

The Call of Abraham

I. INTRODUCTION

The story of Abraham is the story of a man on an amazing journey with all its ups and downs – its successes and failures.

It is a journey of faith, of hardship and sacrifice, of disappointment and great reward!

A. Called and Chosen

It is a story of how God reveals Himself to a man, calls and chooses him for a daunting mission, and then tests him to see how he will respond – to see if he has the capacity to carry out the mission successfully.

The story of Abraham is rooted in history, as is our faith. The history of our salvation, that is, the history of God’s relationship with His people, especially as shown in the way He saves His people time and time again, begins with the story of Abraham.

Abraham is one of the heroic figures of the Old Testament and is held up as a model of **faith** and **obedience** for God’s people by the Scriptures. God was able to accomplish remarkable things through him precisely because of his **obedience and faith**.

B. Father in Faith

Abram [“exalted father”] was the original name of Abraham [“father of a multitude”]. Because of Abraham’s whole hearted response to God, he would one day be recognized as the **Father in Faith** to billions of Christians, Jews, and Muslims!

C. Abraham’s Mission

On his journey, God reveals Himself to Abraham and entrusts him with a mission that has consequences for the whole human race. For from Abraham and his

descendants God will form a people, the Jews, from whom will come the Messiah and Saviour of the world – Jesus Christ.

He is entrusted with this awesome mission because of his faithful response to God's call.

D. Application

We, too, are on a journey of faith! God calls each one of us and entrusts us with a unique mission. Each call and each mission is different!

- How is God calling you at this moment of your life?
- What mission do you think God has in mind for you?

II. ABRAHAM AND SARAH

As we reach chapter 12 of Genesis, 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.

E. Abraham

Abram, whose name will later be changed to **Abraham**, becomes the Father of Israel. He is 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.

F. Sarah

Sarai, whose name is later changed to **Sarah**, is included in this examination of the life of faith, although her part is not as detailed as that of Abraham.

Nevertheless, the New Testament says about Sarah, among other things, that "by faith, Sarah herself 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. It will cause some 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.

G. God’s Promise to Abraham [CCC 59-60]

"In order to gather together scattered humanity God calls Abram from his country, his kindred, and his father's house, and renames him Abraham, that is, 'the father of a multitude of nations.' 'In you all nations of the earth shall be blessed.'

The people descended from Abraham would be the trustees of the promise made to the patriarchs, **the chosen people**, called to prepare for that day when God would gather all his children into the unity of the Church. They would be the root onto which the Gentiles would be grafted, once they came to believe." (CCC 59-60)

H. Abraham and Sarah as Examples of faith

"The letter to the Hebrews, in its great eulogy of the faith of Israel's ancestors, lays special emphasis on Abraham's faith [Hebrews 11:8-12]:

[8] By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he

was to go.

[9] By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.

[10] For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

[11] By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

[12] Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

III. THE CALL OF ABRAHAM

1. Background

By the time Abraham was born, his family was living in Ur, a great city-state on a plain in southern Mesopotamia [the land between the rivers] in what is now Iraq. Ur was near modern-day Baghdad.

Ur was a great port city, with a towering ziggurat [tower of Babel?], thousands of houses and shops, and merchants from all over the world speaking every language.

Abraham’s father, **Terah**, and his clan, including his son **Abraham**, his grandson **Lot**, Abraham's wife **Sarah** and their shepherds, slaves and servants lived in tents in the narrow belt of poor pasture on the outskirts of Ur. They were simple, uneducated, poor, wandering Semitic shepherds.

- Scripture tells us that they worshipped pagan Gods [Joshua 24:2].

Terah and his family were probably caravan traders from the west. They were used to the idea of making long journeys over land, grazing their donkeys and goats from place to place.

I. Abraham Sets Out

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 forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there.

One day Terah, his son Abraham and his clan set out from Ur on a long and difficult journey to a land that God would later give them. Why did they leave?

The Bible offers no explanation, but they probably left because of economic or social reasons. There appeared to be no "spiritual" reason for their departure. They wanted more space, greener pastures, and most of all their own land. *There appears to be no explicit divine intervention at this point in time.*

Nevertheless, unknown to Terah and Abraham, God was at work! Later on God reveals this to Abraham, *"I am Yahweh," He said to him, "who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to make you heir to this land."* (Gen 15: 7).

J. Application

Very often God is at work in our lives and we are not aware of it until much later! Think back over your own lives, and see if you can detect God’s plan and purpose for you!

Read: Genesis 12: 1-6

[1] 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.

[2] 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.

[3] 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."

[4] So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

[5] And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions which they had gathered, and the persons that they had gotten

in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan,

[6] Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

[7] Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

[8] Thence he removed 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 on the name of the LORD.

[9] And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

IV. GOD REVEALS HIMSELF TO ABRAM

About half-way through the journey, at a place called Haran, the One True God, *Yahweh*, whom Abraham had not known previously, suddenly reveals Himself to Abraham.

How did God reveal Himself to Abraham – did he hear a voice, see a vision? We do not know; the Bible is silent! What we do know is that the impact of his encounter with God changed his life forever!

Abram must have wondered about *Yahweh*! Who is this unknown God? Can he be trusted? Does he have the power to deliver on his promises? Is he a good God, a generous God, a holy God?

V. REVIEW OF GENESIS 12:1-3

A. A Clean Break with the Past

Last week we discussed the first three verses of Genesis 12, but it is worth reviewing them briefly.

What is the first thing God requires of Abram after he calls him? What is the significance of that requirement?

God tells Abram to leave everything and go to a place unknown to him. He has to make a clean break with all that is near and dear to him. Inevitably, this will mean a break with the customs and religious practices of his father's house.

- It is a dramatic call to a turning away from one way of life to embrace something very new.
- It is the very first glimpse we have in Scripture of what conversion looks like.

B. Abram Puts His Trust in God's Promise

Abram was willing to leave his earthly security and whatever power was his as Terah's firstborn son to obey the voice of God (Whom he barely knew). He set out for a land he'd never seen and knew nothing about.

- He placed all his trust in God put himself in a position of complete dependence on God.

That dependency is a sharp contrast to the builders of Babel. They refused to be scattered over the earth, choosing instead to consolidate their technology and power. Their intention to make a name for themselves and to build a tower to heaven showed them to be unwilling to live in humility, without knowing what comes next.

The irony is that Abram, who was willing to leave behind his comfortable place on earth in order to obey God, received a promise of unthinkable power and influence.

He was to become the father of a great nation, Israel. It would be a descendant of his, Jesus, Who would bring heaven to earth in the Incarnation.

Abram gave up everything to obey; in obeying, he gained back more than everything.

C. God Blesses Abraham

In the first three verses of Genesis 12, the word "bless" (or some form of it) appears five times. It is a super-abundance of blessing and points to the momentousness of what God is doing.

- The blessing on Abram will be so far reaching that generations yet unborn will experience it. It is a promise that looks forward, but it also looks backward.

Remember that when Adam and Eve left Eden, they took two problems with them.

- The first was the presence of an enemy who hated them. God promised to send "the woman and her seed" to address that problem.
- The other was the change that had taken place inside of them, a change so radical they had to be expelled from Eden.

D. The Curse Reversed

How would this problem ever be reversed?

The answer lies here in God's promise to Abram. It will take centuries for all the details to get worked out, but there is no missing the fact that God wants to restore humanity to its original state of blessedness.

He has a plan to do it that involves a nation with a unique relationship with Him. Somehow this nation will provide the means for all men everywhere to be blessed.

This promise to Abram is not just about a new place for him to live. It is a promise that will regain Paradise, for him and all who come after him.

E. God Risks the Success of His Plan

Imagine the risk God takes to associate His plan so closely with humans. We have already seen examples of human weakness, and we expect to see many more. Yet God has shown Himself willing to take risks in order to do things the way He intends.

His daring use of the rainbow as a sign of the covenant with Noah showed that He wants to preserve humanity as He created it.

His promise to bless men through the mediation of human beings is even more outrageous. It is another occasion for us to marvel afresh over the love of God for creatures made of dust like us.

VI. GOD’S PROMISES TO ABRAHAM

The promise that God makes to Abram has three parts.

- First, God will make Abram the father of a great nation. That nation was the nation of Israel, which did not exist before Abram.
- Second, God will 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 promises that all families on the earth will be able to bless themselves through Abram.

This means that through Abram's descendants, God will open a door of blessing for men, reversing the curse pronounced in Eden. During the course of Abram's life, all these promises will be transformed by God into covenants, which we will see in Genesis 15, 17, and 22.

A. Land and a Nation

Abram's descendants became a "great nation" (and not just a collection of tribes) around 1500 B.C., when Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt and back to their homeland, Canaan.

God established a covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai, giving them a liturgical and civil code to live by. This distinguished them from all other nations on earth. They agreed to be His people by keeping that covenant.

B. Kingship and a Name

Abram's name became "great" around 1000 B.C., 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.

C. Blessing for all Nations

"All families" could bless themselves through Abram when, around 4 B.C., Jesus, who was a Son of David and thus of Abram, was born.

- Jesus came to make universal blessing once again possible for humanity.
- Before he left Jesus established His Church, which would perpetually offer blessing to the world, until His return.

VII. FULFILLMENT OF THE PROMISES

- The promise of a **LAND AND A NATION** will be fulfilled in the covenant with **Moses**.
- The promise of **KINGSHIP AND A NAME** will be fulfilled in the covenant with **David**.
- The promise of **BLESSING FOR ALL NATIONS** will be fulfilled through **Jesus Christ**.

VIII. THE LAND OF CANAAN

We learn from vs. 6 that the Canaanites were in the land that God intended to give Abram, the Shemite.

Remembering the curse of Noah on Canaan (see Gen. 9:24-27), what can we expect from the encounter of these two tribes of people?

Noah had declared that Canaan, the son of Ham, would be a servant to Shem. If God intended to give the land of the Canaanites to the Shemites, perhaps the Shemites had an original rightful claim to it.

As the history of Israel unfolded, it took many battles with the Canaanites (as well as other tribes who lived on the land) and hundreds of years for Abram's descendants to finally take possession of all the land. Yet Noah's word was eventually fulfilled.

D. Abram Builds an Altar

God makes a promise to Abram; Abram responds by building altars, and he "called on the name of the Lord," a phrase we first saw associated with Seth, the son of Adam and Eve.

What does this suggest about the relationship that is developing between God and Abram?

Abram appears to be developing reverence for this God Who has called him and given him such great hope. He is a man who is learning to worship the One, True God in his daily life.

It is worth taking note of the use of altars in man's relationship with God. Noah built an altar to the Lord and pleased Him with the sacrifice he made on it. 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. 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.

Summary

1. 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.
2. In this, God promised to resolve the problem that drove Adam and Eve out of Eden. In some way as yet unclear, God is going to do a work on earth that will result in man's blessedness. He will once again be pleasing in God's sight. Details are few, but this promise is a beacon of bright hope for all human beings.
3. 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.
4. Abram grew in reverence of God. He built altars as a sign of this reverence, acknowledging that God is worthy of honour, praise, and sacrifice.

Questions

1. How old was Abraham when God called him? Genesis 12:1-4
2. What was Abraham’s response to God’s call and promise? Genesis 12:4-8
3. What were the three promises God made to Abraham? Genesis12: 2-3
4. When and how were they fulfilled?

Preparation for Week #11

1. Read: *The Navarre Bible*, Genesis Chapter 12
2. Read: Come and See – Genesis 12-14 – God calls Abraham