

JANUARY 5

Genesis 12, 13, 14

Today you read Genesis 12 thru 14 and have moved into the second major section of the book. Chapters 1-11 focused on four major events - creation, fall, flood, and Babel. Chapters 12-50 will focus on four major people: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. The first section was universal in scope, dealing with the big picture of how the world came to be and how sin began to enter into the human race and how the nations were formed. The focus was a general revelation available through creation to the whole human race. The story was told without much detail - we really don't know much about even the most important people in the accounts like Adam and Eve, or Noah - (what was his wife's name anyway and how did she feel about everything that happened? We just don't know!) - Enoch - a great man of faith - but the tiny, tiny bit we do know about him comes from Hebrews and Jude in the New Testament.

All of this changes when we get to chapter 12. The scope here is no longer universal. Now it is "particular" and we become almost intimate with Abraham (at least by comparison). No longer is the whole human race Moses' primary interest - now he is intent on limiting our vision to just one man so that he can show us how the nation of Israel began and how through just one man, God is going to bless the entire race of human beings. The emphasis also switches from general revelation to what we call special revelation.

Special revelation comes from God to a limited number of people (sometimes only one) and contains information that is just not available by observing God's more general revelation in the creation. God's special revelation came to Abram in the City of Haran and out of that 'call', the nation of Israel was born and the progress of redemption takes a giant leap forward.

There is a classic phrase spoken many times over "How odd of God to choose the Jews." The truth is that God did not choose the Jews, he chose Abram and the Jews are Abram's descendants who share his inheritance and blessing.

Now there is a very important question that I want to ask you today - "Why did God choose Abram? Why Abram and not Terah, his father? Why Abram and not Harry who lived two streets away in the City of Ur? Why Abram? Do you have the answer? If you do, you know a lot more than I do. You see - the Bible never ever gives an answer to that question. God chose Abram, but He never says why - It wasn't because he was more faithful, more righteous, better looking or that he could dunk a basketball. He just chose him - that's the only thing we know, and we know that it had something to do with GRACE! We are not even sure that Abram was a worshipper of the Lord before the call came.

We do know that he came from an idolatrous family and that when they left Ur, they took the household gods with them (Joshua tells us that in chapter 24 of the book he wrote). It's certainly true that Abram, like Noah before, met the grace of

God with faith and obedience (Hebrews 11 makes that part clear, as does the Genesis account itself). But you and I need to be very clear about the fact that it is the grace of God alone that stands behind the call of Abram. That and nothing more. Why is it important? Because there is another question.

Why did God choose you? Why was your life arranged in such a way that you would be exposed to the Gospel and given opportunity after opportunity to respond to Christ? Did you deserve that privilege more than others who have not shared it? Did you earn it by some wonderful act of goodness? Of course not - for you, like Abram and Noah before him, the answer can only be - "It was grace." Just like the old hymn says, "It was grace that taught my heart to fear and grace those fears relieved"

II. I want you to notice some other key ideas in Chapters 12 and 13 with me. First, think about the promise God made to Abram..."I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you, I will make your name great and you will be blessing. I will bless those who bless you. I will curse whoever curses you and all the people of the nations will be blessed through you." Now we don't know exactly when God promised Abram all this, but Abram is 75 years old when, in obedience to the call, he leaves Haran to find the "promised land." That could not have been an easy thing to do! Nevertheless, in that experience, the theme of the whole rest of Abram's life has been established. He has been "blessed in order to be a blessing" - "blessed to be a blessing to others." Remember that phrase - blessed to be a blessing - because it will serve as a wonderful theme not only for the life of Abram but for the rest of us as well. Why did God call you? He called you out of His wonderful grace so that He could bless you in order to make you a blessing to others.

The story of the famine that pushed Abram down into Egypt, and of his foolish plan to protect himself by claiming that Sarah his wife was really his sister, serves as a sobering reminder to us that the call of God (which for us as it was for Abram will always be a call to separate ourselves from things we love dearly, and to blind obedience simply because God has spoken) - this call will always be followed by testing - testing to see how committed we are to the call; to determine how much we are willing to trust God. Abram obeys God by going to Canaan; then there is a test to see how much he is willing to rely on God. Apparently for Abram at this particular point in his life, the answer was not enough. I can identify with Abram there and I am sure you can too.

So far Abram's walk of faith is just like ours. He hears the call of God which comes as a wonderful call of grace. Then after his initial obedience, there is a failure (in this case a big time failure) born of a lack of complete trust in God. Now what happens next is important to us. God intervenes to rescue Abram from the awful situation into which he has placed himself (He does that with us too right?). Then Abram goes back to the beginning - back to Bethel, the house of God - the place where he started with God in Canaan - -back to square one, if you will, and Abram starts over again. He reestablishes his relationship with God. He starts obeying again. (Maybe

some of us need to turn the recording off at this point and get back to Bethel ourselves!?) Just as there were some areas in the life of Abram where God was testing him to see how much he would trust the Lord, so there may be areas in your life and in my life where God is pushing us to see how much we will trust Him.

We learned today as well, that Abram did not go into the promised land alone; he took his nephew Lot with him and both of them prospered greatly - so much so that the land could not easily support both of them with their ever growing herds of sheep and livestock.

Abram solved that problem by proposing to give Lot the first choice as to which part of the country he wants, and Lot, knowing full well that the city of Sodom was not a good place for his family, chose that portion of the land because it was such a prosperous place. The plains were well-watered and surely his flocks would grow greatly there and he would become even wealthier than he was.

More quickly now, note just two things about this: first Abram was no loser when he allowed Lot to have the first choice. God's way is for us always to esteem others as more important than ourselves. Lot took what he thought was the best, but God blessed Abram. It was right after this that God told Abram to look up and see everything he could in all directions. "Look at it," God said, "I'm giving it to you - it's yours." When we give preferences to other people, in God's economy, we never get the short end of the stick.

Finally, Lot apparently voted with his pocketbook alone. And he did end up being the loser - several times over before the story ends. Lot went to live near Sodom - remember that - because that's where the good money was. Abram built an altar to the Lord at Hebron. And Abram is the one that got the blessing! (Incidentally, Sodom will wind up getting sacked by God's judgment while Hebron becomes the great King David's first capitol city before he takes Jerusalem.)

The small walled cities of the valley of Sodom now lie, as best as we can determine, under the present day waters of the southern extension of the Dead Sea. The four kings mentioned in the account would have been the overlords of larger and fairly distant cities near Ur, where Abram had been born, and up into the area of Mesopotamia. Though we cannot positively identify them all from presently known historical documents, some of the names of those kings are known from extra-Biblical sources and all of the names are very consistent with what we know of the culture of that time. Most probably the military campaign of Chapter 14 had something to do with the non-payment of tribute money, which kings of larger city-states always demanded from the smaller ones. Apparently, by joining forces, the cities of the plain thought that they could defeat the greedy overlords, and Lot, well Lot sort of got caught in the middle. I want you to notice that there is one tiny but significant fact in this account. In chapter 14:12, we are told that Lot was living in Sodom - but in Chapter 13, that we read yesterday, he pitched his tent toward Sodom. Now he is living inside Sodom! Remember that - we will be back to it before the week is out.

Abram, on hearing the plight of his wayward nephew, immediately rushes to his aid by marching north with a private army of 318 men. While that may not sound like a huge force, anyone who maintains a private army of more than 300 people is pretty substantial in terms of their wealth. God has already blessed Abram exceedingly.

Two words used in this chapter are probably worth noting in passing. In verse 13, Abram is called "Abram the Hebrew." Now that's the first time the word Hebrew is ever used in the Bible. There is a related word back in Chapter 10 of the Table of Nations - Eber - but this is the first time "Hebrew" is used. He's now the "Hebrew." The second interesting word is the one translated "trained men" in verse 14. That word is used only here in Scripture but has been discovered in a few other ancient manuscripts where it clearly means "armed retainers."

By far the most interesting thing in chapter 14 though, is the appearance of this mysterious King of Salem: Melchizedek - the priest of "God most high" - El Elyon in Hebrew. Mark that name - El Elyon - God Most High - in your notebook under names of God. Melchizedek means King of Righteousness and Salem is in all probability what later would be called Jerusalem. The King of Righteousness who dwells in the City of Peace. Pretty interesting - and it gets more interesting, because Melchizedek is both king and priest - a combination of offices never found anywhere else in the Bible - except with reference to the Messiah. Then it gets even more interesting because Abram gives to him a tithe (this is the first biblical mention of that concept). We'll have occasion to talk more about tithing later. For now, you might want to write Melchizedek on your notebook page under "Jesus sightings."

Melchizedek would simply be an interesting curiosity were it not for two other passages of Scripture. One is Psalm 110, a Messianic Psalm, which indicates that the Messiah will be a priest after the order of Melchizedek - a priest and a king all at once (if you want to investigate that concept of king and priest wrapped up in one - you might also want to check Zechariah 6:12ff). The other passage which mentions Melchizedek is Hebrews 7. There we are told this about Melchizedek: he was "*without father, without mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life* (that is a pretty interesting phrase), *like the Son of God he remains a priest forever.*"

At the very least Melchizedek, the priest/king to whom Abram offered his tithes, is a type of the Lord Jesus Christ - a representation or figure appearing earlier in the progress of revelation which points toward, and helps us to recognize and understand, the later reality.

But some people believe that in Genesis chapter 14, we have more than just a type - we have a theophany, or more technically, a christophany - a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ Himself in the Bible. Did Jesus 'show up' in person to Abraham? If this is so, then Jesus' words to the Jews in John chapter 8, take on a wonderful meaning. He said to them, "*Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad.*"

Whether Melchizedek is a type of Christ or an actual pre-incarnate appearance of the Lord of Glory, it is important to recognize in this passage that the work of Christ did not begin in a manger in Bethlehem. He was at that work long before that - He was at work in the drama of redemption from the very beginning of time.

This is Mark Ashton reminding you to hold tight to the gospel "because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction."

Peace to you.