

GOD'S CALL TO ABRAM

Genesis 12:1-13:4
Key Verse: 12:2

Lesson 6

"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."

The first eleven chapters of Genesis tell us that God created a good and beautiful world and put man in it to be the ruler, shepherd and caretaker of all things. God was pleased and man was happy (Ge 1,2). Then man and woman disobeyed God and sin entered the world (3). At first, disobeying God seemed to be very trivial. But it was not. Because of sin, man lost paradise. Because of sin, death came; men were alienated from God and from each other. A man killed his brother; then, he lived in fear, expecting to be killed at anytime. He became a restless wanderer who produced only bad fruit. As time went on, things did not get better--they got worse. Men deliberately left God out of their lives--especially out of their marriages--and became corrupt and violent (6). The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth and his heart was full of pain. So God judged the world and destroyed it with a flood. But this did not solve the sin problem (8:21). Even Noah, the one righteous man whom God saved out of the flood had sin in his heart. He offered a blood sacrifice to God, and God accepted it. God then made a plan to deal with sin in another way.

Beginning in Genesis 12 God called one man, Abram, and gave him a covenant promise. And Abram believed God and obeyed his word. God promised to make him a source of blessing for all people. God's best blessing is salvation from sin and his kingdom.

In the New Testament, Jesus speaks of Abraham. He called him a man of truth (Jn 8). He said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." (Jn 8:56) Paul said that Abraham is our father if we walk in his footsteps of faith. (Ro 4:12) He also said that those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham the man of faith (Gal 3:9); and God "redeemed us so that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus..." (Gal 3:14) In chapters 12-25 we will study about Abram's faith and the God of Abram.

1. Abram's times

The times of Abram were godless times. People who live without God are like orphans, children with no parents. They seem to have absolute freedom, but they are bound by fear and fatalism. Freedom from God means slavery to everything else.

First, Abram's world. Egypt was the most advanced civilization of the times. But under the superficial veneer of culture, there was no justice; morals and ethics were too corrupt to imagine. In Egypt, men ruled over other men harshly and material things seemed to rule all men.

The great cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were thriving in Abram's time. They were located in the beautiful Jordan valley, which was like the garden of the Lord and the land of Egypt (13:10). But the people there were sinning greatly against the Lord (13:13). The men of

Sodom were homosexuals. Their eyes were blinded by curiosity and lust. Men abandoned normal relations and committed indecent acts with other men and received in themselves due penalty for their perversion (19:4,5; Ro 1:27). In Genesis 14 we can see the unstable political situation of the times. It was like the feudal age, with powerful kings and cities seeking to exert control on weaker ones. There were continual wars. Weak cities were plundered and their women and children taken into slavery.

And what about the intellectual and spiritual climate of those times? The creation order of God was turned upside-down. People served idols. The Canaanites worshipped their gods with sexual orgies and drunken feasts. The worst of the superstitious practices was the practice of offering children as burnt sacrifices to idols. How miserable a man must be if he resorts to burning his son to appease the gods. This is not just an old story about other people. It is a direct way of telling us how much people who live without God suffer in the agony of fear.

But even though men abandoned God, God did not abandon men. He had great compassion on mankind living in slavery to fear and to material things. In order to save such men, God called one man, Abram.

Second, Abram's family (11:27-32). When God called Abram, he was 75 years old and his wife Sarai was 65. Abram and his 2 brothers, Haran and Nahor, were born and raised in Ur of the Chaldeans. Haran, the father of Lot, died there. This was ancient Babylonia, a region noted for astrologers, sooth-sayers, and all kinds of practitioners of the occult arts. Abram's family were also idol worshippers. (Jos 24:2)

God first called Abram to leave his country and his people when he was living in Ur. (Acts 7:2,3) At that time, Abram's father, Terah, took his 2 surviving sons and his grandson Lot and left for Canaan. But when he got to Haran, he decided to settle there.

Abram was wealthy, but he had one great personal problem. His wife Sarai was barren, so he had no children. To a man with a sense of history, this is tragic, for it meant that he had no one to whom he could pass his name and wealth, his intellectual and spiritual heritage. His line would end with himself. He may have found some comfort in his nephew Lot, whom he looked upon as a son, but there was still a fatalistic element and a deep sorrow in his heart.

2. God calls Abram (12:1-3)

Genesis 12:1-3 says, "The Lord had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you...I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'" This call contains a command and a promise. The command is, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. God's call to Abram was specific. Abram, a man immersed in his times and in his family, was already 75 years old. For such a man to leave the security of his homeland, his family and friends--to cut these precious ties and go into an unknown world was indeed difficult. But if he was to become a man whom God could bless and use, it was necessary. God wanted him to become independent of his idolatrous family. He wanted him to be the pioneer of a new history. He wanted him to depend on God alone--not on family, friends, or on past experience or his habitual ways of thinking and acting.

When we begin the life of faith, we must break away from our past lives. Family, home,

my own country are not necessarily bad. But when we depend on these human things, we cannot wholly trust and obey God. For some people, to go from our own country and our father's house is a spiritual decision which results in a new and better relationship with our human families. We become independent by becoming dependant on God. For others, it means actually leaving physically, breaking human ties. In every case, however, the earthly things which we once trusted and to which we once clung for security and help must be surrendered as we take hold of God's word and begin a new life of obedience to him.

When our hearts and feet are deeply caught in the sinful world, God calls us to repent and leave a life of sin and turn to God.

God did not call Abram in order to make life miserable for him. God said to Abram, "I will bless you and you will be a blessing." "I will make you into a great nation." "I will give you this land." (7) God called Abram to bless him. God's blessing is a covenant promise, for God is a God of promise. When we become Christians, we take hold of God's promise and enter into a covenant relationship with God. God promised Abram--in spite of his childlessness--to make him a great nation. This means that Abram would have many descendants. He promised to make Abram's name great. This was a promise to train him until he could become a truly great man. A man's greatness is found in his inner character. He is great because of what he is--not because of what he has. God would make Abram great. A great name also implies honor. Abram would be honored and respected by all men. But the greatest blessing that God can give a man is to make him a source of blessing to others. God promised Abram that he would be a blessing--that all peoples on earth would be blessed because of him. He would not live and die a useless old man whose family line would end with himself. Through him and his descendants God would pour out the greatest blessing God can give. God's promise to make Abram a source of blessing for all mankind was finally fulfilled in Jesus, whom God sent to die for our sins and be raised to life so that all who believe in him might be saved from sin and destruction. (Acts 3:25,26)

God calls us into a covenant relationship with himself in order to bless us and make us a blessing. Each of us can become a source of blessing to others when we accept God's salvation and his calling to participate in his redemptive work in our own times by sharing his gospel and his word and his love with the people of our own time. If we hold our faith and blessing for ourselves alone or for our own families or people, then something is fundamentally wrong. Such believers among the Jews were the ones who nailed Jesus to the cross. When our faith is based on God's covenant, not only are we blessed, but we become a source of blessing for our families, our neighbors and for the world.

God promised to protect Abram from a hostile world. Those who cursed him would be cursed; those who blessed him would be blessed. He promised Abram's descendants the land of Canaan as an inheritance--even though the powerful, war-like Canaanites were already there.

God's promises plant hope. Hope is like the bright sunlight that dispels the dark clouds of fatalism and despair. Or it is like the morning star that rises in the sky in the darkest hours just before dawn.

Genesis 12:4 says, "So Abram left as the Lord had told him..." We don't know

about Abram's theology. All we know is that he believed the word of God and that he showed his belief by obeying God's command. In the New Testament, when Peter received Jesus call, "Follow me", he left his boats and nets and followed Jesus. James and John left their father and servants in the boat and followed Jesus. (Mk 1:16-20)

When Abram arrived in Canaan he looked around and saw the Canaanites. They were strong and war-like. They lived in walled cities. But when the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land," (7) Abram believed God and built an altar. It was an altar of thanksgiving. It was like a flag planted to claim the new land. He did not own even a foot of land, but in his heart, he claimed the whole land because God had promised it to him.

Abram's life in Canaan was an altar-building life. He went to a place between two of the most powerful cities and built another altar. There he called on the name of the Lord. "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Ro 10:13) He had no army and no walled city. But he trusted the Lord. The Lord God was his shield and his protection. So he could live by faith, without fear, in the land of the Canaanites.

3. Abram in Egypt (12:10-13:4)

Abram was not sent to Egypt by God. He did not pray about going. He went to Egypt because there was a famine in Canaan. He had a material problem. He had to survive. It was the reasonable thing to do. Because he did not go by faith, he was full of fear. So before he entered Egypt he made a plan for survival. It was a brilliant plan, and it worked. When he lied to Pharaoh about his beautiful wife, Pharaoh indeed took her into his harem and Abram was treated well for her sake, and his life was spared because of her. (13) But it was also a very dumb plan, for it cost Abram his wife and his slender hope of having a son and heir. Abram became rich and miserable and more hopeless than ever. He did not build altars in Egypt and he did not pray. But God helped him anyway and inflicted diseases on Pharaoh and his household. Pharaoh rebuked Abram and sent him away with all his possessions and his wife. Abram returned to the altar he had built between Bethel and Ai. He again called on the name of the Lord; the altar became an altar of repentance and an altar of a new beginning. Abram, God's servant, must live by faith, not by human calculations.

God who called Abram is a God of hope. In Abram's time, the world was full of sin and there was no hope of salvation. But God called Abram and made a plan to save all the people of the world through him. Abram himself was a hopeless old man; but God had hope for him and called him. God called one man, but he wanted to make of him a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. He wanted to bless all people by bringing them back to himself through them. He is the God and Father of Abraham's offspring, our Lord Jesus Christ. He purchased our salvation through Jesus' blood. Still, Jesus' people are called to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests for the world.