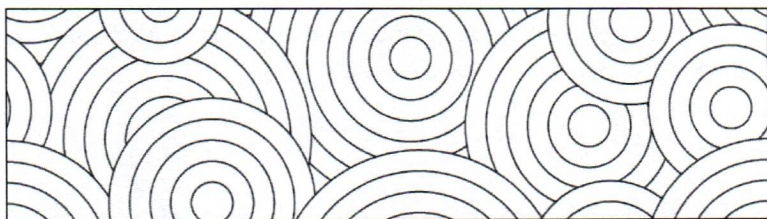


LESSON 9

ABRAM'S CALL

GENESIS 12:1-20



OPEN IT UP

No figure in the Old Testament exhibits more faith than Abraham. Faith is often ridiculed because it is contrasted with knowledge. In the modern world, people think they can figure out anything they don't know. Smart people engage in experiments and present academic papers at professional conferences in pursuit of figuring out the unknown. The rest of us just Google it. But asking anyone to *believe*, especially without offering evidence, is unthinkable. Yet this is exactly what God asked Abram. We sometimes hear that faith in the Bible is not "blind faith," but in Abram's case, it definitely was. He was called to leave everything familiar and to launch out into a strange world. And he obeyed, not knowing what lay ahead.

GOD SPEAKS TO ABRAM • GENESIS 12:1-3

God speaks to Abram after ten generations of silence, the last human to whom He spoke being Noah. God offers Abram a command and a covenant complete with blessings and curses. From a certain perspective, the book of Deuteronomy is an expansion of Genesis 12:1-3. Yet we are never told why God called Abram. Abram must have demonstrated previous faith in God, for he was called prior to Genesis 12 while his

family was living in Ur of the Chaldeans (15:7). The point is that Abram has a record of faith prior to his call; he was not suddenly seized by irresistible grace.

The command to “get out” sounds rude to modern readers, but the Hebrew just means “Go!” Abram is asked to leave everything familiar, his “country,” his “family,” and his “father’s house” (Genesis 12:1). These are listed in order of increased intimacy and expected societal ties. While today it is not unusual for children to move hundreds of miles away from their parents in their late teens or early twenties, in Abram’s day, it would have been unusual ever to move more than a few miles from your father. God is asking Abram to do something scary and unusual. He will leave the people and language he knows. He will leave the family on whom he depends. And he will abandon an aged father for whom he was expected to care. In some ways, “His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3); but in other ways, they definitely are.

Along with God’s command, He offers a series of seven promises, starting with those most directly connected to Abram personally and extending to cover the entirety of the human race. “I will make of you a great nation” (Genesis 12:2) is a promise that involved offspring. This promise alone would have tempted Abram to obey. God then promises to “bless” Abram personally, which included the external goods of health and wealth, and to give him a great “name” (verse 2). Abram would be rich and famous. As a result, Abram would have the opportunity to “be a blessing” to others (verse 2). Furthermore, God promises to be on Abram’s side, blessing “those who bless you” and cursing “him who curses you.” No slight against Abram would go unrequited. Finally, “all the families of the earth” would benefit from Abram’s blessings (verse 3). All of these promises Abram would have expected during his own lifetime. He could not understand their ultimate fulfillment in Christ and the church (cf. Galatians 3:15–18).

ABRAM’S MOVE TO CANAAN • GENESIS 12:4-9

At the age of seventy-five (Genesis 12:4), Abram gathered all he had, including his nephew Lot, and launched out into the desert in search of Canaan (verse 5). Having obeyed, “the LORD appeared

to Abram” (verse 7). God previously “spoke” to Abram (verse 1), but now He “appeared.” It seems the relationship is growing increasingly intimate. Expanding on the national promise of verse 2, God says, “To your descendants I will give this land” (verse 7). Abram will not only have many descendants (a sign of honor), but they will also have a recognized territory. This implies a nation with the size and strength to acquire and defend a country of their own.

In response to God’s extension and explanation of His previous promises, Abram “built an altar” (Genesis 12:7) to commemorate the place and the occasion. The text does not say Abram offered sacrifices, although he may have done so. The altar appears to have been merely symbolic. From there, Abram moved further west, settling temporarily in Bethel, where he built another altar and “called on the name of the LORD” (verse 8). Genesis uses the later name Bethel for the place that in Abram’s time would have been known as Luz. In fact, Abram’s grandson Jacob is the man who changed the city’s name to Bethel (28:19). From there, Abram continued to travel south (verse 9), perhaps as far as Jerusalem, which was only about ten miles south of Bethel.

ABRAM TO EGYPT • GENESIS 12:10-20

Abram’s movements thus far have been directed by God. The move to Egypt, however, was never divinely authorized. This little trip would introduce dangerous temptations and bring lasting problems into Abram’s life. Egypt was one of the most agriculturally productive countries in the ancient world due to the annual flooding of the Nile. Therefore, in times of famine, people would apparently travel there in order to buy food (41:57).

Egypt may have been a prosperous country, but it was also dangerous. Abram knew this and, fearing that Sarai’s “beautiful countenance” (Genesis 12:11) would provoke the inhabitants to “kill” him (verse 12), he commanded her to lie, claiming she was his “sister” (verse 13). Some have tried to rescue Abram from the accusation of lying, claiming from the genealogies of Genesis that Sarai was indeed Abram’s half-sister. But such apologetic aims miss the point of the

passage. Abram's intent was not to represent Sarai's status but to deceive others in an effort to save himself.

Abram's fears are realized when they enter Egypt. Indeed, "the Egyptians saw" Sarai "was beautiful" (Genesis 12:14). Some people today wonder how Sarai—by this point, a woman in her sixties—could have been so strikingly beautiful. Laying aside the modern prejudice of associating youth with beauty (we cannot assume all peoples believe this), Sarai's beauty was both exotic (she being from Mesopotamia) and natural. Throughout history, Egyptian women are portrayed with excessive cosmetics to accentuate the features they wished to present as prominent, regardless of their age. It appears Sarai exhibited those natural traits without wearing makeup.

After eventually being taken into the Pharaoh's house, "the LORD plagued" the royal residence "because of Sarai" (Genesis 12:17). The superstitious Pharaoh concludes the most recent change to his royal house must be responsible for the trouble and reaches the right conclusion that Sarai was Abram's wife (verse 18). Pharaoh did not consummate his relationship with Sarai since he says, "I might have taken her as my wife" (verse 19). Instead, he orders Abram to take his family and leave Egypt. This proper action was not due to respect for Abram but for the gods Pharaoh felt were offended. He sent the family away with the gifts they had received (verse 16).

WRAP IT UP

A synonym for *faith* is *trust*, and we are regularly asked to trust when we cannot know. I cannot verify by empirical evidence there is a heaven and hell. I cannot prove Jesus actually rose from the dead. These are biblical claims I accept on faith. And I build my life around these biblical teachings and the divine promises based on them. Such is the case with Abraham. Abraham's initial movement to Canaan was a tremendous show of faith. He was willing to disrupt his life and build a new reality for his family based purely on the Word of God. Throughout it all, "Abraham trusted God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:3, the Greek quotation of Genesis 15:6, translation mine).

**THINK ON IT**

1. How hard do you think it would have been for Abram to leave home? Imagine if you suddenly had to move across the world to a culture where you did not speak the language, know the people, or the land. How many of you find this exciting? How many find it terrifying?
2. List the seven promises God offers Abram. What do these convey?
3. Why do you think Abram built altars? What lesson can we learn from his behavior?
4. Did Abram lie to the Egyptians? Did Sarai lie to the Egyptians? Is it okay to lie under extreme conditions?
5. Discuss the role of faith. Is faith always based on proof? Why does our world ridicule “blind faith”?