

Set Apart for God's Purpose

Genesis 11:27-12:9

In this passage we have the beginning of Abraham's story. It starts with an account of the line of Terah, Abram's father (Abram's name was later changed to Abraham. See Gn 17:5). Before this, the writer traces the ancestry of Terah all way back to Shem, one of the sons of Noah (11:10-26). The writer's intention in drawing this line from Shem to Abram is to direct the reader's attention to the link between God's call on Abram and His purpose since the fall of man – to restore man and creation to His original purpose. The flood during Noah's time was God's way of purifying and cleansing the earth from sin which had permeated the earth. He gave men and women another chance to walk with Him. However, eventually, all human beings turned away from God and went back to their own sinful ways. But in His love He did not give up on his creation. He once again extended His loving hand and gave us another chance. So in the midst of this human decadence that once again pervaded the earth following the flood, God began to unveil a marvellous and final plan for the redemption of mankind. It began with one man, Abraham.

Abraham probably lived with his family on the outskirts of Ur. His father Terah, was a shepherd who had settled in the rich pasturelands surrounding the city. Predictably, the religious influence of the culture had penetrated this family. We are told in Joshua 24:2 that Terah worshipped other gods and it would not be too far wrong to assume that Abraham and his wife Sarah did the same. It was in the midst of this idolatrous and affluent environment that God suddenly appeared to Abraham, commanded him to break his family ties, to leave the city of Ur, and to head off for a place he had never been before (12:1). What a shock it must have been to Abraham. Was this real or a figment of his imagination? Questions must have flooded his mind. And as if to assure and encourage Abraham to make the right choice, this call came with three promises. God promised Abraham a land, a large family that would be a great nation, and a special blessing that would affect everyone on earth (12:1-3).

The land was Canaan, a place Abraham didn't even know existed. The "great nation" referred to Israel, something Abraham could not comprehend at this moment. And the "blessing" referred to the birth of Jesus Christ, a great truth that would affect his own eternal destiny, the destiny of his immediate family, and eventually all the people who would comprise the nation of Israel. This blessing would then impact millions of people on the earth for centuries to come, including you and me. We know how all these promises unfolded from the benefit of hindsight but for Abraham he had to rely on his trust or faith in God. The Bible does not tell us how his faith in God developed but when God spoke to him or appeared to him (Acts 7:2) there must have been a conviction of the reality of God and that He can be trusted. This conviction, I believe, was placed upon his heart and spirit by the Holy Spirit.

But in spite of his faith in God it must have been hard for Abraham to obey fully. According to Acts 7, the word of God came to Abraham while he was still in Ur. When he left Ur he did not leave his father's household behind; Terah, his father, and Lot, his nephew, came with him. In fact, verse 31 seems to suggest that Terah somehow got in the driver's seat, and they started out together, under his father's leadership. Abraham didn't make a complete break with Terah as God told him to. Allowing this to happen, Abraham's obedience was only partial. But in spite of his partial obedience God was patient with him. Abraham did not make a decisive break from his family because he was in a cultural situation where his father, Terah, as the head of the ancient household still commanded respect from other members of his family. Abraham was caught between these cultural expectations and what God wanted. In this case, cultural commitments interfered with God's perfect will, but at the same time God understood Abraham's dilemma.

Even though Abraham did not obey God completely, he began the trip from Ur to Haran. When Abraham and his family arrived in Haran, a city just as idolatrous as Ur and still in the land of Mesopotamia, we read they "settled there" (11:31). This too was a step out of God's perfect will. Scholars calculate Abraham resided in Haran approximately fifteen years before he finally journeyed on to the land of promise.

The security Abraham felt within his family structure temporarily caused him to forget the details of God's call. As with all of us, the passing of time blurred his memory. But even though Abraham had difficulty obeying completely, God waited patiently. He had a definite plan for Abraham (12:4-5).

Eventually, Terah died, which enabled Abraham to once again focus his thoughts on God's great plan and will for his life. But he now faced the true test of faith. God was leading Abraham southwest of Haran and into the wilderness. He was heading to a place he had never been before. Imagine the negative advice Abraham must have received from his relatives and the fifteen-year friends he was about to leave behind in Haran. But in the face of all these discouragement Abraham started his journey.

At least four hundred miles (643 km) lay ahead of Abraham and his family as they travelled across the monotonous wasteland, using their water sparingly. According to Josephus, they eventually arrived safely in a beautiful oasis, now called Damascus. How tempting it must have been for Abraham to settle in Damascus permanently, just as he had done in Haran. But this time Abraham kept his eyes fixed on the goal and his ears tuned to God's call that he had heard fifteen years before. He was side-tracked before, he did not want that to happen again. Thus we read that he continued his journey and arrived at the land of Canaan (12:5).

God honoured Abraham's faith and obedience as He always does for all His children who follow Him fully. Once Abraham arrived in Canaan, the Lord appeared again and affirmed His divine promise: "To your offspring I will give this land" (12:7). As far as we know, this was the first word from God that Abraham had received since his initial encounter with the Lord in Ur a number of years before. However, even though God

had been "silent," Abraham had been obedient.

After Abraham had arrived in the promised land he "built an altar there to the Lord" (12:7). And later at a place where he pitched his tent, he built another "altar to the Lord and called on name of the Lord" (12:8). As he did this, he was bearing witness to his new pagan neighbours that he and his family were different. They no longer made sacrifices to idols of wood or stone. Abraham had now made the complete transition from idolatry to worshipping the One true God. He was in the midst of fulfilling God's purpose for his life.

[Adapted from Gene A. Getz, *Abraham: Holding Fast to the Will of God*, Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996]