

Stepping Forward in Faith

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| <i>Text</i> | Genesis 11:27-12:9 |
| <i>Readings</i> | Hebrews 11:8-19, Galatians 3:6-18 |
| <i>Theme</i> | Abram obeyed God's command to leave his home and move to the land God promised him. |
| <i>Purpose</i> | To highlight God's plan and promises and urge you to respond in obedient faith. |

Context: In Genesis chapters 6-9 we read the story of Noah and the flood. In chapter 10 we read the genealogy of Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. In chapter 11 we read about the Tower of Babel and how God scattered all the peoples of the world as a judgement on their pride.

In the middle of chapter 11 the focus of this book narrows sharply. Up to this point we read about the whole world, all the nations; here the account focuses on the line of Shem, and especially on one man, Abraham, who lived in Ur around 2000 BC.

It is interesting to note that Noah was the tenth in line from Adam and that Abram is the tenth in line from Shem. The Holy Spirit wants us to see that God used these two men at significant points in his plan of salvation. Noah was rescued from the flood so God could begin again with humanity. Abram was chosen by God to be the father of God's covenant people. Chapter 12 mark a new phase in God's plan of salvation.

Read: Genesis 11:27-12:9

Many of you have moved from one city to another or even from one country to another. Moving is a major event! You say goodbye to family members and friends; you move away from a place you have lived for many years and where everything is familiar; you relocate yourself and your family to a new situation; and then you have to find a home to live in, you have to settle in to a whole new environment, make new friends, and begin in a new school or workplace. Psychiatrists and counsellors will tell you that moving is one of the most stressful things you can do. Yet, people are moving all the time.

Some who move have some idea of where they are going. Today you can visit the place ahead of time, or you can look it up on Google Earth and find out a great deal of information from the Internet.

Others who move have little idea about where they are going or what awaits them.

That was certainly true of Abraham and his family. God called them to leave their own country and to move to a land he would show them, but they had no idea what that land was like. To move like this took much courage and faith. Today we want to consider God's call and Abram's response. As we do so we will see that there are many applications to us in our lives.

1. God's Call

a. God's election

From the nations scattered at Babel God chose one man and promised to make him into a great nation. Why did God choose this man? What made him pick Abram from among all these peoples?

It was not because Abram worshipped the Lord. Yes, he was in the line of Shem, but most people in the world had forgotten about the Lord. Much later Joshua told the people of Israel that Terah and Abraham "lived beyond the river and worshipped other gods." (Joshua 24:2). Ur and Haran were main centres of worship for the moon goddess. The Lord did not choose Abram because of his faith or goodness or righteousness; no, he was an idolater when God spoke to him.

God chose him because this was God's choice. He chose him out of his grace. Paul in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 used Abraham as an example of God's election and emphasised that he was not saved by his works but by faith in God's promises. God chose him because this was his sovereign will.

That is true for you and me. Sometimes we are inclined to think that there must be something in us that prompted God to choose us - some goodness, some merit, something of worth. Not so! God chose his people because his grace and mercy, "not by works so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:9). This is the consistent teaching of the Bible. God did this so that all the glory for salvation might go to him, not to us.

b. God's command

We read in chapter 12:1 that the Lord came to Abram and called him to leave his country and go to the land he would show him. The Lord knew this was a difficult command and he did not try to soften it. "Leave your country, your people and your father's household..." He had to leave all that was familiar and go to an unknown land. A move like this is difficult today, but even more so then with the strong family ties of that culture, and the limited communication, and the difficulties of travel - all travel was by foot; there were no cars or trains or planes.

This call to Abram came while he was living in Ur. That city was located in the region of Babylonia, just above the Persian Gulf.

The way this is written may give the impression that the call came to Abram when he was in Haran but that is not the case. We know this from Stephen's speech in the book of Acts. He told the Jews; "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran." (Acts 7:2-4) This is why the NIV translates: "The Lord had said to Abram..."

Abram heard God's command and obeyed it. He told Sarah, his wife, and his father about God's call. We can assume that Terah decided they should all go together. In Genesis 11:31 we read that Terah took Abram, Lot and Sarah and all they had and "together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go on to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there." Haran was about 1000 kilometres from Ur and about halfway to Canaan. It too was a major city and the family settled there until Terah died. We don't know why they stopped there nor how long they lived in Haran, but after his father died the Lord appeared to Abram again and sent him on to the land of Canaan (Acts 7:4).

c. We have considered God's election, his command, and now we consider his promise

"I will make you into a great nation", God said.

Sometimes you hear something that seems too good to be true, like the letters you get in the mail telling you that you have won an overseas holiday or a brand new BMW!

Maybe this is what Abram thought when he heard this. A great nation? He was 75 and they did not have any children, not even one! Moses made a point of that in chapter 11:30; "Now Sarai was barren"; and in case you missed this he added, "She had no children." So how was this great nation going to happen?! It seemed impossible. But we know that nothing is impossible with God! "I will make you into a great nation", God promised.

"And I will bless you." God's blessing is his favour. God would provide for him, look after him, be good to him.

The Lord continued on; "I will make your name great." This looks back to the men who built the Tower of Babel - they wanted to make a name for themselves (Genesis 11:4). But it is God who makes men great, and he promised to do this for Abraham. We know that the Lord kept his promise. People all over the world know "Father Abraham" – Jews, Muslims and Christians. He has a great name.

Then the Lord promised that he would be a blessing: "...all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (verse 3). This was not a promise of physical blessings primarily, but rather of spiritual blessing. God promised the joy and privilege of knowing him with all the benefits that go along with that. He promised the blessing of the gospel - the good news about the Lord Jesus.

This promise looks ahead to the coming of the Lord Jesus. Everything God promised to Abraham was fulfilled in Christ.

Jesus has a great nation; he is the head of his people the church, a royal priesthood, a holy nation; and he is the king of his kingdom.

Jesus has a great name; God "gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow." (Philippians 2:9f).

Jesus is the source of blessing for all who believe in him. Paul explained this in Galatians 3:8; "The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham" with these words; "All nations will be blessed through you."

God narrowed the focus of salvation to the people of Israel so that on the Day of Pentecost he might broaden it out again to all the nations of the world. On that day the good news about the death and resurrection was proclaimed in many languages so that it would go out to all the nations.

We are part of this. We have received Abraham's blessing through Jesus Christ. The promise given to Abraham is also give to us.

2. The Lord called Abraham and he responded in three ways

a. First, as we have seen, he obeyed God's call

He did not do that because he was so eager to leave Ur. That city dated back to 3700 BC and had an advanced civilisation and culture. Houses were made of bricks and many were two stories. Some larger homes had 10 to 20 rooms. The kitchens were well equipped with good plumbing systems. There was no reason to leave.

But he had the command of God. So he left "as the Lord had told him" (verse 4). He left Ur, and later on he left Haran. He took Sarah his wife and Lot his nephew and all the people of his household and they set out for the land of Canaan. He obeyed the word of God.

Some of you might be thinking; "That's all very well for Abraham because God came and spoke to him directly. If I had a word from the Lord like that it would be a lot easier."

Don't be too quick to come to that conclusion. We often think that the Lord was speaking to Abraham all the time, but that's not so. Yes, God spoke to him directly, but he often had to wait many years before the Lord came to him again.

God does not come to us today and tell us to move to Christchurch or Australia or Brazil. God does not speak to us directly as he spoke to Abraham and Moses and the prophets. But he does speak to us in the Bible. This is his word and God makes it very clear what it is he wants us to do.

Are you listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures? Are you hearing the word of Christ in the Bible? Are you doing what God wants you to do? Will you obey God's laws? Will you do what he commands?

b. Abraham obeyed God. Secondly, he believed God - he was a man of faith

He set out for the land of Canaan. He had never been there before. From Haran it was 1000 kilometres on foot. He had no idea what he would find when he arrived. He did not know the details of God's plan, but he trusted in God.

This why he is listed in Hebrews 11 as one of the great men of faith: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going." (Heb 11:8). He stepped out in faith; he believed God would lead him; he trusted that God would provide for him; he was confident of God's providence.

And he continued in faith. He arrived in the land and moved through it; and as he travelled he looked around him. We read; "At that time the Canaanites were in the land" (verse 6). The land was already occupied.

Here was a problem, a major obstacle. "Possession is nine tenths of the law" we say. Well the Canaanites were in possession of the land.

Of course, the Lord knew what was going through his mind, and in the next verse we read (v 7); "The Lord appeared to Abram" and said; "To your offspring I will give this land." "Yes, it is occupied; yes, others already live here, but this land will be your land. I will give it to you." That would take a long time but Abraham believed God's promise. He was a man of faith.

Do you believe God's promises? Are you living by faith? Do you trust in God?

When you come to important decisions do you trust that God will guide you and lead you?

When you are going through financial hardship do you believe that God will give you your daily bread?

When you are in a time of ill-health do you trust that God is with you and watching over you?

When you experience great loss, such as the death of a loved one, do you believe that this too is God's will and do you rely on him?

We need to live by faith in the Lord.

c. Abram obeyed God, he believed God, and thirdly, he worshipped God

"Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem" (verse 6).

Shechem was located in central Palestine in a fertile valley between Mt Ebal and Mt Gerizim. It was a very important spot. Much later, after they had occupied the land, the people of Israel would gather here to hear the covenant blessings and curses (Deut 27f). This is where Joshua assembled the tribes of Israel to give his farewell speech before his death (Josh 24). And this is where the Solomon's kingdom divided in two (1 Kings 12). It was fitting that this was the first place Abram came to in the land. There he built an altar to the Lord (verse 7).

After that he went further south and pitched his tent between Bethel and Ai. There he built another altar. One writer notes that Abram pitched his tent and built an altar; He pitched his tent for himself but he built an altar for the Lord.

He was a pilgrim and a stranger in the land, moving about in tents; but he left behind him altars - permanent structures that marked the land as belonging to the Lord. With these actions he "planted a flag", as it were, in this new land, like Scott did when he arrived at the South Pole. Abram claimed the land for the Lord.

And "he called on the name of the Lord." He worshipped God. This was his response to all that God had done for him.

This is our response too. This is why we are here today, gathered in worship.

We are a pilgrim people, on our journey to our home in heaven.

We remember that all the promises of God centre in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We recall the blessings God has given to us as his people.

We remind ourselves that we are to obey God's call on our lives.

And we live by faith in the Son of God who gave himself for us.

And in response we worship this great God who has given us so much.

Amen