

Genesis 12:1-9 **The Call of Abram**

The chorus of the song “Trust and Obey” is as simple as its theme,
Trust and obey, for there’s no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.”

Such a song easily describes the life of Abram. By way of review, let us recall that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are as familiar to us as the stories about them. These individuals represent the beginnings of the nation of Israel, the chosen people of their God, Yahweh. Throughout the book of Genesis, these four great patriarchs have their stories told and, in the telling, certain themes emerge. One of these themes is the importance of having descendants, the constant concern over who will be the heir to the promise. Another theme is land, specifically Canaan. This land, though promised to the patriarchs and their descendants, is not fully occupied until centuries later. Yet another theme is that of family conflict. Few elements of the biblical narrative are more relatable to us than the seemingly constant bickering and quarreling among the families of these men of God. A final theme is that of deception. These men, and their wives deceive one another at an alarming rate. Again, despite the continuation of the *imago dei*, the sinful nature of man is frightfully evident.

As far as fundamental facts are concerned, while the genealogies of the early chapters of Genesis are impossible to use as a means of arriving at specific historical dates for events such as Creation, the Flood, or the building of the Tower of Babel, the biblical record does allow us to safely assert Abram's birth as occurring in the year 2166 BC. In terms of language, both Sumerian and Akkadian were spoken in Mesopotamia, so it is very likely that Abram was at least bilingual. Also, at the time Abram began his migration, Haran was a commercial center populated mainly by the Amorites. These Amorites spoke a Semitic dialect with which Abram would have also been familiar in order to do business. And the Amorites were an expanding people, and had connections throughout the Tigris-Euphrates River Valley and into Canaan itself.

Therefore, when Abram migrated to Canaan, he may likely have been part of a larger Amorite movement. The Canaanite peoples who greeted him had ruled the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River for centuries before Abram arrived. The language spoken by the Canaanites was similar enough to that spoken by the Amorites that Abram would have had no difficulty communicating, at least the simplest necessary words to get along. Over the years, the increasing Amorite migration pushed the Canaanites into the coastal regions of Palestine and the Jordan River Valley. The Amorites, therefore, tended to settle in the central hill country. We will see that Abram, too, settled in the hill country as well.

The Command

God began His conversation with Abram by stating,
“Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father’s house,
To the land which I will show you” (v. 1).

There has been some speculation regarding where Abram lived when this conversation occurred. The narrative context of Genesis has the family already in Haran. The previous chapter concludes, “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 out together from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to enter the land of Canaan; and they went as far as Haran, and settled there” (Genesis 11:31).

Yet, later, God said to Abram, “I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it” (Genesis 15:7). And Stephen, in his final speech, said, “²hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³and said to him, ‘leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you’” (Acts 7:2-3). One option is that this original call to Abram came when he was still in Ur, and the biblical narrative simply concluded the narrative regarding the descendants of Shem in chapter 11 by including the move from Ur to Haran and now there is something of a ‘flashback’ to the specific call received by Abram.

An alternative explanation is that perhaps God appeared and called to Abram on two different occasions, as He progressively revealed His will to him. That is, God appeared to Abram in Ur, as evidenced by Genesis 15 and Acts 7, but also appeared to him again as recorded in Genesis 12. It is not unreasonable to consider that as consistent with God’s character to reveal His will in parts. Either conclusion is in agreement with the biblical text.

One element of God’s command that is worthy of notice is that it draws Abram’s attention to what he must leave. God tells Abram he must leave his country, his relatives, and his father’s house. That is, Abram must leave the land with which he is familiar, his family, and even his specific place of residence. Interestingly, in a later narrative, when God spoke to Abraham for the last time, God said, “take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you” (Genesis 22:2). As we will see, this was a specific challenge to Abraham’s faith in that Isaac was the promised ‘seed’ from whom the great nation would emerge. The point is that in each conversation, the command moved from the general to the more personal - “your country,” “your relatives,” “your father’s house”; “your son,” “your only son,” “Isaac.” God, then, is directing Abram’s attention to ever more intimate relationships with which he must part in order to be obedient.

Also, the destination in each case is not specific. In Genesis 12, Abram is told to go “to the land which I will show you” (v.1). In Genesis 22, Abraham is told to go to “one of the mountains of which I will tell you” (Genesis 22:2). We can probably all attest that God does not often reveal His entire plan for our lives. Even in the act of His own revelation of Himself to His people, we see that this happened in stages. Adam may have walked with God in the Garden, but once sin forever marred that relationship, Abel knew less of God than Noah, who in turn knew less of God than Abram. Eventually Moses would know God in more detail than the patriarchs, and David knew Him better still. Finally, in the Incarnation of Jesus, “¹God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, ²in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He

made the world. ³And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Hebrews 1:1-3).

It seems that what is clear is that God is asking for Abram to cut ties of increasing levels of intimacy. Abram must go forth from the region of his birth, leave behind the extended family unit that has supported him, and even move out on his own taking only his wife and nephew and some servants. He would be required to trust God, rather than the social and economic resources available in Haran. And he must do all of this without a specific end in view. We are also reminded of Jesus words, “he who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Matthew 10:37). Yet, Abram simply trusted and obeyed. Thus we see a great example of the faith for which Abram is justly known.

The Promises

God continued,

“²And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;
³And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will curse
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (v. 2-3).

The promise given by God to Abram began with making him “a great nation” (v. 2). The word used is *gôy* which specifically means ‘nation’ rather than other Hebrew words for ‘people.’ That is, this was a promise to make Abram the ancestor of not only a particular ethnic group, but literally of a political entity with a territory and a government. This must have seemed an extraordinary promise, as Abram was already advanced in age, seventy-five, and Sarai had been barren. Abram might acquire land by conquest or purchase. Wealth and fame he might also achieve their human endeavor. But to father a nation meant offspring, and that was only possible as a gift from God.

The second promise, that God would “bless you” (v. 2) followed from the first. If Abram became a great nation, he clearly would have been blessed by God. The word used for blessing, *bārak*, can mean either progeny or material wealth. Since offspring had already been promised, we can assume that this particular promise referred to material possessions. We will see that, like the other promises, these were applied to Abram’s descendants as well as to himself. For example, “now Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. And the Lord blessed him” (Genesis 26:12). Jacob, as well, acquired numerous livestock and servants (Genesis 32). And Joseph was second only to Pharaoh in all of Egypt.

But this promise was also to Abram, himself. And as we will see, Abram acquired such wealth that he and his nephew Lot could not remain together because the strain their vast herds of livestock put on the land. “⁵Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. ⁶And the land could not sustain them while dwelling together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to remain

together” (Genesis 13:5-6). In fact, even pagans recognized that Abram had been blessed by God. “Now it came about at that time that Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, ‘God is with you in all that you do’” (Genesis 21:22).

Not only would Abram father a great nation and be blessed by God, but he would become famous, that is, God promised to “make your name great” (v. 2). In ironic contrast to the builders of the Tower of Babel, who sought to make a name for themselves by defying God, it was the submission and obedience of Abram that allowed him to become great. Success was not achieved, it was given by God. But this promise was more than a promise of mere celebrity. It was a promise that kings would descend from Abram.

Years later in Abram’s life, when this promise was renewed, God elaborated, “I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you” (Genesis 17:6). And it was a promise that was fulfilled in Abram’s lifetime, at least in the eyes of his contemporaries. For example when Abraham sought to purchase a burial place for his beloved wife Sarah, he found his reputation had preceded him. “⁵The sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, ⁶‘hear us, my lord, you are a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our graves; none of us will refuse you his grave for burying your dead’” (Genesis 23:5-6).

Another promise of God was that Abram “shall be a blessing” (v. 2). That is, Abram was not only to be a recipient of God’s blessing, but the conduit through which that blessing would be passed on to others. The details of how this would be are given in the following set of promises. But here we can note that though the fulfillment of this promise would manifest itself even in Abram’s lifetime, this promise also suggested also the coming of the Messiah. However, none of this could happen of Abram remained in Haran. The condition was that Abram must go.

God’s promise of blessing others through Abram related to his relationship with others. God promised that He would “will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse” (v. 3). As the narrative of Abram unfolded, he would be both blessed and cursed by others. This blessing was, in one sense, conditional. Individual blessing would be related to one’s relationship with Abram. But on the other hand, there was a universal promise as well.

The final promise was that in Abram “all the families of the earth will be blessed” (v. 3). This elaborated on the previous promise that Abram would be a blessing by indicating the recipients of that blessing - all the peoples of the world. This promise began to be fulfilled even during the lifetimes of the patriarchs. For example we will see that Laban claimed that “if now it pleases you, stay with me; I have divined that the Lord has blessed me on your account” (Genesis 30:27). And even the Egyptian Potiphar was blessed. “It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the Lord blessed the Egyptian’s house on account of Joseph; thus the Lord’s blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field” (Genesis 39:5).

Of course, the ultimate fulfillment of this promise was through the ‘seed’ that was completed with the Incarnation of Jesus as Messiah. In his second sermon after Pentecost, Peter argued,

“²⁵It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’

²⁶For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways” (Acts 3:25-26).

And Paul insisted,

“¹⁶I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. . . . ⁹There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹¹For there is no partiality with God” (Romans 1:16, 2:9-11).

The Journey

“So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran” (v. 4). God spoke and Abram obeyed. Like Noah, Scripture does not record Abram as questioning God, or asking why he must leave. Neither did Abram press God for details about the land to which he is going. He simply obeyed.

Abram did not travel alone. “Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan” (v. 5). Apparently Lot was under the protection of Abram. Why this was so is not indicated. It may have been that with his grandfather Terah dead, Abram was the logical protector. It also may have been that, with Nahor living in Ur and Sarai barren, it seemed that only through Lot could the family line of Abram be perpetuated. In other words, Nahor had the likelihood of fathering additional children, or he may already have added to the two daughters mentioned in Genesis 11. Abram needed Lot to continue the family line.

Another detail to note is that Abram was financially secure. He had not only many possessions, which would have included his herds of livestock, but also slaves. This was no immigration of an indigent and impoverished family on the margins of survival. It is not as though Abram had exhausted all possibilities of success in Haran and needed to move on in hopes of saving his family from utter destitution. Abram had made connections. He had established markets for his flocks and herds. Abram was removing himself from a lucrative position and trusting God that he could continue to flourish in a new land.

The journey of the family is detailed. Abram first made his way to a Canaanite settlement later known as Shechem. He settled between mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, west of the Jordan River, about midway between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. “Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite was then in the land” (v. 6). The oak, or terebinth, marked the resting place on the journey. Such a singular tree, or perhaps a grove of trees, might have been a place of worship for the pagan Canaanites. While there is no hint that the patriarchs engaged in such practices, clearly the tree had significance even for them. It would be used by Jacob as a place

where he buried the idols belonging to a member of his household (Genesis 35:40), where Joshua set up a large stone to commemorate the people's vow to serve Yahweh only (Joshua 24:16), and where Abimelech tried to usurp authority after the death of Gideon (Judges 9:6).

While there, "the Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'to your descendants I will give this land' (v. 7). First God had spoken to Abram. Now God appeared to him. The increasing intimacy of the relationship was marked by a further explanation of the promise. This is our first indication that Abram had arrived at his destination. Until then, Abram had simply been instructed to go to a land he would be shown. Now he was being shown. But we must notice that the land was not promised to Abram directly, but to his heirs. Also, God made clear that Lot was not to be the person through whom the family line would continue. The land would be given to Abram's descendants, not his brother Haran's. However, Scripture had already announced that Sarai was barren. This promise, then, emphasized the divine intervention that would be required.

Then, Abram the pilgrim became Abram the builder. "He built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him" (v.7). Notice that Abram did not build a tower or a city, but an altar. His purpose was not to settle down and establish himself, but to worship. It was an occupation to which Abram apparently devoted himself at different stops along the journey. "Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord" (v. 8).

The wording indicates the importance of the altar to Abram. He 'pitched' his tents. These were portable structures that could be easily dismantled and carried away. But Abram 'built' an altar. The word indicates something of permanence. When Abram left, the altar remained as a marker. It is also clear that Abram avoided settling in the Canaanite settlements themselves. Instead, he chose the land between settlements that would become known as Bethel and Ai. Certainly he needed the acreage for his flocks, but also implied is that Abram was not interested in dwelling among the pagan inhabitants of the land.

"Abram journeyed on, continuing toward the Negev" (v. 9). Perhaps he was merely looking for more space for his flocks. Perhaps this was just part of the nomadic lifestyle to which herdsmen such as Abram were accustomed. Nevertheless, Abram's last stop was in the desert area in the south of Canaan. But as we will see, Abram's journeys were not finished.

Takeaways

Abram is justly remembered as a man of faith. Though he certainly failed, and as we will see he failed in some astonishing ways, he nevertheless obeyed God when commanded to abandon his home and family. Not all of us are likely to receive such a command from God, though some of us are. In any case, each of us is commanded by God to do something. To live according to our faith, to evangelize the lost, to consider other more important than ourselves, to rejoice always, to pray continually. May we rest in the sufficiency of God's grace to simply trust and obey.