



The Call to Abram

(Genesis 12)

Genesis is the book of beginnings; in its first eleven chapters, the beginning of the story of man is told. And it was a bright beginning, because man was created in the image and likeness of God, for His good pleasure and man's own enjoyment. Rebellion against God cast a dark shadow in man's story, however. Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise, under the curse of death. That might have looked like the end, but it was really only another *beginning*.

The story of mankind outside of Eden was the beginning of the account of God's amazing plan to redeem His fallen creation and restore it to its original splendor. It included a cleansing of the sin-stained earth by a great flood, and a new beginning for mankind through the righteousness of one man, Noah. God renewed His covenant with man and set the rainbow in the sky to mark His faithful love for His creation.

In the story of Noah and the flood, however, some ominous clouds gathered in that sky of the newly re-created earth. Noah was a righteous, faithful man, but he was not perfect. He got drunk, and his son, Ham, arrogantly took advantage of his father's weakness. That offense precipitated the pronouncement of a curse by Noah on one of Ham's Sons, Canaan. Suddenly, we are reminded of Eden in ways we hadn't expected. A promising beginning went sour quickly.

As civilization began to develop through the sons of Noah, some of Ham's descendants decided not to spread out to fill the earth, as God had commanded. Instead, they wanted to consolidate their power, building a city called Babel. They even began construction of a tower that reached up to heaven. God was not pleased by this show of arrogance, so He intervened by confusing the one language everyone spoke into many different ones. That made solidarity difficult for men (especially the ones with proud plans for themselves). They had to continue spreading out to inhabit the rest of the earth. One thing became clear, however: the flood did not remove the stain of sin from the earth.

The story of Genesis 1–11 could leave us wondering whether God’s plan for mankind fizzled out. Human history up to this point has been decidedly dark. The memory of Eden grows dimmer and dimmer. Is there any hope left? If we are asking this question, then we are ready for Genesis 12–50. In it we will find that God meets every challenge to His plan for man, in ways that go beyond what the imagination might suggest. Because the problem we see in man is man himself, our impulse is to expect that God’s solution will work around him or skip over him. Get ready for a surprise. With God’s call to a man named Abram, the human story has yet another beginning.



“He Opened to Us the Scriptures”

Before we read God’s Word, we ought to take a moment to humble ourselves before Him, remembering that His Word is primarily a conversation with us, not a textbook. “Speak, LORD, for thy servant hears” (1 Sam. 3:9) can be the prayer on our lips. Then, read all the way through Genesis 12. Think about what you understand and what you don’t understand. Make a simple response to God in terms of what you do understand. Write your prayer in this space:

Now, ask for His help as you work on the questions below.
(Prayer hint: “Lord, thank You for Your unquenchable desire to bless the human creatures You have made. Please bless me today.”)



Questions God Calls Abram

Read Genesis 12:1–3.

1. The Lord spoke to Abram, a man who lived in Ur, a large city of Mesopotamia, in about 2000 BC. We know very little about him except that he was a Shemite, a member of the family destined to have a covenant relationship with God (because of Noah’s blessing in Genesis 9:26–27).

a. What was the first thing God required of Abram?

b. What do you think was the significance of that requirement?

2. Challenge question: In just three verses, the word *bless* (or some form of it) appears five times. Think back to Eden (Gen. 1:28) and back to Noah as he got off the ark (Gen. 9:1). What does this profusion of references to blessing suggest to us about what God is set to do?

God's Promise to Abram

The promise that God made to Abram had three parts. First, God would make Abram the father of a great nation. That nation was the nation of Israel, which did not exist before Abram. Second, God would make his “name great,” which, in that day, meant not that he would be famous but that he would father a dynasty of kings. Third, God promised that all families on the earth would be able to bless themselves through Abram. This means that through Abram’s descendants, God would open a door of blessing for men, reversing the curse pronounced in Eden. During the course of Abram’s life, all these promises were transformed into covenants, as we will see in Genesis 15, 17, and 22. How were these covenant promises eventually fulfilled?

- Abram’s descendants became a “great nation” (and not just a collection of tribes) at about 1500 BC, when Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt and back to their homeland, Canaan. God established a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, giving them a liturgical and civil code by which to live. This distinguished them from all other nations on earth. They agreed to be His people by keeping that covenant.
- Abram’s name became “great” in about 1000 BC, when God made David king over Israel. This was a wonderful time in the history of Israel, when their enemies had been defeated, the land had been secured, and David sat on the royal throne in Jerusalem. God made a solemn promise to him that one of his descendants would always sit on that throne. In other words, David began a royal line of kings.

•“All families” could bless themselves through Abram when, in about 4 BC, Jesus, who was a Son of David and thus of Abram, was born. Jesus came to make universal blessing once again possible for humanity. At His baptism in the Jordan, God announced: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17). Jesus established His Church before He left, which would perpetually offer blessing to the world, until His return. Baptism, the initiation into His Church, washes sin away and makes us sharers of the life of Christ. Thus we become beloved children of God, pleasing in His sight, as Adam and Eve once were.

3. See how deeply and completely this promise of universal blessing is rooted in a human being and his descendants. Knowing human history as we do from Genesis, this was a bit risky. Why do you think God chose to work this way?

Abram Sets Out

✎ **Read Genesis 12:4–9.**

[Note: Be sure to check your Bible for a map of Abram’s travels.]

4. Read Genesis 11:4 for a description of some of Noah’s descendants through his son, Ham. Review Genesis 12:1–4. What was different about Abram, who was Noah’s descendant through Shem?

5. Why do you suppose Abram took Lot, his nephew, with him?

6. God appeared to Abram and made a promise to him. Abram responded by building altars, one at Shechem and one near Bethel. He also “called on the name of the LORD,” a phrase we first saw associated with Seth, the son of Adam and Eve. What did this suggest about the relationship that was developing between God and Abram?

Abram’s Altars

It is worth taking note of the use of altars in Abram’s relationship with God. Noah built an altar to the Lord and pleased Him with the sacrifice he made on it (Gen. 8:20–21). Men after Noah everywhere built altars to deities. Through ignorance and perversion, many men worshipped false gods. Yet there was among men a common understanding that an altar is appropriate when men approach the divine. Why? It is because men know instinctively that they owe God something: worship and service (Rom. 1:18–23). The altar represents man’s desire to give something to God. In false religion, the offering is made to a deity out of fear or a desire for manipulation. When men worship from the heart, the altar is associated with praise and thanksgiving. In the life of Israel, the altar would take on a central significance in the relationship between God and His people. It would be a visible expression of atonement for sin and of thanksgiving to God. In the life of the Church, the altar continues to be a central, visible expression of the atonement that Christ won for us on Calvary, as well as the place where our offerings of thanks (“eucharist” means “thanks”) are joined to His perfect offering as we renew our intention to be His covenant keeping people.

Abram Is Tested

✎ **Read Genesis 12:10–20.**

7. Abram was faced with a famine in the land that he had left everything for.
 a. What do you think this might have done to his faith?

b. What was his response to the crisis?

c. What other way might Abram have responded to the famine?

8. For Abram to tell the Pharaoh that Sarai was his sister was half-true—she was his half-sister.

a. What was the intention of this deception?

b. What was God’s response to Abram’s weakness?

c. Why do you suppose God didn’t just start over with someone more reliable?

9. Challenge question: Clearly God intended to build His own nation, beginning with a miraculous birth to Abram and Sarai. Why do you think God picked one nation among all the others on earth to be His own?



“Did Not Our Hearts Burn Within Us?”

Our hearts will burn with joy when we consciously open them wide to God’s Word. Scripture memorization is a good way to get that started. Here is a suggested memory verse:

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.

—Gen. 12:1–3

Continue to welcome Him into your soul by reflecting on these questions:

Abram and Sarai left home and family in order to receive the gift God promised them. They received much more than they lost. The first step to true conversion is a willingness to leave behind whatever prevents us from belonging entirely to God. That can be a situation that is wrong for us, a sinful habit to which we tightly cling, frivolous distractions, etc. Is God calling you to “go out” of anything today so that He can have you for His own?

Have you ever felt like Abram might have when he obeyed God but faced a difficulty because of it? Were you able to accept it as a test of your faith, or did you see it as a sign of failure? Did you learn from it, or did it become a stumbling block in your life? Speak to God about it.

God’s plan to restore blessedness on earth was to build a nation. Righteousness is difficult to live alone. Jesus, the descendant of Abram who made all things new, built the Church as a nation of God’s people, whose unity will serve to strengthen them in the covenant. How does the Church work that way in your life? How are you working that way for others in the life of the Church?



“Stay with Us”

As we reach Genesis 12, we find that we are about to become deeply acquainted with the lives of two human beings, Abram and Sarai. They are the first people in Scripture who are followed this closely in the narrative. This in itself should serve as a sign to us: “These are important people. Watch them.” From the first verse of Genesis, God has been revealing Himself to us in His relationship with His creation. Yet now we will have an extended opportunity to see God at work in very human situations as He moves along His plan to win the world back to Himself.

Abram, whose name will later be changed to Abraham, became the father of Israel. He was the first Jew. In him we ought to be able to see what God intended when He created a nation for Himself. He was, of course, a real human being in real history, but he is also one of God’s works of human art. The rest of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, constantly look back to this great patriarch. If we are attentive, his life will serve as a window into life with God—what it means to be chosen, called, and equipped to live in the blessedness of God. This is knowledge most precious to every baptized believer, since it is what we have committed ourselves to in our baptismal vows. Sarai, whose name was later changed to Sarah, is included in this examination of the life of faith, although her part is not as detailed as that of Abram. Nevertheless, the New Testament says that Sarah, among other things, “by faith . . . received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised” (Heb. 11:11). The miracle that began God’s plan took place in Sarah’s body. Hers is a life worth watching.

The story of Abram and Sarai will be one that is human and divine. Are you ready for that? It will cause some wincing, just as the episode of Abram’s lying to Pharaoh created a ripple of disappointment. Yet if we are willing to open our hearts to these human beings, as God did, they will help us to see the gold that God purifies out of vessels of clay like us.

Lesson Summary

- ✓ God called Abram, a Shemite, to leave his homeland and his father’s house for a new country. He promised to bless Abram by making of him a great nation, one with a dynasty of kings, and to extend His blessing to all families on earth through Abram. In this, God promised to resolve the problem that drove Adam and Eve out of Eden. In some way as yet unclear, God would begin a work on earth that would result in man’s blessedness. Man would once again be pleasing in God’s sight. Details were few, but this promise was a beacon of bright hope for all human beings.

- ✓ Abram put his trust in God and left home. Turning his back on comfort, safety, familiarity, and perhaps the pleas of his family, he made a clean break with his past to follow the voice of God, whom he did not really know. He went out to receive the astounding gift God offered to him.
- ✓ Abram grew in reverence of God. He built altars as a sign of this reverence, acknowledging that God is worthy of honor, praise, and sacrifice.
- ✓ When faced with the crisis of a famine, Abram went down to Egypt with his entourage. When he feared for his life, he urged Sarai to help him deceive those who might kill him because of her. This was not how God wanted Abram to live, so He sent plagues on the Pharaoh's household. God revealed Himself to be with Abram wherever he was, looking after him. Thus Abram entered into a deeper knowledge of the God who had called him.

For responses to Lesson 1 questions, see pp. 131-34.