leave behind his extended family, and even to leave behind his own father's household. Now, while we cannot be certain, it would seem likely that one of the things going on here, and one of the reasons for God's calling Abram to leave *in this way*, had to do with Abram's background, and that of his family of origin.

You see, at the point where this story begins, Abram has already come, with his family, from a place called "Ur of the Chaldeans", moving westward to a place called Haran. We know from extra-biblical sources that the city of UR was a prominent city in that day, and was also a place where moon worship was one of the dominant religious cults. In fact, some scholars have argued that some of the names in Abram's family of origin were derivatives of the names of some of the deities associated with the worship of the moon.

In other words, it may well have been the case that prior to his being called to obey God and follow him, Abram and his family were devotees of this particular cult. As such, when we read this account of Abram's call, what we are reading is the account of his conversion from paganism to the worship of the true God. Indeed, this may be at least a background reason behind God's changing Abram's name in chapter 17 to *Abraham*.

Now, again, we can't be certain about this detail, but it may well have been the case. Either way, given the context that Abram has come out of, his being called to leave his homeland and to leave behind his family meant, at the very least, that he would be "set free from the drag of a familiar [pagan] culture which would be positively harmful and detrimental to a new start", as one writer puts it.

So God commands Abram to leave, and then proceeds to tell him about all the ways that He is going to be blessed. He tells him, firstly, that he is going to make him *a great nation*. A large nation, an identifiable race will come from him. Now, to a man whose wife has been unable to conceive and who now seems to be well beyond the years when child-bearing normally happens, to such a man as this these words would have been almost too good to be true. And yet that is what God promised to Abram.

Further He promised to not only bring forth a great nation from Abram, but to also bless him *personally* and to *make his name great*. And this too would have been an amazing thing for Abram to hear - and a helpful thing. After all, while being told that a great nation will come from you is an encouraging truth - it is also a truth that Abram knows he will never live to see. He will be long gone before enough descendants have come from him to form a legitimate nation in its own right. And so, given that reality, it must have been a great encouragement to be told that God was going to bless him *personally* - and not just *eventually* through his descendants becoming a nation. The result of God's doing this meant that Abram's name would be long-remembered, and long-honored among men. His name would be made great.

Following these descriptions of ways that God was going to *directly* bless Abram, God talks about some other ways that he will be *indirectly* blessed by not only being the *recipient of blessing* but also by becoming *God's channel of blessing to others*.

God says, in verse 2, that he is going to bless Abram *so that he will be a blessing*. God's intention for Abram is not that the blessings he receives will stop and stay with him, but that they will flow *through* Abram and become a source of blessing to others. And not just to his own descendants. God says that in Abram *all the families of the earth* will be blessed. There will be no corner of the globe that will not eventually experience the blessing that God would bring through Abram and his descendants. And any who oppose God's purposes in this, vs 3 tells us, will fall under the curse of God. Likewise, those who align themselves with God's purposes - as carried out through Abram and his descendants - will themselves be blessed.

Well, after receiving God's command and promise, the text tells us very simply that "Abram went". And when he went, he took his wife, of course, and he took Lot, his nephew, and all their possessions, and '~the people they had acquired in Haran", the text says. Now, it's possible that this is a reference to *slaves* but, as one writer has pointed out, slaves would have been considered one of their possessions and so would not need to be mentioned separately as they have been here.

So what does this refer to? Well, at least one scholar has observed that the Hebrew here should probably be more literally translated so that instead of saying "the people they had acquired" the text should say, "the *souls* they had acquired in Haran". And, if that is the case, then the verses here may very well be referring to people with whom Abram had spoken about God and who, subsequently, had also turned from their pagan ways to follow this God who had made such great promises to Abram. Now we don't know if that's what happened. But it may well have happened just that way.

And so this entourage sets out to go *to* and then *through* the land of Canaan which from Haran would have been a journey from north to south. Along the way they make several stops, firstly at a place called *Shechem* - at which point we are reminded that there are Canaanites in the land - the significance of which we will see in a moment. From Shechem, which was about 67 kilometers north of Jerusalem, they went further south to a place midway between the two cities of Bethel and Ai, and then from there they went further south into the desert region known as the Negev. Along the way, we are told, Abram built two different altars which were basically places of worship and, indeed, *acts* of worship, in the midst of Canaan. And so, in summary, Abram's response to God's command and promise was that *he believed God*. And the proof that he believed God is seen in at least three different ways:

- 1) He was *willing* to leave some things behind, and in fact *did* leave them behind.
- 2) He was willing to follow God's call into an essentially *unknown* future.
- 3) He openly worshiped God along the way, publicly calling out and calling *on* the name of the Lord. .

Well, what are we to make of all this? What does it all mean? What *did* it all mean? In the few minutes we have remaining I want to respond to those questions, firstly by thinking about what would have been the significance of these words for the people of God in Moses' day, then tracing their trajectory through the New Testament and then, finish out by thinking about how these words are still important for God's people now.

Now you may be wondering, "Why is he talking about the significance of these words for God's people in Moses' day? What does that have to do with anything?" Well, without going into great detail, the reason for considering how these things would have affected God's people in Moses' day is because Moses is the one that, under the inspiration of God's Spirit, wrote the Book of Genesis, as well as some other books in the OT. And so the first people to have *received* these things and benefited from them *as Scripture* would have been the people that were *with* Moses. And, as this was most likely written by Moses near the *end* of his life, then the people we are talking about are the people of God who have been wandering in the wilderness and who, after neglecting to enter the promised land 40 years earlier, have now come full circle and are standing, poised, on the edge of the promised land, almost ready to go in.

And as they stand there, recalling their past, wondering about what will await them, knowing that there are many strong nations in the land before them who are not going to just walk away without a fight. knowing all these things they receive these words through their leader Moses. And what does he tell them?

He tells them about their ancestor - Abram - from whom they have descended. And in this account of Abram they hear God's words of promise to him to make him a great nation - and they look around and see that this indeed has come true. They are a great nation. They hear the promise to bless Abram and to make his name great. These things they can also confirm. And they hear about how Abram then got up and journeyed through this land, setting up places of worship as he went - even though it was a foreign place, and even though the Canaanites were in the land. And they heard - as we will see next week - how Abram encountered two pagan kings and how God delivered he and Sarai from these pagan kings and abundantly blessed them in the process.

And so the people of God under Moses would have heard these accounts of Abram and in them they would have seen a *symbolic* conquest and consecration of the very land that now lay before them and which they were being assured by their leaders was *their* land and that God meant for them to enter into it and claim it for themselves. The account of Abram would have given them some assurance about these things and it would have given them courage to follow in Abram's footsteps - to trust and obey this God who had determined to bless them in so many ways.

And the fascinating thing is that, when you read about how God's people finally do enter the promised land under Joshua, you see that the path they take is the same path that Abram took - only in reverse. Abram went north to south, stopping at certain places and setting up certain worship sites while Joshua and his people went from south to north, stopping at the same places and setting up similar sites for worship so that, once again, what we have in this account of Abram's journey is a *symbolic conquest* or a *forecast*, as one writer puts it, of what would happen through his descendants much, much later on. (Cassuto).

If, then, the people of God in Moses' day were to learn anything from Abram, then they too would have to be prepared to leave behind some important things and enter into an unknown land, with the firm intention of establishing throughout this new land the true worship of the one true God.

Taking the next step, we can trace the significance of these things through the New Testament. When you look at the life of Jesus, for example, you see a number of important parallels. When Jesus began his ministry, he started out by calling together a group of *disciples*. And the manner in which he approached them and called them out was very similar to the way in which God approaches Abram. Just as God called Abram to drop what he was doing, pack up his things and follow him, so too did the Lord Jesus ask his disciples to respond in similar ways. They were asked to drop what they were doing and follow, even leaving behind their families.

And, while Jesus does not lead them into an unknown land, he leads them into a *life* that is just as unknown and a future that is just as uncertain. And yet he does, in the end, promise them a land, doesn't he? He promises them a *place* and says that he will go ahead of them, to prepare it for their arrival - speaking of course of heaven. Indeed, even in this there is a parallel with Abram since, as the writer of Hebrews tells us (Heb 11), even Abram looked forward to a city "whose designer and builder is God". In other words, Abram looked forward to heaven too.

And so Jesus sovereignly called his 12 disciples - signifying the "new nation of Israel" - to follow him, and they did, leaving behind some important things, heading into an unknown immediate future, with the firm hope of a certain future, somewhere in the distance, and being taught, as they journeyed with Jesus, what it meant to worship God in spirit and truth.

Now there is much more that could be said about Abraham in the NT, but there is enough in just this for us to formulate a basic trajectory for the application of these things for God's people today. Because the reality is this: God is still in the business of sovereignly approaching people and calling them to follow him. How does God approach people and call them today? *Through the proclamation of the Gospel*. When you and I open our mouths and *speak the words*. As we do this, God sovereignly calls people to respond to the Lord Jesus Christ. And as they DO respond, the promise to Abram that through him all the families of the world would be blessed is being fulfilled. Paul makes this clear in the letter to the Galatians, chapter three, when he writes,

*Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed"*

Again, every time someone responds to the Gospel, the promise that Abraham would be a channel of blessing to the nations is being fulfilled. And it is being fulfilled because, as Paul points out later on in the same chapter of Galatians, Jesus is the *specific* and *ultimate* descendant in and through whom the promises of God would be fully realized. And so it is through our being united to Christ, our being "in him", as Ephesians puts it, that we benefit directly from the promises made to Abraham and his most significant descendant - **Jesus**.

And just as Abram responded to God's call, and the disciples responded to Jesus' call, so too are people today meant to respond in similar ways. The call of God, that is still going out through the proclamation of the Gospel, is a call to *leave behind some important things*. To leave behind whatever idols we might have clung to before. To leave behind other contingency plans, in case this one doesn't quite work out as we expected.

To leave behind patterns of behavior and attitudes of the heart that are dishonoring to the Lord. To be willing to forsake anything that might get in the way or prove to be a stumbling block or distract our attention away from God. There is a life and a lifestyle and a life-orientation that we leave behind when we first come to Christ. That's what repentance is all about, it's about turning from a self-serving and self-directed life, admitting your sin and rebellion, and determining to leave those things behind. But the leaving behind doesn't stop there. It's not something that is over and done with in a single moment. It is a daily reality, a daily call to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, that is one way of describing what Christian discipleship is all about: It is this on-going process of learning to leave what we don't need behind.

And, just as it was with Abram, and just as it was with the disciples, we do not just let go of things, we move in new direction. We too follow the Lord Jesus into unknown, un-familiar places and situations. We neither see nor can we predict what is in front of us. We have the promise of a future - an inheritance that is assured - but that blessing is still far away, and even *that* certainty lies on the other side of another uncertainty - the fearful, stinging reality that is death.

Nevertheless, while it seems at times that all we have are words - yet the words we have are the very words of God. And they are as sure as the voice which spoke to Abram, and as full of promise as the promises he received. And the voice we hear in the Scriptures, is the same voice that called out Abram to trust and to follow.

And just as Abram punctuated his travels with an on-going pattern of calling upon the Lord in worship, so it should be our desire that our own path would be distinguished by the same pattern of public devotion to God - not out of slavish obedience, but out of heartfelt gratitude that springs from a person who is deeply aware of the mercy of God. Abram's responses of worship to God' were all *subsequent* to God's determination to bless him, and they were the responses of a man who was *glad* to follow God into the unknown. They were the response of a man who trusted the One who was leading him, even if he didn't know exactly what that all meant.

I remember one time interviewing for an Associate Pastor's position at another church. And we had gotten down to the last steps of the interview process. The church liked me and wanted to issue a call. We had looked at the situation and thought that it would be a pretty good fit. And then the senior pastor asked me one final question. He said, "Scott, I know you could work here, and I know you could do the job we're asking you to do. But I want to know, would you *whistle* while you worked?"

It was a great question. Because what he wanted to know was not *if* I could do the job, but *how* I would do the job. He wanted to know if my heart would really, fully be in it, so much so that I might spontaneously, because I couldn't help myself, break into a whistle, or sing a song.

Let me tell you something, worship is the whistle. It's not the thing that Abram was commanded to do, it's the thing he spontaneously did. It's the thing he *wanted* to do. Because he trusted this God that was leading him, because he believed that this God was going to deliver.

My prayer for us, and for all of God's people today, is that our response of worship to God would be like that - the thing that we spontaneously do as we are responding to him in faith - not to earn God's favor but because we are so deeply *conscious* of his favor and blessing and goodness. My prayer is that our worship of the living God would happen not because it's supposed to but because *wild horses couldn't hold us back*. My prayer is that our lives will be punctuated by, characterized by countless acts of public and private devotion to God, that what happens here, on Sundays, is simply a continuation of what has already been going on, out there, the *rest* of the week.

Through Abram, through the Lord Jesus, and through the proclamation of the Gospel, God has called his people and is still calling his people today, to follow him into unknown places, And to gladly and publicly own him and honor him in the *midst* of those places, through their worship, trusting him for the blessings we can see, and even more for the ones that cannot yet see.