

## **“God chooses a man” (Genesis 11:27-12:5)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

To the Jew there are few men in history greater than Israel’s most revered patriarch, Abraham, who is described as God’s friend three times in Scripture (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; James 2:23). Outside of the Lord Jesus Christ, this man Abraham is arguably the most important man in the Bible.

In the Old and New Testament, Abraham is named in 230 verses. Included in this number is the appearance of his name 67 times in the New Testament. His name appears 30 times in the gospels, 8 times in Acts (5 in one sermon), and 32 times in the epistles. Even in the Bible’s “Hall of Faith” in Hebrews 11, Abraham is given almost half the space - twice that allocated to the great lawgiver, Moses. God is clearly telling us that we are to pay close attention to this man.

When a New Testament writer wanted to teach a lesson on the nature of or importance of faith, Abraham was invariably the model. For instance, when the Apostle Paul taught about the righteousness, which exists through faith, Abraham was the example he pointed to (Rom. 4). When Paul taught that all people became the heirs of God’s promises through faith, Abraham was the foundation of the lessons (Gal. 3). In Hebrews 11, the great faith chapter, Abraham is given striking prominence. Only once do we read “*By faith Isaac,*” and only once do we read “*By faith Jacob,*” but three times the faith of Abraham is mentioned (see verses 8, 9, 17). When James sought to teach his readers that obedient works were the natural expression of a living faith, Abraham’s faith was cited as primary evidence (James 2).

The essential characteristic of a great man of God is that he must be a man of faith. Abraham has been called by some commentators, “the Columbus of Faith.” God explicitly tells us that Abraham was a man of faith as “*Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness*” (Rom 4:3). Of all the tributes that justly can be bestowed upon Abraham, no tribute equals the one conferred upon him by God. He demonstrated that faith without having a written Word of God. Although Abraham had less revealed to him about God’s plan for the redemption of mankind than any great man of God who followed him, it is he who is the timeless example of the faith, which God wants in His people. Incredibly, this nomadic patriarch who possessed so little information about God and His purposes trusted God in a manner, which cannot be surpassed by those who have the knowledge of history and revelation.

As we study the development of Abraham’s faith in Genesis, we will find that God appeared to this man seven times, each time to develop faith in his life. This does not mean that he was perfect, as he had many failures. God gave him four tests and he fell failed on all four of them. However, like Simon Peter, he was able to renew afresh communion with God and overcome his failures. When we first meet him in Genesis 12, he does not appear to be the hero of the faith we know from other passages in the Bible. Here was a man who came to trust in God, rather than in his own self, but it took considerable time and trial to reach that point in his life.

In Genesis 10 and 11 the entire human race is before us, but from Genesis 12 onwards God now singles out a man from whom the Chosen Nation was to spring and attention is directed to him and his descendants. The first eleven chapters make up one main division and are really the foundation on which rests the remainder of the Old Testament. By contrast, the last thirty-nine chapters are on the other side. In the first eleven chapters we cover over 2,000

years, as long a period as the rest of the Bible put together, whereas the remaining thirty-nine chapters covers scarcely four hundred years. Indeed, more than three-fourths of Genesis is occupied with narrating the lives of Abraham and the first three generations of his descendants. So this is a pivotal passage.

*Now these are the generations of Terah: Terah begat Abraham , Nabor, and Haran; and Haran begat Lot. And Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees. And Abraham and Nabor took them wives: the name of Abraham 's wife was Sarai; and the name of Nabor's wife, Milcab, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcab, and the father of Iscab. But Sarai was barren; she had no child. And Terah took Abraham his son, and Lot the son of Haran his son's son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abraham 's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there. And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years: and Terah died in Haran. (v27-32)*

Abraham's life was in a period of time two thousand years before the birth of Christ and when four centuries had passed away since the Flood. We first read of him situated in the ancient city of "Ur of the Chaldees." After the Flood, in the intervening centuries the sons of Ham likely pushed southwards, over the fertile plains of Chaldea, where, under the lead of the mighty Nimrod, they established cities with pagan idolatrous temples. One of these cities, Ur became a Sumerian royal city. Excavations of the royal tombs of the First Dynasty revealed impressive evidences of the wealth and artistic refinement of the city. It has been also shown that they were proficient in mathematics, astronomy, weaving, metalworking, and gem engraving. They also preserved their thoughts by writing on clay tablets. Some historians believe that as many as 250,000 people lived there.

In the midst of this idolatrous and commercialized society there had come a family of the sons of Shem; no doubt attracted by the rich pasturelands outside Ur. The city of Ur was a wicked place where pagan sacrifices, including human sacrifices, abounded. Like countless believers have found over the centuries, the close association of this Shemite family with the idolatrous and abominable practices of the children of Ham, soon tainted the purity and simplicity of the historic faith of their fathers. This was no place for Abraham's faith to be nurtured. God would call him to separate from this environment.

*Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. So Abram departed, as the LORD had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came. (v1-5)*

What we can be certain about is that amid the failures of his family and the darkness of pagan idolatry, God first appeared to Abraham and called him. This initial call came to Abraham not when he was a youth but in later life. Age is no barrier to the call of God. It was a sovereign call that was not conditional on Abraham's faith, background or age. There is not even the slightest hint in the passage that Abraham was looking for God. Indeed, we find that Abraham's family were involved in idolatrous worship.

**And Joshua said unto all the people, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods. (Joshua 24:2, cf. Gen. 31:19-35).**

So God did not call Abraham because He saw some good in this man to commend him to God and then Abraham was extended grace. The Bible repeatedly emphasises that man is born depraved, “*for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth*” (Gen. 8:21). This call had to be one of sovereign unconditional grace. It always has to be or no one would be saved, “*Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain...*” (John 15:16).

There were seven direct communications between God and Abraham. In what form of glory Jehovah revealed Himself we are not told, but it was so tangible that it gave him unmistakable basis of belief for all Abraham’s future by faith. In any case, the celestial vision was accompanied by a call: “*Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto the land that I will show thee*” (Gen 12:1). Abraham was being asked to forsake everything that was important in this life in order to follow God’s call. Although God calls us sovereignly as there is no good in any man, that does not mean that there is nothing for Abraham to do once God’s grace initiates the relationship. Every justified believer is called to evidence good works in obedience to God’s will (cf. Eph. 2:10). This incident tells us much about Abraham but also about Abraham’s God.

There were no great details given as to where God wanted Abraham to go or was there a map provided. The journey was over 800 miles from Ur to Canaan. Abraham had to step out in faith on God’s command, “*unto the land that I will show thee.*” This call is reminiscent of the call of the gospel (cf. Matt. 10:37; Mark 8:35). It is a separation from anything that hinders us in our spiritual life and a separation unto the blessings of God’s place of Christian service. It is a call that must be responded by faith as God rarely gives all of the details or explanations. Our duty is to respond and leave the consequences to God. Faith means taking God at His Word and responding to it.

However, from what Moses tells us in Genesis 11, it was Terah who brought his son Abraham (along with other members of the clan) out of Ur (Gen. 11:31) and made the long trek northward around the Fertile Crescent to the city of Haran. It is clear that Abraham either would not leave the oversight of Terah, or Terah would not permit him to leave Terah’s oversight. We get more information on the precise sequence of events in Stephen’s sermon before the Jewish council, when he declared that God’s call to Abraham in Ur previously was the same call Abraham received presumably a second time in Haran at 75 years old recorded in Genesis 12:1-3. This initial call at Ur instructed him to leave his land, to leave his kindred, and to go to a land, which God would show him,

**And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee. Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell. (Acts 7:2-4)**

The first call demanded absolute confidence in and obedience to the word of Jehovah. It was also a call that required separation, sacrifice, and hardship. In Isaiah 51:2 we are also expressly told that God called Abraham “*alone.*” Therefore, when all the pieces of information are harmonized, we must say that the “call” of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 seems to be his “second call,” something like Jonah’s second commission to go to Nineveh. The call of Abraham shows us the starting-point of the life of faith.

So in this first test of faith at Ur, we see a lack of total conformity. Three things were commanded him by “*The God of glory*” in this call: he was to leave his own country, he was to separate himself from his kindred, and he was to go forth unto a land which Jehovah had promised to show him. Although he left Chaldea, Abraham did not separate himself fully from his kindred, as Terah his father and Lot his nephew accompanied him. This resulted in a delay in entering Canaan of probably at least five years in Haran. Abraham was sidetracked when he sojourned in Haran, which was several hundred miles closer to Canaan. Despite this incomplete obedience, the Lord still used him. Steve Cole makes a pertinent application,

“Thankfully, God often issues second calls to those He uses in His plan of salvation. God called Moses; Moses blew it by killing the Egyptian and fleeing into the wilderness for 40 years. But God called Moses again. God called Jonah; Jonah took off in the opposite direction. But the word of the Lord came unto Jonah a second time. God called Peter; Peter denied the Lord three times. But the Lord restored Peter with the threefold command, “Feed My sheep.” If you’ve begun to follow the Lord, but you’ve gotten sidetracked along the way, today He’s telling you, “Come on, I want you to go on with Me.””

Despite this failure of partial obedience, it should be acknowledged that Abraham had sufficient faith to forsake the pagan gods for the guidance of the God who called him; had sufficient faith to leave Ur and its material advantages for life as a nomad in dangerous wildernesses; and had sufficient faith to migrate in the direction, which God desired. No doubt Abraham’s family and especially his worldly neighbours thought, like his ancestor Noah, that he was foolish to leave such promising circumstances to go out into the unknown in obedience to the voice of an Unseen God but, “*by faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place, which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed*” (Heb. 11:8). This obedience evidences the justifying faith in his heart.

As part of this second call, we find wonderful promises made to Abraham. God’s commands are not always accompanied by reasons, but always by promises, expressed or understood. God promised here that though this old man was childless, He would make of him a “*great nation.*” Although Abraham was the youngest son, God would make Abraham’s name great; and although Abraham would be separated from family, in him would all the families of the earth be blessed. There is a marked contrast with the people of Babel. They migrated to Shinar from their own selfwill to build man’s city so that they could make them a great name. By contrast, Abraham left Ur at God’s command to seek out “*a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God*” (Heb. 11:10) and as he went God promised to make him a “*great name.*” James Boice notes,

“We are highly impressed with what we imagine men and women can do, and we want to achieve greatness ourselves. But usually this is mere wishful thinking. Very few of us will be great in the world’s terms. And the greatness we do achieve, if we achieve it, soon

passes away and we are forgotten like the builders of Babylon. It is different when God acts for us; then, the results are permanent, and the greatness He creates is true greatness.”

So Abraham was able to leave the advantages of Ur and embrace the hardships in the exile, as he “*went out not knowing whether he went?*” (Heb. 11:8b). He turned his back upon what the world would regard as a great city and civilization as saw by faith the “*city which hath foundations.*” He was never tempted by the great cities of Canaan but was content to wander as a pilgrim in his tent for the next century as a testimony of walking by faith. This was a permanent life of separation. FB Meyer notes,

“The key to Abraham’s life is the word “Separation.” He was from the first to last a separated man. Separated from his fatherland and kinsfolk; separated from Lot; separated, as a pilgrim and stranger, from the people of the land; separated from his own methods of securing a fulfillment of the promises of God; separated from the rest of mankind by special sorrows, which brought him into closer fellowship with God than has ever been reached by man; separated to high and lofty fellowship in thoughts and plans, which God could not hide from him.”

The principle of progressive revelation is very evident in the Book of Genesis in the life of Abraham, especially regarding the Abrahamic Covenant. We find that Abraham’s understanding of the true nature of this first promise that accompanied his step of faith deepened over his lifetime. The covenant itself will not be formally ratified until the sacrifice is offered in chapter 15, and Abraham does not receive the covenant sign of circumcision until chapter 17. As first he received and understood the promise referred to his literal offspring, but as the covenant became more explicit and the light more clear. Paul tells us that Abraham discerned 2,000 years in advance that the promised seed became to him the symbol of his coming Saviour, “*He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, and to thy seed, which is Christ?*” (Gal. 3:16). Christ also implied that Abraham understood this when rebuking the Pharisees, “*your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad?*” (John 8:56). This illustrates the Biblical principle here that if we live up to our light, we shall have more light unfolded.

On this middle aged man rested the hope of God’s sovereign plan for the future of the world. There is no indication that Abraham was significant in terms of material wealth or position in the Middle East when God called him. He was far from a young man and hampered by a pagan upbringing. Yet, he demonstrates that a life yielded to God’s sovereign purpose can make a profound impact on the course of human history. God delights in taking the nobodies and making them somebody for His glory (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26-31).

However, the promised results of this blessing would not be evident during the lifetime of Abraham. But that simply caused Abraham to walk by faith and not by sight. When God calls you, then step out in faith and let Him lead you on this wonderful walk of faith. The endpoint is guaranteed as it ends in glory. However, only a wise and sovereign God knows and plans the hills and valleys you must cross in between.

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Who is sovereign in salvation? What do we mean by God's sovereign call?
2. How great is Abraham in the history of redemption?
3. Why is biblical separation so important?
4. Did Abraham exhibit perfect obedience when he heard the call of God?
5. What is the principle of progressive revelation and how is it seen in the life of Abraham?