

The Call of Abram

Genesis 11:10-12:20

Focus Verse

“The LORD had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you.’ ” Genesis 12:1-2a

- **Abram’s Family – Genesis 11:10-32**
- **Abram’s Faith – Genesis 12:1-9**
- **Abram’s Folly – Genesis 12:10-20**

Engage

Is following God a risk? Is going with the crowd safe? These two questions represent an ongoing challenge in the believer’s life, including your own. Our mixed-up world simultaneously commends conformity and rewards rebellion. Playing it safe and fitting in seems appealing. Trends can dictate what we should read, how we should dress, what is acceptable and what is not. On the other hand, obeying God often feels risky. Christians think and live so differently from the world that the New Testament refers to believers as aliens, foreigners, strangers and exiles.¹ **Giving up what this world holds dear appears costly; valuing what God rewards involves sacrifice.** If following God risks this world’s favor and comforts, is it worth it to you? How do you evaluate the risks and rewards?

God called Abram to leave everything familiar. Holding only God’s promise of future blessing, Abram packed up and left a comfortable life in a thriving city. He placed his confidence in the character and promises of God, not the clarity of the path before him. Is following God a risk? Certainly Abram risked loss by this world’s standards. He gave up personal control in favor of trusting God. He risked so much that others would think him foolish. Abram risked what this world labels as gain for the sake of obeying God. **God calls and guides His people into a new life of faith.** Because God is God, following Him is safe. The martyred missionary Jim Elliot said it well: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”

Abram’s Family – Genesis 11:10-32

Shem’s Family Line – 11:10-26

God, the Author and Giver of Life, recorded the population of humanity both before and after the Flood. Chapter 11 lists selected family members from Noah’s son Shem through Abraham (called Abram until God renames him in Genesis 17:5). This genealogy offers an interesting parallel to Adam’s line recorded in Genesis 5. Both lists repeat the phrases “became the father of” and “other sons and daughters.” Genesis 11 also records life spans but omits the phrase “and then he died.” By this point in history, death seems expected and came more quickly. The offspring God promised to conquer sin had not yet been born.²

Men of importance named in Genesis 11:10-26 include:

- **Shem** – became the father of Arphaxad at 100 years old, two years after the Flood.

- **Shelah** – became the father of Eber at 30 years old. From Eber came the name “Hebrews,” God’s chosen people.
- **Terah** – became the father of three sons after he was 70 years old – Abram, Nahor and Haran.

Abram’s Immediate Relatives – 11:27-32

Scripture reveals a few more facts about Abram’s closest relatives.

Terah (Abram’s father) – Terah lived east of the Euphrates River in Ur, a country in Mesopotamia ruled by the Chaldeans.³ He served other gods and worshipped the sun and moon.⁴ He led Abram, Sarai (renamed Sarah in Genesis 17:15) and Haran’s son Lot from Ur toward Canaan, settling in Harran.

Nahor (Abram’s brother) – He married his niece, Haran’s daughter Milkah. Their marriage produced

eight sons, and his granddaughter Rebekah became the wife of Abram's son Isaac.⁵

Haran (Abram's brother) – He was born, lived and died in Ur. He became the father of Lot and two daughters, Milkah and Iskah. After Haran's death in Ur, Terah moved Abram, Sarai and Lot to Harran.

Sarai (Abram's wife and half sister) – She was Terah's daughter, but she and Abram had different mothers. She was 65 years old and still barren when Abram left Harran for Canaan.⁶

Abram's Background

Abram originally came from Ur, a highly advanced port city at the mouth of the Euphrates River on the Persian Gulf. The archeological remains commonly considered as the city of Ur reveal its wealth, power

and idolatry. The "step pyramid," the Ziggurat of Ur, was built to honor the moon god Nanna (also called Sin), perhaps earlier than the first pyramids on the Nile. The top of the temple rose about 100 feet (30.5 meters) above its courtyard.

Excavations common to this area and time have uncovered two-story villas with as many as 14 rooms with plastered, whitewashed walls. Not even houses in Babylon, built 1,500 years later, compared with those of Ur. Archaeologists have discovered materials from libraries and schools. Thousands of tablets record everything from hymns to the gods of Ur to business contracts.

Idolatry permeated the advanced development in Ur. **Despite a family history of idolatry, when God called Abram to leave all he had ever known, he obeyed.** He found that God guided him every step of the way.

Abram's Faith – Genesis 12:1-9

Genesis 12 records Abram's first steps of faith.

This chapter describes God's call to Abram and his obedience to leave his home and trust God's promise. Abram's faith grew deeper as he walked with God. Hebrews 11:8 describes Abram's first steps of trust in God: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going."

God's Command – 12:1

"The LORD had said ..." **This statement, *had said*, written in past tense, indicates God first called to Abram while still in Ur.** In his speech to Israel's religious leaders centuries later, Stephen confirmed the Lord first called Abram when he lived in Ur with his father Terah (Acts 7:2-4). Later, Abram, Sarai, Terah and Lot settled in Harran, along the Euphrates in Mesopotamia, partway to Canaan. After Terah died, God reminded Abram of His command and restated His promises.

Abram and every person face the same defining decision – "how will I respond to God?" **First and foremost, God calls you to Himself.** He does not call you to follow rules, bargain or earn His favor. God calls you into a relationship with Him and into deeper relationships with others. His call includes facing sin and our need for God. Mankind's need to *repent* or *renounce* former ways is not optional to God. God's call also brings a promising way forward, an invitation into a new life of faith. From this moment forward, Abram increasingly followed God's guidance, though not perfectly. Abram grew in faith as He experienced God's faithfulness.

Abram faced the cost of God's call as he heard, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household ..." This represented no small sacrifice. The promise within God's call awakened his faith, "Go ... to the land I will show you." God called Abram to follow Him into a new land and new life. **Abram did not yet know all the challenges, changes and joy to come, but he knew the next step.** What allowed Abram to grow? He desired to know God more fully and surrendered His will to God. He trusted God and moved forward step-by-step.

Crisis moments in life require a deliberate decision to either trust God or your own solutions. The strength necessary to trust God and step out in obedience comes only from Him. God's character upholds every promise and command in His Word. **Through His grace and with every command, God gives the desire and will to trust Him.** Philippians 2:13 explains, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose." Faith includes new power to act on God's promises and to renounce anything contrary to His revealed plan.

God's Promises to Abram – 12:2-3

God's call and promises to Abram reveal His faithfulness and plan to redeem humanity from sin. God intervened against evil in Noah's day, calling and delivering Noah and his future descendants from the judgment of the Flood. God dispersed the rebellious people at the Tower of Babel, upholding His plan for humanity to fill the earth. The world again seemed filled with wickedness in the days of Abram. This time, God called Abram. The promise God made to Abram

represents His planned way of deliverance for Abram and his descendants. God's covenant promise, like the ark, delivers all who enter into His promises through faith. God continues to offer a way of salvation from His righteous judgment and wrath against evil.

God's plan for Abram depended solely on God, not Abram. God announced what He would do, not what Abram must do. The sufficiency and faithfulness of God provides the foundation for faith that Abram and all people after him follow. **God's promises to Abram changed the course of individuals, families, communities, nations and the world.** Abram received amazing, unconditional and lasting promises of land, people and blessing from God:

- **I will make you into a great nation** – God promised descendants and a legacy to the currently childless Abram. Abram's nation (Israel) would be great (meaning significant) because of their unique relationship with God.
- **I will bless you** – God promised Himself to Abram. The goodness of God would bless Abram personally.
- **I will make your name great** – Abram (later known as Abraham) is also called the father of many nations, a prophet, mighty prince, God's friend, father of those who believe and the man of faith.⁷
- **I will make you to be a blessing** – God's blessing came with the responsibility to share His goodness, to bless others.
- **I will bless those who bless you** – Abram's people would be so identified with God that for anyone to be kind, good or generous to them would be to act in kindness, goodness or generosity toward God.
- **I will curse whoever curses you** – Likewise, to curse Abram's people was akin to cursing God. Throughout history, this prophetic promise proves true. Whenever nations afflict the Jews, they invariably suffer.
- **I will make all peoples on earth be blessed through you** – God called Abram out of the nations that had gone their own way in evil and idolatry.⁸ Through Abram's nation all can know these gifts:
 - **God's Word** – God preserved His revelation of Himself in the Scriptures through Abram's descendants.
 - **The Lord Jesus Christ** – Abram's greatest descendant fulfills God's promise of salvation and blessing.
 - **God's will** – Through Abram's example of faith, all people can learn how to increasingly know, love, trust and obey God and believe in His promises now fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Abram's Response to God's Call – 12:4-9

Abram believed God, but partial obedience marked his early walk of faith. God's call included risks and Abram responded with half steps of obedience. First, he went with his father and family but stopped short of Canaan to settle in Harran. When he left Harran for Canaan, he brought Lot (his father's family) along with all their people and possessions. Lot and these possessions created trouble later. **But God remained faithful to His Word.** He continued to work in Abram's life to grow his faith and to accomplish His own plans.

Obedience – 12:4-5

Abram left Harran with Sarai, Lot and their acquired possessions and went to Canaan. Scripture gives the practical, visible results of God's effective call. "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him ... and they arrived there." The Canaanite nations, described in Genesis 9-11, lived in immorality and idolatry like the people in Abram's homeland. **Abram was to enter Canaan with God and his family to claim this land.**

Moses wrote Genesis centuries after the life of Abram. God's people, the Israelites (Abram's nation), were again under God's command to claim this promised land from the Canaanites. The Genesis account reminded and equipped this new generation of God's people for their return to the land God promised Abram. The story of Abram foreshadows his later nation Israel and their conquest of Canaan, the land promised by God. Like their forefather, the Israelites struggled with faith and obedience to God's call.

Living in unwavering faith challenges us, even when we desire to believe God. Abram and the Israelites struggled to fully embrace new life under God's love, care, guidance and rule.

The Lord appeared to Abram at Shechem – 12:6-7

The great tree of Moreh at Shechem marked a place of abundant water at the center of Canaan. The tree stood along a mountain ridge that formed a well-traveled route through the land. Shechem is a key site for many Bible events marking new phases in journeys of faith. There at Shechem, "The LORD appeared to Abram." Verse 7 repeats this amazing fact twice. God personally confirmed His promises to Abram to strengthen his active but imperfect faith. **God knows and guides His children in grace and mercy.** God understands human weakness. He calls His people to trust Him, not their own understanding. God would give Abram offspring as well as the land into which he journeyed. Abram responded in awe and worship, building an altar of praise and sacrifice to God.

Abram called on the Lord and built an altar near Bethel – 12:8-9

Abram continued to travel through the land, demonstrating faith in God by journeying through regions inhabited by the Canaanites. He pitched his tents and built an altar between Bethel and Ai to fellowship with God. Bethel later became an important place of worship to Abram's grandson Jacob and others. **Abram expectantly called upon the Lord, Yahweh, the covenant-keeping Lord.** He personally sought the Lord, growing in faith to trust God and continue his journey. He set out and continued to explore God's gift of land toward the Negev in the south where many other Bible events occur.

God designed a special role for Israel that He first revealed to Abram. God keeps all His promises. Abram's story records the beginning of God's plan to bless the world through this nation. God's plan for the world includes His people. He built their identity as a community and a nation. Israel was designed by God to be a source of blessing for all the nations of the world. Today, communities of faith, groups of people who believe God and reflect His priorities, get to model healthy, flourishing lives to a watching world. God never intended for your walk with Him to be private or secret. Who in your life shares your faith in and calling by Christ? Together, do you find strength and unity that spur you forward to impact our world?

The Doctrine of Regeneration

God offers one way of salvation. Only He can regenerate or create the spiritual life necessary for any person, otherwise dead spiritually, to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Since the Fall of mankind described in Genesis 3, everyone born does not have a natural desire or ability to respond to God. Just as a corpse cannot see, hear or respond in any way, those dead in sin cannot see, hear or understand the things of God. **Only when the Holy Spirit regenerates a dead heart and gives new life can mankind believe God and receive salvation in Christ.** Regeneration is also called new birth because the spiritually dead are born again, given new life by God (Ephesians 2:1,4-7). Salvation comes by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

As with Abram, new life for all believers begins through God's call to believe Him and His promises. Today, believers more fully understand regeneration as the act by which the Holy Spirit puts His eternal life into a person who believes in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (2 Thessalonians 2:13). **God gives new life along with the desire, faith and ability to obey His call** (Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Philippians 2:13; Hebrews 11). The Holy Spirit indwells believers in Jesus Christ and guarantees that those who receive God's eternal life will continue to believe. This new life of faith in God begins and continues, evident through faithful obedience. God regenerates and transforms believers' lives, fulfilling their identity and ultimate purpose. Through regeneration, believers' minds are renewed, and their lives transformed.

Without a regenerated heart, no one desires to seek God (Romans 3:9-18). Human attempts to regulate behavior, control evil or please God fail, apart from the life-giving Holy Spirit. But there is hope. **We serve a God who brings dead hearts to life.** The gospel has power because God gives life to the dead. He unstops ears and causes the blind to see. Only then can people understand the truth about God and what He offers through salvation in Christ. God's work, not your eloquent words, awakens dead hearts. You can share the gospel boldly, knowing God has the power to make the dead come to life. Because your life with God is all His doing, He alone gets the glory.

Abram's Folly – Genesis 12:10-20

A Test of Growing Faith – 12:10

A famine in Canaan tested Abram's willingness to trust God. God allows growing faith to be tested. He wants you to succeed and to experience His faithful provision in personal and meaningful ways. Your faith muscle develops by trusting God in real life challenges. God's tests are never temptations toward evil, rather they are opportunities to depend on Him. Even when your faith falters, God's grace allows you to understand

better your human weakness and utter neediness of how much you need God's grace. God promised to dwell with Abram in Canaan in every circumstance. The famine greatly impacted Abram partly because of the large number of possessions between his and Lot's households. This famine, ultimately under God's sovereign control, offered Abram a choice. Would he depend on God or rely on a human solution? God intends hardships to draw us closer to Him, so we become content with His presence and provisions.

A Convenient but Costly Lie – 12:11-16

The severe shortage of food in Canaan led Abram to seek refuge in Egypt. Abram's move seems to be driven by insecurity, self-determination and fear. Abram's fear only increased as he moved away from God and His guidance. He feared the Egyptians would kill him to take Sarai, his beautiful wife. Abram put his own welfare above loving protection of his wife. He lied, claiming Sarai was his sister, not his wife. Perhaps he justified the lie that contained a half-truth (Sarai was his half sister). Lies often multiply to maintain effectiveness. He prepared by first asking Sarai to join in the deception and then lied to the Egyptians. Sarai was taken into Pharaoh's harem.

Abram's choice to leave Canaan led to sin, broken trust and disrupted relationships. Sin deceived Abram to think he would be safer outside God's promised place of blessing rather than within His revealed will. His lie exposed his wife to harm in Pharaoh's house. Abram's sin toward God, Sarai and Pharaoh resulted in a tide of unexpected trouble.

God's Deliverance and Collateral Damage – 12:17-20

Abram's lie caused suffering. **God intervened in grace and mercy to protect Abram and Sarai.** God inflicted Pharaoh's household with serious diseases as a result of Abram's deception. The Egyptian ruler justly rebuked Abram – "What have you done to me?"

God allows growing faith to be tested. He wants you to succeed and to experience His faithful provision in personal and meaningful ways. Your faith muscle develops by trusting God in real life challenges.

and "Take her and go!" "Wife" is repeated four times in these verses. Pharaoh understood the honor and protection due a wife better than Abram, who belonged to the One who created marriage.

God, in grace and mercy, protected Abram and Sarai. God knew they would bear Isaac by His miraculous intervention. Isaac carried forward the family line that ultimately led to the birth of Jesus Christ. God protected Abram and Sarai from death or other loss when their lies were discovered. For a foreigner to deceive and cause suffering to Egypt's leader could be considered an act of war. God caused Pharaoh to send them away with all their goods. These "possessions" likely included the Egyptian slave girl Hagar. The abundance of possessions contributed to Abram's decision to split with Lot near Sodom.

God calls and guides His people into a new life of faith. God called Abram and promised blessing beyond his imagination. Abram believed God's promises and acted on them by faith. He found that although faith and dependence on God is risky and challenging, belief in God reveals the only complete security that can be known. Abram's journey of faith revealed both God's faithfulness and Abram's need to depend on God for every step.

Take to Heart

Hold Fast

Only God can impart faith to understand how wise, joyous and good it is to obey His call. God called Abram, and he stepped out in faith to leave Ur. Abram believed God's promise and obeyed. His first steps of faith represent a very human picture that mixed God-given courage and human caution. Faith required Abram to believe what he did not see physically.⁹ Abram experienced God's faithfulness as he obeyed His command and even when he did not. Only as we obey God's Word do we prove that "the path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day."¹⁰

God's love for Abram shined through their person-to-person relationship. God appeared to Abram and reassured him of His steadfast promise. God protected Abram, Sarai and His plan when they disobeyed and fled to Egypt. **God promised a family that eventually became the nation of Israel.** The greatness of Israel is not the number of its people or size of its land, but God's presence with them and the

gift of His revelation for the world. World history, current events and Bible prophecies confirm the significance of the nation of Israel.

God's promise to bless all nations through Abram continues today. **Now, all may hear about the person and work of Jesus Christ, the One promised to come and save humanity from sin.** He died in our place on the Cross, so we may be forgiven and received into God's family by grace through faith. God gives new life, regenerating all who respond to God through repentance and belief in His Son.

Abram followed God's guidance into the land that would become his inheritance.¹¹ The land was far more wonderful than first expected. **You experience the fullness of God's presence and spiritual blessings when you trust and obey.** Not only in this life but also in the ages to come, God has promised to show to those who are in Christ "the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us"¹²

Apply It

Abram and Sarai set out without fully knowing God's specific plans. **Abram's confidence rested on God and His promises.** God led him, a step at a time, building his faith along the way. Do you often prefer every detail and risk of the journey to be explained before you commit? Do you wrongly choose to "play it safe" rather than trusting God? Are you hesitating right now to answer God's call because you are afraid of what you might lose? What things in your life seem more precious or secure than following God? What promise is God calling you to believe, by faith? When will you move forward and risk leaving people, options or things behind and depend on God alone to guide you?

Compromise in faith poses a greater risk than obedience.

Failure to trust and obey God brings unintended consequences, not just to you but also to others. Fear and anxiety are never from God. However, when we fail, God shows mercy and leads us to repentance and a new start. When God leads you beyond your comfort and understanding will you trust Him? What is your greatest fear today? What truth about God or promise from His Word helps that fear to crumble and your faith to grow? **Truth about God is truer than what we feel or fear.**

God grants us faith; yet, God-given faith often collides with our human understanding. In Mark 9, a desperate father asked Jesus to heal his young son. He cried out to Jesus in a way we understand, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" Abram's early faith walk in Ur, Harran, Canaan

and even Egypt reveals not only his human limitations but also God's faithfulness. **In this life, your faith will falter but can never fail because God is the One who sustains your faith.** Your confidence lies not in the strength of your faith but in the power of our sovereign God. In mercy, God guides His people back to His desired path again and again. 2 Timothy 2:13 says, "if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself." Are you trusting the Lord as you should? Can you hear God's loving call to believe He is faithful? How is God's record of faithfulness maturing your faith so you can obey Him with less hesitation? Do not let a delay or setback discourage you from doing the next right thing and taking the next courageous step of faith.

Go Deeper

Check out these footnoted references for further study of God's Word in this week's lesson.

1: **Exiles:** 1 Peter 2:11

2: **God's promised Savior:** Genesis 3:15

3: **Beyond the Euphrates:** Joshua 24:2

4: **Terah's idolatry:** Joshua 24:2, 14-15

5: **Nahor's offspring:** Genesis 22:20-24; 24:15

6: **Sarai/Sarah:** Genesis 12:5; 17:17; 20:12; Isaiah 51:2; 1 Peter 3:3-6

7: **Abraham's great name:** Genesis 17:5; 18:17-19; 20:7; 21:13; 23:6; Isaiah 41:8; Galatians 3:7-9

8: **Idolatry:** Isaiah 44:9-20; Acts 17:29-30; Romans 1:18-32

9: **Faith:** Hebrews 11:1

10: **Path of the righteous:** Proverbs 4:18

11: **Inheritance:** Hebrews 11:8

12: **Incomparable riches:** Ephesians 2:7