

Abraham and the Call of God

The Life of Abraham: Genesis 12-22 Sermon 1

Genesis 11:27-12:19

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When I look back over the past decade or so of my life, I'm surprised by the impact biographies have had on me. Second only to communing with God and fellowship with God's people, nothing has done more to inspire, encourage, and guide me, than the example of the lives of others. We love biographies because they help us see how the ups and downs of a life finally weave together into a story—something with purpose and meaning. We read biographies and think, *"maybe the pieces of my own life are all working together toward something meaningful, too?"*

Do you know that being inspired by biographies is biblical? After recounting the faith of several heroes from the Old Testament, the writer of Hebrews commands:

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith (Hebrews 13:7).¹

Remember your leaders. Consider the outcome of their way of life. Imitate their faith. One of the most influential lives in terms of impacting world civilization is the life of Abraham. His biography is recorded in our Bibles from Genesis 12-25. Over half the world's population (roughly 4 billion people) refer to this man who lived four thousand years ago as *father*, Father Abraham. Though with significant differences, Christians, Jews, and Muslims all trace their lineage—whether ethnically, spiritually, or both—back to this lone man from Ur of the Chaldeans, Mesopotamia—modern-day Iraq.

For Christians, Abraham's life is set forth as a life we must study and imitate. Saint Paul holds up Abraham as the example of the life of faith and hope in Romans 4. He speaks of those who "walk in the footsteps of Abraham" (Romans 4:12). Paul even explains that when you come into a relationship of trust with Jesus Christ, you become a child of Abraham: "If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." (Galatians 3:29).

Whether for historical and social interests or from a spiritual perspective, it seems that all of us should be familiar with this man from Ur of the Chaldeans. As a church, we'll spend the next few months studying his life—asking what it teaches us about a life lived for God, and a life lived by faith.

Abraham at the headwaters of salvation

Turn in your Bibles to Genesis 12, where Abraham's story begins. Genesis is the first book in the Bible and its fifty chapters can be understood as two parts. The first part, chapters 1-11, covers the beginnings of the world. Beginning in glory, things descend swiftly into sin and chaos.

The second part of Genesis, chapters 12-50, recounts the beginnings of the salvation of the world. It's a story that centers on Abraham's family. From Genesis 12 onward, we are either reading about Abraham, his son, Isaac, his grandson, Jacob, or his great-grandson, Joseph.

We might think of Abraham as standing at the great headwaters of the river that is salvation. There is a small stream, of course, tying Abraham back to Adam: Abraham's father, Terah, goes back to Noah's son, Shem, who traces their line back to Adam and Eve's son, Shem. But something new bursts forth in Genesis 12, and the events of the rest of the Bible look back to this moment and these promises.

- When God delivers Israel from Egypt, it's in keeping with His promise to put Abraham's descendants in the Promised Land.
- When God delivers Israel from captivity in Babylon to go back to the Promised Land, it's in keeping with this promise to Abraham.
- When God sends His Son into the world, we read in the first verse of the New Testament: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1). Jesus' life, death, and resurrection open the way for the blessings of Abraham to come to all those who believe. Jesus' life is in keeping with the promises made to Abraham.
- When, in Revelation 7, we are given a picture of heaven where people "from every nation, all tribes and every language" (Revelation 7:9) are worshiping God, it is a fulfillment of these promises to Abraham.

As Paul says in Galatians 3, “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the nations [=gentiles] by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed. So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith’ (Galatians 3:7-9). As John Calvin wrote, “Abraham is an example of the vocation of us all.”²

While the first major episode of Abraham’s life comes in Genesis 12:1-9, there is a prologue at the end of Genesis 11. Along with tying Abraham to the line coming from Adam and Eve that is destined to “crush the head of the serpent” (Genesis 3:15)—the line from Seth—, this prologue sounds two notes of tension.

First, Abraham’s family is from Ur of the Chaldeans: Haran, Abraham’s brother, “died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans” (11:28). This ancient city is associated with Babylon, and its remains have been excavated today. And we know that in Ur there was a temple complex dedicated to a moon god. Abraham comes from a family of moon-worshipping idolaters.³

A second note of tension emerges between the meaning of Abraham’s name (and the calling that will soon come to him) and the state of his wife. In the Hebrew language, the name “Abram” means “great father,” and the name “Abraham” (which God will later change Abram’s name to), means “great father of multitudes.” And God’s promises to Abraham in chapter 12 center around making a great nation out of Abraham’s offspring. The theme of extravagant fatherhood sits in tension with 11:29-30:

The name of Abram’s wife was Sarai.... Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

When the reader comes to Genesis 12, it is not a note of confidence in humanity ringing in our ears. The promised line has wandered into a world of idolatry in Babylon; Terah’s son Haran has died, and his son Abraham (whose name means great father), is childless. What’s more, God has not spoken to someone of the line of Seth for over ten generations—not since he spoke to Noah. And God has us right where He wants us: the dead end of human ability. This is where God likes to work.

Genesis 12: Call and response

The voice of God seems to come out of nowhere in Genesis 12:1, and it speaks to this man Abraham, in Ur of the Chaldeans:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (12:1).

This ensuing passage, Genesis 12:1-9, divide into two actions:

In verses 1-3, we hear God’s call to Abraham, what it will initially require of him, and the promises that come with the call:

And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (12:2-3).

Then, in verses 4-9, we see Abraham’s response: he goes, “as the Lord told him.” And by verse 9 Abraham has walked through the entirety of the land of Canaan, stopping in the middle near Shechem (v. 6) and finally in the Negev, the southernmost region, in verse 9.

Three major themes emerge in this passage, that become the fabric of the rest of the Bible: **calling, faith, and mission**. Here we begin to see how God awakens people (the calling of God), what He plans to do with them and through them (the mission of God), and what it looks like to respond to God (the faith of men and women).

Today we’ll consider the theme of calling. Next week we will turn to what a response to God’s calling looks like in terms of faith and mission.

Abraham and the call of God

People often speak of having a calling: toward a movement, a career, or a spouse. “I feel called to the work of justice.” “I feel called to be a chef.” “I feel called to marry him or marry her.” What we mean by this is that we experience a strong pull towards something or someone, as though it’s calling us outward, towards something bigger than ourselves. Having a sense of calling makes life meaningful and gives it focus. A life without a call can feel like no life at all—an aimless wandering, or a sad silence, as though there is nothing bigger than ourselves to live for.

Beneath all these experiences of calls is our need to hear the call of God. We are creatures made to be addressed by God. But what does God's call sound like? Who hears it? How do we hear it? Focusing on God's call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, we can see that God's call involves at least three things: (1) A Word from God; (2) A Captured Heart; (3) A Father's Blessing.

I. God's Call Comes Through God's Word—Not a Voice in My Head

God calls Abraham by the same method He used to create the universe and world, His Word: "Now the Lord said to Abraham" (12:1). The careful reader of Genesis recalls that God created the world by speaking, by His word, as well: "And God said, 'Let there be light...'" (Genesis 1:3). This means the same power that created the world is now at work creating something through Abraham. The salvation of the world is just as much a creation as the first creation. You might call it a new creation. And though it will involve human beings, it depends on the power of the sovereign God.

There is something important to reflect on at this point—the fact that God's call comes by God's Word. It means, at the very least, that God's call comes by His Word, not from a voice in our head.

People long to hear the call of God. And of course, they do. It makes one feel like they've found their place and purpose in the universe. But there is a danger here for modern, relativistic people. We treat the call of God as something totally experiential, as something private that happens inside us. Now the call of God certainly makes its way into our heads and hearts, but it doesn't start there. It has an objective reality outside of us—and this is crucial.

Imagine you meet someone who says they have the call of the sea. It calls to them, and they cannot, not hear it. You ask them if you could experience it with them. They say yes and proceed to take you—not to the ocean—but to a mountain trail to start hiking. You politely say, "Friend, you may have a call to nature, but this is not a call to the sea." They reply, "how dare you tell me what the sea is. This is my call, it speaks to my heart, and this is what the sea is to me."

Or consider a man who tells you he is called to the work of justice. You find this commendable and ask if you can tag along with him one day as he lives into this call. He proceeds to take you to the pool, where he reclines on a chair, orders a cold drink, and soaks up rays for the day. This is not the work of

justice, you say. But he insists, “who are you to tell me what justice is. This call is real and speaks to my own heart. How dare you question my truth.”

These examples are silly. But millions of people do this with God every day. They believe, based on some feeling or voice within, that God has called them. “Show me life with this God,” you say. And they take you to hot yoga, or for some meditation, or whatever suits their fancy. The call of God has an objective reality which is the Word of God that comes from God. The call does not start inside you but inside God.

How we hear the call of God today is like the Thessalonian Christians: Paul writes:

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen [ἐκλογὴν; called] you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power [δυνάμει] and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction [πληροφορία πολλῇ] (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5).

They are called by the Gospel and the Spirit. The Gospel means the clear articulation of who God is in Jesus Christ. So, the beginning of hearing the call of God is hearing the written Word of God. It’s hearing about Jesus Christ.

Now, this is not all the call is. Not everyone who reads the Word of God feels God calling to them through it—and indeed, not everyone who reads God’s Word hears God’s voice. So, there must be more to God’s call to consider. And Paul lays it out for us right here in this same verse:

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen [ἐκλογὴν; called] you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power [δυνάμει] and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction [πληροφορία πολλῇ] (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5).

This brings us to our second point.

II. God’s Call Captures the Heart—Not Just the Intellect

Think of the relationship between kindling and fire. You lay the kindling, but it needs a spark for the fire. Here is how it seems God calls to us today: we hear that there is a God, who came to us as Jesus Christ,

who loved us so much that while we were rebellious and distant, he died for our sins. He now calls us to new life in him. These truths begin to sit in our minds—as kindling for something more.

Then, by an act of God, His Spirit sparks them, and they begin to burn. We sense a growing conviction: we are sinners. We feel a growing longing: *there must be more to life than living for myself. I want to know God.* This is when the Gospel is igniting by the spirit into a burning fire of “full conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5). And we know God is personally calling to us through Jesus Christ. Sometimes this happens suddenly, and other times slowly. Sometimes it’s like a switch being suddenly turned on; other times it’s like a dimmer switch, slowly making things brighter and brighter.

I believe the call of God began to speak to me first through my parents, and when I was quite young. They loved Jesus Christ, and both took me to church and taught me about him. I remember feeling quite bothered once in fifth grade when a friend of mine was mocking God. Then in high school, my friend Ethan Lynne heard the call of God and started to follow Jesus passionately. I wasn’t willing to make that step yet—but it was like sparks from the fire inside Ethan were landing in my own heart, meeting the kindling that was already there. Then finally in college, after resisting it, my heart could take it no longer. I remember hearing a speaker share his testimony and he said that at some point in his early twenties, he’d said to God, “I want to be that man that is for you Lord.” And I just knew, *this is what I am made for.* My heart was overwhelmingly convicted. I wanted so many things. But I knew above all that I wanted God in a deeper and different way. I could no longer keep God at a distance.

For me, this was the experience of hearing the call of God. It wasn’t a sudden firework. It was more like a dimmer switch that gradually got brighter and brighter until suddenly it was the brightest light in the world to me. I had to follow it.

Third, what then is at the heart of this calling? Why is God waking us up? Of course, there is work to be done—we will get to this aspect of mission next week. But God is not calling us to be His mercenary soldiers; He’s calling us to be His sons and daughters. So, the third aspect of the call of God to Abraham, is that it shows us God’s calling is the Father’s Blessing.

III. God’s Call is the Father’s Blessing—Not a General Calling Mercenaries

From Genesis 1-11, the word “blessing” has been used only five times. This makes the fact that the word “blessing” appears five times in just the two verses of Genesis 12:2-3, striking. God’s calling to Abraham is God’s announcement of blessing upon him.

I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (12:2-3).

After creating Adam and Eve, the first thing God does in Genesis 1 is pronounce His “blessing” upon them (Genesis 1:28). Here, in a fallen world, God’s blessing does not mean an immediately easy life (as Abraham’s life proves). What it means, is that one’s life will be good, in the truest sense, will be a benefit to others in this world, and ultimately lead into the riches of God’s presence. It is the opposite of one’s life being, ultimately, a curse.

And God’s blessing comes as He reconciles us to Himself as Sons and Daughters. Just after telling us that by faith in Jesus Christ we become “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise,” (Galatians 3:29), Paul goes on to say that God has “sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba, Father!’ so you are no longer a slave, but a son” (Galatians 4:6).

When God calls a person, He calls them to *be* something before He asked them to *do* something. We want to know, *is God calling me to be a dentist, doctor, mom, dad, pastor?* These are important, and God does have things in mind for us to do. But deeper than that is His calling for us to be His son or daughter. And it is in this—this calling us His own child—that we are touched so deeply by His blessing. A Father’s blessing of a son, a daughter.

None of us have perfect earthly fathers. But all of us need to hear this voice of the Father calling out to us: “you are my beloved son, daughter, in you I am well pleased. I bless you.” Beginning with Abraham and now through Christ, this is precisely the call that comes to us.

Have you heard God’s call on your life? His call that you would be a man or a woman who lives for Him? When did it come to you? How did it come? Have you thanked God for it? Have you talked to your children, friends, or siblings about it?

Do you feel you're living a call-less life? That there's no big purpose you are beckoned toward, no mission worth dying for? Do you feel pulled hither and to by the competing calls of this world? The calls to be successful, strong, or authentic? Do you long for the truer call, the call of your Maker?

God's call sometimes starts softly, as a still small voice (Elijah). Sometimes we don't recognize it at first (Samuel). But we need to make space to listen for it. Hide away in an old church on your next lunch break. Go for a long hike next weekend. Or ask a Christian friend to lunch to tell you about how God's call reached them. But you don't need to live a call-less life. Even now, here in this church, God is calling to you through His Son Jesus Christ.

Endnotes

1. So also he writes earlier, "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1).
2. John Calvin, *Genesis*, 343.
3. As we read in the book of Joshua: "And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods" (Joshua 24:2).