

ABRAHAM'S COVENANT INITIATED

There were five stages to Abraham's story, each marked by a divine conversation:

Abraham's Covenant Initiated (12:1-8)

Abraham's Covenant Clarified (13:14-17)

Abraham's Covenant Clarified Further (15:1-21)

Abraham's Covenant Clarified Still Even Further (17:1-27)

Abraham's Covenant Clarified Even Further than the Last Time (22:1-18)

TEXT

Genesis 12:1-8 The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. 2 "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." 4 So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. 5 He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. 6 Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7 The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. 8 From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.

INTRODUCTION

LOOKING AT THE PATRIARCH

Throughout Islam, prayers and praises are being given to Allah for Abraham, the father of the Islamic faith.

Yesterday in Jewish temples, orthodox, conservative and reformed, Abraham was heralded as their grand patriarch – the Father of the Jews.

And today, Christian boys and girls around the United States are undoubtedly singing “Father Abraham, had many sons. Many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you. So let's just praise the Lord.”

A serious student of the Bible will quickly come to the conclusion that Abraham is a pivotal figure. He is mentioned in over 300 verses throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Dr. James Boice states that with the exception of Jesus, Abraham is probably the most important person in the Bible.

Look at the emphasis Moses gives to Abraham. Prior to our present reading, we have 11 chapters of Genesis covering thousands of years and numerous generations. Then Moses spends the next 14 chapters dealing with one man, his family and his legacy.

He is the initial receiver of God's covenant in Genesis, and the reason God states for rescuing his people in Exodus (Ex. 2:24). He is the emblem of Jewish pride in the Judges and Kings, and his name and covenant is heard in the accusations of God throughout the prophets. In the Gospels, he is the reason for Christ's birth (Luke 1:68-72), yet he is the curse of the Israelites, and the blessing of the Gentiles. And through the Epistles, he is the man of faith, par-excellence, that is to be a role model for believers today.

In Paul's systematic theology, Romans, almost two chapters spent simply outlining the Abrahamic covenant and how it applies to Christianity. And in his exposition to the Galatians, Paul spends two chapters making sure that the Gentile believers understand their inheritance as children of Abraham.

Throughout the Bible, Abraham is there. You can almost say, "He's everywhere, He's everywhere." Or in more modern-day language, Abraham is popping up again and again saying, "Can you hear me now?"

The covenant, the church and the Christ all have their foundations in Abraham. So for that reason, we will spend four weeks studying this figure.

FOUR SERMONS ON ABRAHAM

There were four stages to Abraham's story, each marked by a divine conversation. So we will allow these divine encounters to guide our Biblical study.

I really had a tough time crafting scholarly titles for these messages. I desperately wanted to impress you with my brilliance in the use of English vocabulary. So here are our four sermons.

Abraham's Covenant Initiated (12:1-8)

Abraham's Covenant Clarified Further (13:14-17; 15:1-21)

Abraham's Covenant Clarified Even Further (17:1-27)

Abraham's Covenant Clarified Even Further than the Last Time (22:1-18)

THIS MORNING

Dr. Reymond calls Genesis 12:1-3 the most important verses in the Bible. Why would he make such a bold statement?

Because through these verses, this morning, you are going to see how God deals with people. The way God approached, commanded, and blessed Abram is the same way God approaches, commands and blesses men and women today.

My hope is that you will respond to this message in one of two ways:

1. Believers, rejoice in the call of God and the blessings of God, and recommit to live in obedient faith throughout your days.
2. All others, hear the call of God, realize the blessings He has for you, and respond as Abram responded. Become a Jehovah worshiper this morning.

I. THE COVENANT RELATIONSHIP IS GRACEFULLY INITIATED BY GOD.

First I want you to see who approaches whom in this covenantal conversation. The covenant relationship is gracefully initiated by God.

THE COVENANT IS INITIATED BY GOD

There is nothing in Scripture that would lead one to the conclusion that Abram was in any way seeking God. As far as we know, Abram was simply a Mesopotamian citizen, no different from any of his other Middle Eastern neighbors.

Abram was approached by God. God was the instigator in this transaction.

THE COVENANT IS GRACEFULLY INITIATED BY GOD

But now let's delve further and ask the question, "Why?" "Why did God approach and call Abram?"

It will help us if we understand who God calls? Does God call everyone? Does everyone hear the voice of God? The answer, which may surprise some of you here this morning is, "Yes." There is a real sense in which all men receive some sort of a "general calling" from God.

Scripture tells us that the heavens declare the glory of God. It takes more faith to believe the present complex order of life originated from two amebas of primal slime than it does to believe in intelligent creation. According to Romans 1, all men see and know there is a God. There is a Divine Teacher and He has taught very, very well.

Scripture also tells us that this Divine Teacher, God, has placed within all men an inner instinct of right and wrong. He has placed within all men a desire to find and know the spiritual. All men have an inherent understanding that

there is something after this life. Sociology shows us that all cultures instinctively find or create a god to worship.

And so all men have received this elementary call. All men have received this “grace of God.” We call it grace because God owes it to no one to communicate Himself to them. All men receive some grace. We call this the “common grace” of God in our theological ramblings.

But while all men receive some call of God, some receive an even further, more intimate calling from God. We will call this the “special calling.”

You have to admit that not all men receive the same calling of God. This can be clearly seen in the pages of Scripture. Noah received a verbal call from God. Balaam heard God speak through his donkey. Samuel heard God’s call in the night. Elijah heard the still, small voice of God in the wilderness. Paul saw the light, literally, as he was traveling on the road to Damascus. And Abram was approached by God in Ur.

And yet, there is even a deeper calling than the ones I just described. All men receive a general calling. Some receive a special calling. And then there are others who receive what I will entitle the “complete calling.” The correct theological term for this is the “effectual calling”, but we will call it the “complete calling” this morning.

This is what Jesus Christ spoke of when he said, “Many are called, but few are chosen.” These people are called outwardly by nature and inwardly by their conscience. These people are then called specially by the voice or words of God. And then, to close the deal, these people are called spiritually and inwardly by the Holy Spirit of God.

And this is where we find Abram. Abram heard the call, and then Abram was moved to accept the call in obedience and faith. This special and complete calling by God is what convinced a comfortable pagan to leave all and obey Jehovah.

SO ALL MEN RECEIVE SOME CALLING, BUT NOT ALL MEN RECEIVE THE SPECIAL INWARD CALLING THAT ABRAM RECEIVED. WHY?

Why did the Christ-hater Saul receive a special calling but the Christ-hater Caiaphas did not? Why did Abram receive a special and complete calling but his brothers, Nahor or Haran did not?

Why did God approach and specially, or effectively, or completely call Abram?

Abraham was not chosen because he was a Jew. Abraham was just as much a gentile as a Jew. There were no Jewish people or chosen race at that stage in history.

Abraham was not chosen because he was righteous, good and holy. Scripture reassures us that all men are sinners and naturally odious in the sight of God.

Abraham was not chosen because of his strong, believing family. It was in spite of his family. We are reasonably certain

that Abram's family, and maybe even Abram himself, were idol worshipers. In Joshua 24, Yahweh clearly calls Israel not to resort back to the idol-worshipping days of Terah, Abraham's father. And we know that even in Genesis 31, the relatives of Abram are still actively engaged in the process of idol worship.

So why did God choose to give a "Special Calling" to Abram?

The answer can be found in one word that starts with "G." It is grace.

God deals with some men one way and other men another way simply because that is His good pleasure to do so.

And so we see that God initiates the covenant relationship, and He graciously initiates the covenant relationship. He owes it to no one. All men hear the general call of God and reject Him. It is only through grace that He boldly approaches some and changes their inner "want to" so that they "want to" turn and follow Him.

APPLICATION: HOW IS GOD CALLING YOU?

GOD HAS CALLED YOU GENERALLY.

God is calling all generally. There are no reasonable atheists. All men can read the signs and see that there is a God. All men instinctively know that there is a Deity somewhere. We know that God has revealed Himself generally to you.

Do you know there is a God? Absolutely!

GOD IS CALLING SOME SPECIALLY.

He has given you an opportunity that not all men receive. You are sitting here this morning hearing the preaching of God's Word. God is revealing Himself to you in a privileged fashion. You are the lucky ones ... if we must use the term luck. God has given an extra measure of information to some, and you are the "some."

For some reason, God has drawn you here this morning. You are not sleeping, eating brunch, fishing, knitting, laying out, golfing, working, or on some travel sports team. No, you are sitting here worshiping and hearing the Word of God proclaimed.

Do you know there is a God? Absolutely! Has he called you specially? I can say "yes" without any shadow of doubt.

BUT PERHAPS, GOD IS CALLING SOME COMPLETELY. EVEN RIGHT NOW. THIS IS GRACE.

For some, this makes sense. For some, it is odd, peculiar, strange, but it is drawing. It is compelling. You find yourself desiring to know more of this God.

This has already happened to many of us. For most of us, we have been driven to change our lives and live for Christ. God has called us generally, specially and completely. We have been transformed. We desire to bring our lives into conformity with God's Word. We have agreed with Scripture and we see our sin and our heinous condition. And we have been seduced by Christ to place our trust in Him for our salvation.

And do you know what we have been praying? That God would do the same for others throughout Palm Beach County.

God gives plain truth to some while hiding truth from others. Those who see, they are the specially called. God gives eyes to see and ears to hear. Those who have these spiritual senses are the specially called. God allows some to continue in their sin unabated while stopping others in their tracks.

If God is disciplining and chastising you, this is grace. Some are cheerfully ignorant of their God-need while others are inwardly miserable. This misery very well could be the calling and the grace of God.

For those of you who see ... praise God.

For those of you who have heard ... praise God.

For those of you who are having the scales removed from your eyes ... pray, repent, confess and believe. Today!

TRANSITION:

God sovereignly and gracefully initiated the communication with Abram. But what was the content of the communication? What did God say to Abram?

God's covenant comes with grace, but it also comes with commands. Let's look at what God commanded of Abram.

II. THE COVENANT RELATIONSHIP INVOLVES TOTAL COMMITMENT.

While the covenant is initiated by God, the covenant does involve human duty and responsibility. It is sovereignly initiated. It is never negotiated. But the sovereign, non-negotiable covenant involves human responsibility. Men must keep or obey the covenant.

So what did God command of Abram?

ABRAM WAS TO LEAVE

God commanded Abram to leave. He was to get up and leave his country, his people, and his family. He was to take that which was most natural, prosperous, and comforting to him and leave it behind. In a nutshell, Abram was to let go of his old life and begin anew.

I'm sure that Abram and Sarah must have been thinking, what is God up to? Why such a strict and seemingly harsh command?

But God is making an exclusive claim on the life of Abram. God is demanding that Abram separate from his past and present situation. God is demanding total loyalty.

ABRAM WAS TO GO

Secondly, God commanded Abram to go. He was to leave one station in life and head towards another.

Yet Abram was not just to go through some mid-life transition and choose a different path. It was not up to Abram to choose his new path, direction and home. No, God would choose Abram's path for him. God had said, "Go to the land I will show you." He was to go in the direction in which God would specifically show him. Abram was not simply to go, but he was to go where God led.

But this second command is even more difficult than it might appear on the surface. Abram was to go where God led, but had not revealed. God had not yet told Abram to go to Canaan. God was keeping Abram in a spiritual suspense. Abram was going to be required to be daily dependent upon the Lord.

Calvin paraphrases the thought contained in God's Word. In effect God was saying, "I command thee to go forth with closed eyes, and forbid thee to inquire whither I am about to lead thee, until, having renounced thy country, thou shalt have given thyself wholly to me."

God was requiring total faith by Abram, and this would be a faith that must be exercised every day. Abram had no benefit of a divine "mapquest" which would give him in colored form the will of God for his life. Abram would have to live by faith and not by sight as he sought to do the will of God.

APPLICATION: NO NEGOTIATION

God comes to Abram and immediately starts making commands. I like the King James Translation of Genesis 12:1, "Get

thee out!” In the Hebrew, it is in the imperative case, meaning that God is commanding. There is no suggestion or invitation here.

What arrogance! It is almost as if God thinks he owns Abram or something. And that is the point, He does!

And so, with full sovereignty and authority, God commands. He does not negotiate. He does not invite. He does not request. He does not enter into a mutually agreeable contract. No, He commands.

And He is doing so to you this morning. Don't be misled or fooled. Realize that God communicates in different fashions. God may thunder with a loud voice, or he may communicate in a sweet, small voice. You may hear His heavy voice pounding in your chest as you hear a sermon, or you may be simply allowing these thoughts to go in one ear and out the other. But be careful, be very careful. For though the style of God's voice is often different, the force behind the voice never changes. God does not ask you to follow. He commands. God does not ask you to die to self. He commands. And God is not inviting you to choose Christ. He demands it.

APPLICATION: THERE IS NO EASY-BELIEVISM HERE

Palmer Robertson writes, one of the most solid Old Testament Biblical scholars that I know, states,

“This command embodies the root requirement of God's people at all times. It stands at the threshold of every proper personal relationship to God ... The original requirement directed to Abraham ultimately becomes the obligation of every true child of God.”

God does not simply ask to come into your life to make it better. He is not a “happy pill.” No, God calls us from something to something totally new. He calls us from an old life to one totally new, totally dedicated, and one that must be lived in daily faith. He calls us to follow and pursue and obey His holy will, and whole-hearted allegiance is required.

There is nothing easy about following God, obeying Christ, and living the holy life. It is hard and against our nature. It requires hard work and diligence. There is no sense in which covenant living is a spiritual walk in the park. The command to Abram was harsh and devastating on the surface. He must leave all that is known and comfortable. And so is the call to Christianity.

Christ set the mark high when he commanded that his disciples be willing to leave father, mother, sister or brother. They had thriving fishing businesses, and they must leave their families and communities in order to be His followers. Christ said, “If you would follow me, then you must deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.”

Abram and Sarai most certainly would have been wondering, why can't we just add Yahweh worship to our current lifestyle? And many today are seeking to simply add Jesus to their already overcrowded lives.

God told Abraham to go and follow. Christ told his disciples to go and follow. And Christ calls you and me to go and

follow.

He is calling Christians to leave their former way of living. If they were engaged in a particular sinful practice, they must cease. If they were characterized by ungodly friends, then they must depart. If they are influenced by sinful temptations, then they must escape.

I am calling you to consider the grace of God in calling, but also the cost of following Christ. Calvin writes, "If we desire to follow God with constancy, it behooves us carefully to meditate on all the inconveniences, all the difficulties, all the dangers which await us"

Christ still commands that all those who wish to be joined with him, they must leave behind all attachments and ties. The mark of a Christian is obedience. Are you bound to nothing, save Christ Jesus?

Genesis 12:4 So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran.

Obedience is the only option. Obedience is the mark of one who has truly been "called" or "confronted" by God. This is the only logical response of someone who has met with Jehovah.

TRANSITION:

God graciously called Abram. God required obedience of Abram. But that is not the end of the story.

We now get to the fun part or the easy section. The glorious realization that the God who makes demands is also the all-powerful, all-seeing, all-knowing, all-loving God who makes promises.

Let's look at the God-promises made in Genesis 12.

III. THE COVENANT RELATIONSHIP INVOLVES SPECTACULAR BLESSINGS.

Genesis 12:1-3 The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. 2 "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Look at the numerous "I wills." Notice that the contract primarily includes what God will do for Abraham, and not what Abraham is to do for God.

I wish to pull out for you six specific promises made by God to Abram.

I WILL SHOW YOU THE LAND.

God told Abram, "I will show you the land."

Abram did not know where God was leading, but he had assurance that God would indeed lead.

APPLICATION:

You have the same promise from God. He has promised to lead you in knowing His will.

How do you know the will of God? How do you do the will of God?

I believe Abram is the perfect example for us to follow.

Originally Abram lived in Ur of Chaldea. I believe that the call of God from Genesis 12:1 took place in Haran. But now skip with me to Genesis 15:7, "He also said to him, 'I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.'" Also, listen to Stephen in Acts 7:2 "To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran."

Twice God states that he began calling Abram even when he was in Ur. I believe that even before Abram heard the audible call from God, he was in effect being sovereignly led by God. It appears that God started calling Abram at Haran, but in reality, the path for Abram began many years before. As a matter of fact, we know that God was calling Abram from Genesis 3, through the woman, through Seth, through Noah, and through Shem.

God was calling Abram before he knew it, and I would tell you this morning that God calls and leads us in ways that we do not see or comprehend.

And so we see that God was calling us and moving us even before we realized it. It is always easier to look backwards

and see the hand of God that it is to see where he will lead in the future.

So how do you know and do the will of God? By daily obeying everything He tells you to do and watch his will simply unfold in your life.

God never told Abram exactly where he was going. And God will probably not tell you either. You have not been called to obey God as long as you agree with the outlined course. No, you have been called from your old life, to the new life, and you must walk by faith trusting Him in the process. That is knowing and doing the will of God.

Be like Abram. It is better to follow God with closed eyes than to navigate our own path using our own natural, sinful sight.

I WILL MAKE YOU A PEOPLE.

God made a second promise to Abram, "I will make you a people."

You can almost hear God saying, "Get out of your current country and people so I can give you a better people."

I WILL BLESS YOU TEMPORALLY.

Here is God's third promise to Abram, "I will bless you."

I think you can take this as a temporal promise. God is here promising to bless Abram as he journeys on this earth.

You can almost hear God saying, "Quit trying to precour your own blessing so that I may bless you."

I WILL EXALT YOUR NAME GREATLY.

Fourthly, God said, "I will exalt your name greatly."

As opposed to those in Babel who sought to make their own name great, it is a wonderful thing when God says, "I will make your name great."

I WILL MAKE YOU A BLESSING TO THE NATIONS.

God's fifth promise to Abram is found in the words, "I will make you a blessing to the nations."

Abram would be a blessing to the nations, but not to every person in every nation. Notice that to some, Abram is a blessing while to others he is a curse. Abram is a polarizing figure. God's blessing would fall on those who had the

proper respect and regard for Abram, but for those who cursed Abram, a curse would fall upon their heads.

The postmillennialist might find some support here. Notice that God will bless those (plural) blessing Abram while cursing him (singular) that curses Abram. It appears that God plans on blessing more than He curses. But we will leave that point for further theological discussion later.

I WILL GIVE THIS LAND TO YOUR OFFSPRING.

To find the sixth promise, you need to jump ahead to verse seven of chapter twelve. “The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.” (Gen. 12:7)

Now the God who says, “I will show you the land”, He is saying, “I will give you the land.”

I know we have flown through these promises, but we will spend more time unraveling them throughout the following weeks.

It was just my desire to give you a taste of the covenant this morning.

CONCLUSION:

WHAT'S THE BIG POINT?

God graciously calls some, commands some, and then He blesses their socks off.

HOW ARE WE TO RESPOND?

I believe verses 4 and 8 show us.

Genesis 12:4 So Abram left, as the LORD had told him;

Genesis 12:8 From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.

Christian, obey! Quit trying to negotiate with God. Submit!

Christian, live by faith! Quit living by sight. Quit listening to the so-called “experts” of this world. Obey God and listen to His Word regardless of whether it seems easy.

Christian, worship! Get excited. Rejoice! You have been chosen, called and saved. There is no condemnation. There is nothing that can separate you from Christ. Even Abram, who in this very chapter loses faith and lies to Pharaoh regarding his wife, he still does not lose the blessing. He is secure, very secure.

Friends who don't yet know Christ, come! For those whose breast is pounding from the call of God, rejoice! Your day of covenant-inclusion is at hand. I prayed fervently this morning that God would save someone right here in this building. After the service, would you come up and pray with me and a couple elders. We can't wait to see who God has placed in our family this morning.

Apart from the Abrahamic covenant, there is no blessing. Inside the Abrahamic covenant, there is no curse. Whatever you do, make sure you are here to worship God and learn more about His covenant next week.

May God help us to realize, respond, and rejoice as we think about the Abrahamic covenant this week.

SIDE NOTE: ABRAM FAILED BUT WAS STILL BLESSED.

Abram had great faith to leave home.

Abram had great faith to follow God's leading.

Abram had great faith to believe he would have a son, and descendants, and a nation, and nations.

But Abram did not have faith enough to trust God with his life and his wife in Egypt.

Genesis 12:10 Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. 11 As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. 12 When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. 13 Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you." 14 When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman. 15 And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. Genesis 12:16 He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels.

Genesis 12:17 But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. 18 So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? 19 Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!" 20 Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.

Genesis 13:1 So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. 2 Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.

This is a clear example that God blesses his children in spite of their disobedience.

God guarded his wife.

God added to his possessions.

God continued the relationship with Abram.