



Lesson 3: The Calling of Abraham

Lesson Introduction:

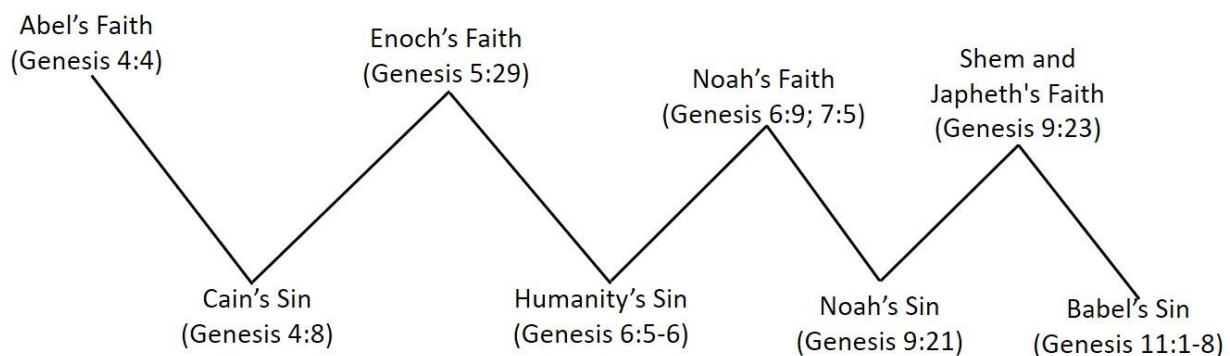
In the previous lesson we examined the creation and fall of man. We saw how God quickly and graciously took the initiative to offer and reveal His plan for our redemption. In fact, the story of the creation and the fall is not our story but God’s. Genesis 1-3 is about God’s love and salvation. God’s plan for salvation continues to unfold as we read the book of Genesis. Today we will look at Abraham and see how Abraham’s story also conveys God’s story. In Abraham, we see God’s persistent desire to save humanity in spite of humanity’s persistent failure to trust and obey God.

Read the Text: Genesis 12:1-7

Understanding the Text:

The Context of Abraham

Abraham first appears in the Bible in Genesis 11:26. His name was originally Abram until God changed it in Genesis 17:5.ⁱ Between Adam and Abraham, however, the book of Genesis presents a pattern of human behavior that shows occasional faithfulness but persistent wickedness:



Despite some high points sprinkled throughout the Genesis account, the progression of humanity is towards sin rather than righteousness. The calling of Abraham comes after a series of stories describing the consistent sinful and disastrous conduct of humanity. In fact, what we see in Genesis is actually many smaller falls after the big “Fall” of Genesis 3. Each fall is also followed by God bringing judgement and God promising salvation.

The flood is another severe scene of God’s judgement on humanity. In Genesis 6:5-7, before the flood, we read that “The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the LORD said, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created. . .” (NIV). After the flood, In Genesis 8:21, God makes a similar grim assessment of humanity saying, “every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood” (NIV). These verses are uncomfortable to read but they clearly show us God’s view of fallen humanity. God recognized that even though the flood gave another righteous family a chance to begin afresh in creation,ⁱⁱ it did not really change the sinful nature of humanity. Soon Noah and one of his sons, Canaan, would fall into sin.

The descendants of Noah do not fare any better than the descendants of Adam. They persistently sin against the God who saved them from the flood and reject his command to fill the earth (Genesis 9:1,

7). Rather than move out in obedience to fill the earth, they remained together and settled largely as one people on the plain of Shinar (Genesis 11:2). This is where the story of Babel unfolds.

The people living on the plain of Shinar found a most suitable place to live in this Mesopotamian region. Here they hoped to create their own Eden. Their desire to build a city resembles the action of Cain who also left the presence of God and started to build a city for himself (Genesis 4:17). In Babel, they could not speak their city into existence as God did so they used brick and mortar instead. In the midst of the city, they began to build a great tower which would seemingly reach into the heavens. Archeology has shown that towers were common in Mesopotamian cities and were often dedicated to idols or false gods. These towers were viewed as a connection between the human population and the deity who lived above them.ⁱⁱⁱ This is perhaps what the people of Babel had in mind. Their desire for a tower that “reaches to the heavens” may well be referring to both the height of the tower and the purpose of the tower. Whether they were trying to reach the God of their ancestor Noah or another god is unknown. Nevertheless, they were commanded by God not to build towers but to scatter over the earth and repopulate the whole of it. In spite of the great salvation shown to their forefathers in the Ark, they fall into a great sin and God brings divine judgement on them. They are cursed with confusion of languages and subsequent divisions based on language barriers which surely developed into cultural, racial, and tribal barriers as well.^{iv} Their pattern of sin mirrors that of Adam and Even. First they doubted the Word of God (they feared spreading out to multiply), then they developed pride, and finally acted in disobedience.

Christopher Wright explains that “the Babel story presents us with people who seem intent on reaching the heavens even while resisting God’s will for them on earth.”^v Such a task is impossible and for trying, God ensured that their name would forever be connected to confusion. They were thoroughly confused even before God scrambled their languages. No one can possibly reach God through sinful disobedience. There is no salvation outside the plan of God.

The writer of Genesis intentionally tells the story of Babel just before the story of Abraham. We know this because in Genesis 10, the writer explains all the places where the descendants of Noah moved and settled. Then, in Genesis 11, the writer moves back in time to this story of Babel which took place before (and resulted in) the scattering of Noah’s descendants all over the world. Thus, we should read the stories of Babel and Abraham together, as the writer of Genesis intended. Seeing these stories together reveals some interesting parallels:

Babel	Abraham
Let us build ourselves a city (Genesis 11:4)	I will make you into a great nation (Genesis 12:2)
Let us build a tower that reaches the heavens (Genesis 11:4)	I will bless you (Genesis 12:2)
Let us make a name for ourselves (Genesis 11:4)	I will make your name great (Genesis 12:2)
Let us not be scattered over the whole earth (Genesis 11:4)	Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you (Genesis 12:1)
All peoples on earth are cursed because of Babel (Genesis 11:7-9)	"All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3).

Everything that Babel sought to obtain in unfaithful disobedience, God promised to give Abraham in response to Abraham’s faithful obedience. Babel was concerned about going up in glory rather than going out in obedience to God. However, God promised Abraham that if he went out in obedience, God would raise him up in glory. Fallen Babel demonstrates the ongoing failure of humanity in spite of God’s ongoing demonstrations of love and salvation. Abraham’s calling, however, is yet another example of God’s consistent redemptive activity on behalf of unfaithful and sinful man.

The Call of Abraham

The calling of Abraham represents a shift in God’s approach to humanity. This shift does not represent a change in God’s plan but rather the unfolding of God’s plan. Through Adam, Noah, and Babel

we learn that the whole of humanity remains caught up in a cycle of sin which they cannot break even in the midst of God revealing his love and plan of redemption to them. Now, with Abraham, we see a different approach. In calling Abraham, God is not seeking to immediately turn the whole world towards salvation. Rather, through Abraham, God will raise up a people for himself. These will be His special people who were initially and immediately chosen for the eventual and eternal benefit of all humanity. Rather than working with all, God will work with one nation among the nations to save the nations. We will discuss this more in an upcoming lesson.

Thus, God's holy nation begins with the calling of Abraham to leave his country, enter a new land, start a new family, and found a new nation. In order to accomplish this, God chose a man who "was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old." God also chose a woman whose "womb was also dead" (Romans 4:19). God didn't choose the healthiest, youngest, strongest, best-looking couple in the world. He chose the two people least likely to do what God was promising. God's people Israel, like those in the Garden of Eden, were not established by the power or initiative of mankind but solely by the power and plan of God. The work of Abraham and Sarah was to believe and obey.

Abraham and Sarah were not perfect. They too doubted God and fell into sin (Genesis 16:3-4; 17:17; 18:12). Yet Abraham believed God and demonstrated great faith at key moments in his life. First, he demonstrated trust in God by leaving behind his homeland of Ur and following the leading of God into an unknown, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable place. Second, he believed God after a season of failure with Hagar and Ismael and went on to have the child of faith with Sarah named Isaac. Third, when God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham was willing to trust God completely.

The need to respond with personal faith to God's gracious call to salvation is not only a New Testament concept. This was the plan of God from the beginning and certainly with Abraham. Scripture mentions no work of Abraham that made him worthy to be called God's friend. It was only by the mercy of God that Abraham was chosen and the only appropriate response from Abraham was to believe; to have faith in God. Faith is not a New Testament alternative to God's plan in the Old Testament. Faith IS the plan of God for all humanity. The most appropriate way to respond to God is to believe Him (not only to believe in Him).

Abraham did many good works. However, each major work was preceded by trust and belief. When Abraham lacked trust in God and his Word, he failed. When Abraham trusted God, he succeeded, even when his faith led him down difficult roads. The first road Abraham traveled was the road from Ur to an unknown land (eventually Canaan). God promised that Abraham would be given gifts which he could not see with his eyes. Abraham believed God and was thus able to take the first steps of obedience. Later, Abraham would travel a different road up a mountain with his son Isaac. This time could see clearly what was before him. He was to make a sacrifice of his promised son (Genesis 22). This test of Abraham was not for God to see if Abraham was faithful. God knew his heart. Rather, this was a dramatic opportunity for Abraham to demonstrate his faithfulness. Here, we see Abraham has the chance to be redeemed after his own fall with Hagar. His redemption, however, would cost him his beloved son. Once again, Abraham believed God and was thus able to make the difficult journey. Previously, Abraham had faith in God that he would receive his son. Now he has faith in God even when the gift is being taken away.

The command of God in Genesis 22 must have been agonizing for Abraham. Abraham knew that God's promises to him would be realized through Isaac. Yet Abraham also knew that God had commanded him to lay this boy on the altar and kill him. How could both be true yet both came from God? This is where faith and obedience become difficult. When our trust and obedience lead us into the path of suffering we must continue the journey of faithfulness. The book of Hebrews gives us some valuable insight into how Abraham reconciled this in his mind. "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death" (Hebrews 11:17–19, NIV). Abraham had become so confident in God and His Word that he was willing to sacrifice his son in faith believing that God had both the power and plan to raise Isaac back from the dead. Abraham's faith was so strong that he was willing to do what he did not want to do. He was willing to do what he did not understand on account of his unwavering trust in God.

God, however, stops Abraham from carrying out the actual child sacrifice. I can imagine God saying, "No, Abraham. It's not for you to give up your son. I'll do that work. I'll send my son to die on account of human sin and on behalf of sinful humanity." Hebrews uses the phrase "one and only son" to describe Isaac. This is actually only one word in the original Greek: *monogenes*. The same word was often used to describe Jesus by John. I think we can see a foreshadowing of Jesus in this text from Genesis as a Father sends his son to be a sacrifice and the son then lays down his life. Eventually, a ram died in the place Isaac. Yet no animal could replace Jesus. The blood of Christ does forever and for all what the blood of the animals could not do.

Abraham passes the test. Though he was not perfect, he lived a life of faith and his faith led him into confident action. He was called to believe and then act upon his belief. By faith, a family was started which would grow into a great nation and was eventually used to help provide a savior to the world.

The Continuation of Abraham

Abraham's death is recorded in Genesis 25 but Abraham's story does not end there. His descendants become the characters of Old Testament. Yet Abraham is not only remembered for his descendants. He is remembered for his faith. Genesis 15:6 says that Abraham "believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." Here is a clear indication that God desires for us to respond to Him in faith believing. Faith in God is the only path that leads to restoration, righteousness, and redemption. David sings this verse from Genesis in Psalm 106:31. Paul reminds his readers of this verse in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 as he proclaims and defends the Gospel message. James also quotes this verse from Genesis when discussing living faith. Perhaps Habakkuk was looking back on Abraham when he wrote, "The righteousness will live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). The New Testament also looks back to this statement from the Old Testament to teach salvation (see Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38).

We are often pointed in the direction of Abraham when Scripture seeks to teach about salvation. Abraham was chosen by grace. When God turned to him in love, Abraham responded in faith. He continues to serve as our example for today. Our primary calling is to have faith in God. We must be at work believing. My faith is credited to me as righteousness. Of course, genuine faith will produce good works. Yet the works I do as a result of my faith are not done in an attempt to gain salvation. I put my faith into action because I'm already saved.

Apply the Text:

As we prepare to celebrate the Resurrection of Christ, let us remember that Isaac was spared but Jesus was not. Jesus did lay down his life as a sacrifice for sin. Yet on the third day he rose again. Let us go into Easter with the same appreciation that Abraham had as he came down the mountain. Abraham appreciated the gift of life, the provision of God, and the authenticity of his faith. In the same way, let us use Lent to consider how great a gift God has given us in eternal life. Let us pay close attention to and give more gratitude for the provision of God in our midst. Let us ensure and celebrate the authentic faith that we have. If our faith is not authentic or if it is has grown weak in our current season, let us nurture faith again and trust in the God who has already turned toward us with love and redemption.

In Abraham, we also learn several key points about God's plan for salvation:

- Salvation is not based on man's ability. Salvation is first and only possible by God's grace.
- The only appropriate response to God is faith, belief, and trust that result in action.
- Our concern should not be about going up in glory but going out in obedience as a result of our faith in God.

Conclusion:

Abraham's descendants do indeed become a great nation and today we see the fulfillment of their calling, to be a blessing to the whole world. Through Israel, Jesus came into the world to save the world. In our preparations for Good Friday and Easter Sunday, we would do well to consider how we might also be a blessing to other people. Abraham was blessed to be a blessing. We, then, who are blessed must be about the work of blessing others.

As we continue our studies we will see how Abraham's family fares in the fallen world and find in their story how great is our need for a Savior.

ⁱ Both Abraham and Sarah's names were changed. John Walton writes, "The names themselves indicate an expansion of the covenant. In chapter 12 it was promised that God would make Abram a great nation. The new name 'Abraham' indicates that he will be 'a father of many nations.'" - John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 449.

ⁱⁱ Some even refer to the flood as a divine act of "Re-creation" where humanity demonstrates the inability to start afresh and have better results than Adam and Eve.

ⁱⁱⁱ See the discussion by John H. Walton in *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 373-374.

^{iv} It is interesting to compare the curse of Babel with the blessing of Pentecost in Acts 2. At Babel, God came down and used diverse languages to divide a unified people who were united in their sin. At Pentecost, God came down and used diverse languages to unite diverse people who were united in their worship. Pentecost reversed the curse of Babel.

^v Christopher J. W. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 197.