

Prayers

Opening prayer

It is our duty and our delight to worship You, Lord Jesus, in the everyday things of life. Give us such a deep and abiding sense of Your presence that we fear no evil, and know the touch of Your love which lifts our spirits in the darkest hour. Brighten our lives by Your presence we pray; we praise You, Lord Jesus, our Lord and our Saviour: ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

As you pray, think of other Christians who worship in other ways to that with which you are familiar. What is it about how you worship that you feel comfortable? Wait on the Lord for what He would say to you about how you worship Him ...

On-going prayers

- **Pray for remote churches.** *Pray for Christians who worship the Lord in Arab countries where to be known to worship Jesus would bring swift retribution. Pray for those who suffer for the Lord's sake.*
- *Thank God for the gift of the Scriptures, for both the Old and the New Testaments*
- *Pray for teachers in your local school, especially the primary school teachers who have a great responsibility to help young in their earliest years*

Meditation

We believe we have done our best, Lord Jesus.

May we never fail You so much

That we do not see the extent of our sin,
And come to You in repentance:

May we never fail each other so much

That we do not know when we hurt others,
And turn to them with an apology:

And may we never fail ourselves so much

That we do not admit our shortcomings,
And ask for Your help to change.

In this way, through honesty and humility,

May we always do our best, Lord Jesus
And serve You throughout our lives.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Genesis 12: 1-9

¹ The LORD said to Abram, 'You must leave your country, your people and your father's home to go to the land I show you. ² I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you and make you well known and respected. You will become a blessing; ³ I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse whoever curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he left Kharan. ⁵ Abram took Sarai his wife and his nephew Lot, all the possessions that

they had acquired, and the people who had joined them in Kharan; and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land as far as the site of the oak of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, 'I will give this land to your descendants.' So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he moved on to the hill country to the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east. He built an altar there to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. ⁹ Abram then journeyed on stage by stage towards the Negeb.

Review

We have arrived at the beginning of what many regard as one of the most important parts of the Old Testament; the story of Abram (later renamed Abraham). Previous to this, Genesis has described how God's hand was on Abram's family for blessing, demonstrated in the call which came to his father Terah to leave the pagan lands of Mesopotamia and head for Canaan. Abram took up this call after the death of his father whilst they were in Kharan (11:31,32), and was obedient to it. There is an extraordinary richness to the opening verses of this passage, for after the arrogance and collective effort of those who sought to build Babel, God chose one humble servant as the source of eternal blessings for all people (12:3). Instead of people finding Him by reaching up high, God chose to reach down and touch a single individual.

There are a number of important themes within these verses, which help us understand God's call, even for people today. Firstly, to show his obedience, Abram was asked to take the physical step of leaving everything behind, and he did this, even though it took a long time for the call to be fulfilled. The original journey away from his origins in Ur must have been an extensive undertaking, and once in Kharan, Abram endured the loss of his father. After this, he was separated from the other members of his family as he obediently moved south. Apart from his wife, only his nephew Lot came with him, finally separating from him later on (as we will discover in chapter 13). We do not know how long all this took, but there is no doubt that it took many years. Nevertheless, God's call to Abram to leave his family behind was eventually fulfilled as Abram came into the land of Canaan. Abram was both obedient and patient, and as we will see, God was able to build on this elementary faith.

Secondly, Abram was asked to believe in a promise made to him by God, without any possibility that he could know what it meant. In verses 2 and three, God promised Abram that he, a man with no heir, would become a 'great nation' (12:2), and that he would receive great blessing, indeed, God would work through Abram to bless the world (12:3). These are extraordinary promises, which form the basis of God's covenant love shown eventually through the life and death of Jesus in the New Testament. Abram of course knew nothing of this; he was asked to have a blind faith in God that he would be blessed, and become a blessing to others.

All this was a starting place for his relationship with God, a relationship that would come to have eternal significance. There was no way that Abram could have known how his future generations would fare, indeed he had no heir at all because his wife was barren (11:30). It is just possible that Abram hedged his bets in case God's blessing came to nothing by taking his nephew Lot as a potential heir instead of the son he believed he could not have (more of this later). Yet Abram's faith was still a blind faith in God for the unknown.

Abram's faith was expressed in two ways. Firstly, he did what God told him to do by travelling from his homeland into Canaan, even though the reasons why anyone might have done this are obscure; as is made clear in this passage, the land was already occupied by others, and Abram would have to live the life of a nomad for the whole of his life. Secondly, Abram showed his faith by worshipping God as soon as he came into Canaan; this is the meaning of his building altars in Shechem (vv6,7) and near Bethel (v8).

By accepting God's promises, and acting on the instructions he was given, Abram began a journey not merely through the desert of the ancient Middle East, but a journey of faith with God. We do not yet read much about Abram or his feelings, we have little detail with which to measure the man or his family, but we are told in this reading that his faith was enough for God to begin a great work through him. In addition, he was committed to worshipping God, for both faith and worship are the starting place for a relationship with God.

In this story, God's Salvation plan for humanity has at last begun; God has commanded Abram to follow His lead, and Abram is obedient and worshipful. How much can God do with us if we will be obedient and worshipful?

Going Deeper

The call of Abram is one of those passages which is very rich in meaning, and preachers find a variety of ways to present its powerful message. We will now look briefly at some of the details of this passage, and as we do this we will find the themes mentioned above will be further highlighted, and we will also find some other major themes which deserve our consideration.

The Call of God (vv1-3)

There is some debate as to when Abram was first called. At first reading, it was Terah who first set out from Ur (11: 31), though God is not mentioned. The first sentence, 'the Lord said to Abram', is a past tense in Hebrew and this could well imply that Abram received the call described in verses 1 to 3 previously, either in Kharan or even in Ur. Certainly in New Testament times this is what was believed, as Stephen made clear in his famous speech to the Jews 'The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abram when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Leave your country' (Acts 7:2-3). All this heightens the sense of patient faith exercised by Abram, giving the impression that he did not simply walk away from his family alone, but headed in the direction of God's call and had to be patient whilst family members left him, rather than he leave them!

When God called, he required Abram to change his identity. This is something we who travel about the world might find hard to understand, but in moving away from his family, his own people and his own homeland of Ur (v1), Abram would have been left with little. The closest we can get to what he may have felt would be a situation in which we were in a foreign land, felt that we had no 'place' to call home and had no close family to support. It would not have been easy, even for a nomad, and if this was what God wanted of Abram, then He needed him to hear and embrace His promises, which come thick and fast in verses 2 to 4.

The three blessings

The initial blessings were threefold. Abram was firstly told that he would become a great nation (v2), which was an extraordinary thing for God to say to someone who, as we have already seen, knew that he would have no child, and who may have been planning to make his nephew his heir. This was the only logical reason to take Lot, given his call to leave all his family. However, Abram was important to God, and the promises he gave to him were repeated many times over (17:20, 18:18, 21:18) and later to his grandson Jacob (46:3). God had chosen to work through one line of ancestry from Adam through to Abram. Now he was prepared to allow this line of ancestry to grow into a nation, in order to achieve His purposes.

The second blessing was a personal promise that Abram would himself be blessed by being made 'well known and respected'. The Hebrew for 'blessing' literally means 'great'; not necessarily 'wealthy' and certainly not 'famous' in the sense that we use that word today. It means someone who has earned the respect of their peers and of future generations. Abram certainly achieved this status even in his own lifetime, but at the time the promise was given, Abram had just left his family and may have felt somewhat alone. Such a promise was too distant to be real!

The third blessing initially sounds strange, as it is an extended blessing 'You will become a blessing; I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse whoever curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' (vv2,3). God promised that Abram would himself become a blessing to others. This promise contrasts with the second blessing which was a personal encouragement to Abram, and it returns to the theme of the first promise, for God knew in advance that he intended to bless the whole world through the ancestors of Abram, the people of Israel. Ultimately, he would bless the world through Abram's greatest ancestor Jesus Christ, the unique representative of the 'chosen' people who would bring God's Word to the whole world. Without this perspective, much of this story is meaningless for us.

Obedience to the call

Verse 4 describes Abram's obedience to the call of God as he left Kharan. However, we should perhaps ask whether Abram was as obedient as God really wanted. He took with him a family member, Lot, and also a substantial amount of goods that he had come by in his travels and no small number of other people (v5), probably not family members but servants of various kinds as befits what appeared to be a relatively affluent nomadic group. However we should not be surprised that Abram was not perfect in every detail, and we will discover that the long story of Abram's time in Canaan (Gen chs 12-24) is full of awkward moments between him and God. It could be argued, for example, that the delay in the fulfilment of God's promises to Abram (the birth of his own son) was caused by his disobedience and untimely impatience (see ch 16 and the birth of Ishmael). Nevertheless, Abram was obedient to God's call, at heart, and God was certainly faithful to His promises.

The first stopping place that Abram came to in the land of Canaan was Shechem, a settlement between two large hills or mountains, Ebal and Gerazim. There was an early Canaanite shrine here, and it was also a

place which from ancient times was known as a 'place of decision' (see Deut 11:29, Josh 8:33). This is the significant place at which God first said to Abram 'I will give this land to your descendants (v7), and the first clear indication that this was indeed the land that would become the home for God's people in future times. Abram appears to have had no difficulty with the local Canaanites in setting up an altar with the purpose of making sacrificial acts of worship to God (v7). This worship of God could be seen as aggressively different from the normal religion practiced there, but we should not read back into this story the later history of conflict that would tear the country apart. In the future there would be great conflict between the descendants of Abram and the Canaanites who already had a shrine at Shechem (as we know from archaeology), and there was also conflict later on between the peoples of Israel themselves after the time of Solomon. This took place between Judah and Jerusalem in the south, and Israel with its capital Shechem in the north (1 Kings 12:25).

From there, Abram journeyed around the land between Bethel and Ai, where he built an altar and worshipped again before moving south to the Negev, the southern rocky and desert like regions to the south of the Dead Sea which archaeology tells us was more populated in Abram's days than later. The story is now set to describe the way in which Abram is obedient to God and God fulfils his promises. Much is yet to come.

Discipleship

Application

The story of the call of Abram is the Old Testament's introduction to 'faith'. The word 'faith' is not in this story because it comes from the New Testament; but it is one that enables us to see what is happening through the perspective of God's history of salvation. Faith is something that has its roots in the hand of God on someone for His purposes, and that is clearly the case with Abram. He was obedient to God, and even with his patience and his uncertainty as shown by his attachment to Lot and an extended household (v5), his obedience was a basic ingredient of his faith. So also is worship, as indicated by Abram's spontaneous building of altars to God in the land of Canaan. Abram is often regarded as a rather colourless character because we do not discover much about the details of his life, or of his thoughts and feelings, but what is described is enough for us to agree with both Paul and James, who say he was a man of faith and also a man of action (Rom. 4:2,3; James 2:20-26).

Another aspect of faith is this; God works through people of faith to bless others. This was fundamental to the calling of Abram, but we should not think of blessing as 'being nice'. The blessing God gives is the blessing of His touch and presence as a sign of His work to bless the world; God therefore does not grant someone a 'blessing' for their own comfort or vanity, but so that other people may be blessed. This is clearly what God intended by declaring that Adam was 'blessed' and that through Him, He would bless the world.

Everything we have talked about; faith, obedience, worship and blessing, none of these are in this story of Genesis to create some religious system so that in future, people might feel they have done their duty to God by being a faithful Jew or a Christian. Everything is the result of God's work to begin the salvation history of the whole world so that it is brought back to its Creator with the results of the Fall overcome. The call of Abram and the faith that he showed in responding to it are the starting point of this great story, and pointers to what is to come.

Questions for groups

1. Why was it necessary for Abram to leave everything behind in order to follow God? Is this really required of all who follow God's call today?
2. Was Abram right to take Lot with him together with the entire retinue described in verse 5?
3. Abram worshipped spontaneously. How may we worship God spontaneously, and is this meant to be a part of 'formal' worship when people gather?

Discipleship challenges

- *Pray and listen to God, and ask Him what He is saying to you from this passage. Then, as a result of what God has said, form a plan to put what He has said to you into action, using the 'lifestyle challenges' worksheet from this website*

- *Look at the various issues here in this passage, faith, obedience, and worship, for example, and ask yourself whether you are doing what God requires of you in these things.*
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Final Prayer

Glorious Lord, thank You for the unreserved help You have given us throughout our lives. In response, may we give ourselves without reserve to the work of Your Kingdom and its priorities of helping the poor, declaring the Word and setting captives free. Help us in this task we pray. AMEN
