

Genesis 12-13 – The Calling of Abram

Review

Last time, we looked at the famous story of the Tower of Babel. We saw that the people had congregated in the Plain of Shinar, disobeying God's commandment to multiply and fill the earth as mankind's part in the Noahic covenant. Rather than destroying the tower and forcing the people to disperse, God gently persuaded them by confusing their language to give up the project and fill the earth as He had commanded.

Then we examined the line of Noah's son Shem to Abram who was to become the forefather of God's chosen people Israel through whom God brought forth Jesus the promised מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ*.

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Recall from our initial overview of Genesis that the book may be divided into five major sections. Here in Genesis 12, we arrive at the beginning of the third major section – God's choosing out of all the peoples of the earth one set apart for Himself – the nation of Israel. Here at the beginning of that story we find God calling one man – Abram – to leave the homeland of his forefathers and travel to the land of Canaan which God then promised to give to Abram's descendants as their own.

¹Now 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. Genesis 12:1 (ESV)

Recall from our study of Genesis 11 that when Abram's father Terah left Ur of the Chaldeans near the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates in what is now southeastern Iraq, Terah had originally intended to take his family to the land of Canaan – this same land that God promised to show to Abram here in Genesis 12:1. But Terah stopped along the way and settled instead in Haran. The exact location of Haran is unknown today except that it lay somewhere along the upper reaches of the Euphrates River.

Abram was married to Sarai when the family began their journey from Ur. So, assuming Abram was then in his early 20s or late teens, God's calling Abram out of Haran to continue the journey to Canaan when he was 75 was not until 50-60 years later. Notice that God told Abram to leave his father's house to journey to the Promised Land. This of course implies that Terah was still alive when Abram, Lot, Sarai, and the rest of the family left to go to Canaan. In fact, since Terah fathered Abram when he was 70, and didn't leave Ur until perhaps 20 years later, Terah must have been about 140 years old when Abram departed for Canaan. We know that Terah lived to be 205, so not only was he still living when Abram, Sarai, and Lot left, Terah lived on in Haran for another 60-70 years! This reminds me of one of Jesus' most difficult teachings.

³⁴"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. Matthew 10:34-39 (ESV)

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Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that there was animosity between Abram and his father Terah. The only point I'm trying to make is that God's command for Abram to leave his "comfort zone" in Haran and set out on an arduous journey with his entire family was a step into the unknown taken in faith. Abram knew nothing of the journey's destination except God's promise to reveal it. The journey itself was fraught with uncertainty and apprehension for Abram and his loved ones. But Abram trusted that God would protect and provide for them since it was God after all who had commanded them to go.

²And 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. ³I 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. Genesis 12:2-3 (ESV)

Recall from Genesis 3:15 that in cursing the serpent for his part in the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, God had promised to put enmity between him and the seed (זרע *zera'*) of the woman. In this first Messianic prophecy, God referred to her seed as "He," saying He would crush the serpent's head.

Here in God's blessing of Abram, we see a refinement of the line of Messianic prophecies in God's promise that through Abram all the families of the earth are blessed. It is important to recognize that God intended to fulfill this prophecy through Abram's obedience to God's call for him to leave Haran and journey to Canaan. God knew that Abram would obey His calling, and thus He was able to bless Abram (and all mankind) through Abram's obedience as He does here in Genesis 12:2-3. Later, when God called Abraham to sacrifice his son of God's promise – Isaac, we will once more see Abraham's obedience to God in faith. In response, God will reiterate this promise to bless all the earth through the זרע *zera'* of Abraham – Jesus the descendant of Abraham and Isaac. But we're getting ahead of ourselves...

⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Genesis 12:4 (ESV)

Despite his undoubted uncertainty about the destination, and his certainty about the difficulties his family would face along the way, Abram obeyed God's calling in faith. He recognized that God would most certainly guide him and keep him and his family, because God had called him to go, and God never fails in His promises. Later, we will see that God credited Abram's (Abraham's) obedient faith as righteousness. Abraham (like all men) had no righteousness of his own but had to rely totally just as we all do upon God's righteousness imputed to him through faith for his salvation out of sin. But once more, we're getting ahead of ourselves...

⁵And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem [שֵׁחֶם *š'kem* – back or shoulder], to the oak [or terebinth] of Moreh [מֹרֶה *môrê* – teacher]. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Genesis 12:5-6 (ESV)

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Look at the Patriarchs in Canaan map (<https://huppbbrian.us/bible-study/patriarchs-in-canaan-map/>).

The ancient city of Shechem was in the mountains near the modern city of Nablus in the “occupied West Bank” currently controlled by the Palestinian Authority (which is in turn currently controlled by Hamas). As noted in Genesis 12:6, when Abram arrived with his family, the Canaanites were living in the area as indeed their descendants the Palestinians do today.

Shechem is also where Jacob (Israel) established his camp when he returned to the land of Canaan after sojourning for twenty years in Paddan-aram, just as his grandfather Abram did when he first arrived in Canaan from Haran. After Jacob’s return to Shechem, he and his sons perpetrated a murderous deception upon the men of Shechem. We’ll take up that dismal story in Genesis 34.

7Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring [זרע zera] I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. Genesis 12:7 (ESV)

It is very intriguing here to read that the LORD “appeared” to Abram at Shechem, with no further illumination as to the LORD’s appearance such as we have with the stories of God speaking to Moses from the bush that was burning but not consumed (Exodus 3), of the commander of the armies of the LORD appearing to Joshua at Jericho (Joshua 5), or indeed Abram’s encounter with Melchizedek at Salem (Genesis 14). God simply states here that He appeared to Abram at Shechem without further explanation. Abram obviously recognized the LORD and built an altar to Him on the site.

Recall that when God called Abram out of Haran, He said to go to a land He would show Abram. Here at Shechem, God fulfilled that promise and gave Abram another – that He would give the land that He had shown Abram to Abram’s offspring. Some translations render the Hebrew זרע *zera* – **seed** as “descendants.” Recall that God used this same word in the first Messianic prophecy uttered by God Himself in the Garden of Eden when He cursed the serpent speaking of the “seed of the woman” (Jesus).

8From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel [בֵּית־אֵל bêt-’el – house of God] and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai [אֵי ay – heap of ruins] on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. 9And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb [נֶגֶב negeb – south country]. Genesis 12:8-9 (ESV)

Bethel and Ai lie in the mountains north of Jerusalem and south of Shechem. Ai was the second city to be taken by the Israelites in the conquest of Canaan under Joshua (Joshua 7-8). When the Israelites initially assaulted Ai, they were defeated by the Canaanites because they had tried to take the town without the LORD’s direction. In their arrogance, they attacked the city with only a small portion of their available soldiers. Unbeknownst to Joshua and most of the Israelites, one man among them had taken some of the relics of idolatrous worship from Jericho for himself. Because of this, God had withheld His blessing and support during the Israelites’ first assault upon Ai. After the sin was discovered and purged from among them, they received the LORD’s blessing, so when they attacked Ai once more, they were victorious.

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Bethel is the place where God appeared to Abram's grandson Jacob in a vision of a ladder or stair leading up from that place into Heaven (Genesis 28). Therefore, Jacob renamed the place **בֵּית-אֵל** **bêt-'ēl** which means "house of God." Although Moses refers to the place by that name here in Genesis 12:8, the place wasn't known by that name until later when Jacob renamed it.

Notice that Abram moved from north to south on his journey through the Land of Promise. The Negeb (**נֶגֶב** **neḡeb**) is the southern desert area of Israel bordering on the Sinai Peninsula.

10Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. 11When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, 12and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. 13Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake." Genesis 12:10-13 (ESV)

Notice what we **don't** see in this passage. God had called Abram to leave Haran and go to the land He would show him. God never said anything about Abram going on to Egypt. Recall that Egypt (**מִצְרַיִם** **miṣrayim**) was one of the sons of Ham. Here in Genesis 12:10 we find the first mention of the land in which **מִצְרַיִם** **miṣrayim** settled. Throughout God's Word, Egypt is used as a symbol of worldliness opposed to godliness. Israel is the symbol of God's plan and His sovereignty throughout God's Word despite the frequent rebellion of the Israelites against God's commands.

Abram went down to Egypt as his own response to the famine in the land of Canaan, without apparently seeking God's direction in the matter. Abram had forgotten that God had called him to Canaan, so God would doubtless provide for him there despite the famine. Rather than trusting God for provision though, Abram took matters into his own hands with disastrous results. Of course, Abram's sojourn in Egypt was no surprise to God. He used this sordid little episode to teach Abram, Sarai, Pharaoh, and us some lessons.

Recall from verse 4 that Abram was 75 when God called him out of Haran. We know from Genesis 17:17 that Sarai was 10 years younger than Abram. Therefore, Sarai would have been at least 65 years old by the time she and Abram went down to Egypt. Sarai must have certainly been extraordinarily beautiful in her youth if the Egyptians were willing to kill her husband and take her when she was 65. But I digress...

I am admittedly a little bit hard on Abram. Since God called him and set him apart to be the forefather of His chosen people, I have somehow come to expect better from Abram than he sometimes exhibited. Here in this passage, we see that Abram was willing to allow other men to take his wife as a sexual object to save his own skin. He even rationalized to her that he wanted the Egyptians to spare his life for **her** sake. Sorry. That's hogwash. Abram wanted the Egyptians to spare his life for **his own** sake, not Sarai's. Let's make no bones about it.

That said though, there's a lesson in this for us. God loves and chose Abram out from all the nations of the earth in His sovereignty – not because Abram was inherently more deserving than other sinful men, but simply because Abram was God's beloved child, and God had already determined to use Abram to bring forth His **מָשִׁיחַ** **māšīaḥ** from Abram's **זֶרַע** **zera** ' - **seed** for the salvation of all

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mankind. God's calling of Abram wasn't because he was especially worthy or qualified to be called and used by God in this way, but simply because God reigns over all.

So it is with us. If we have called upon the Name of Jesus for salvation, God has set us apart from the world as His servants, just as He did with Abram – not because we are worthy of His love and calling, but simply because He is sovereign. Like Abram, God has called us out of the world to work His will through us.

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:8-10 (ESV)

¹⁴When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁶And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels. Genesis 12:14-16 (ESV)

Abram essentially sold Sarai to Pharaoh as a concubine. He did not turn down Pharaoh's gifts given in exchange for her. Indeed, Abram prospered from the Egyptians' response to his lie just as he had predicted when he put Sarai up to the deceit. Pharaoh for his part thought he was giving Abram a rightful brideprice for his "sister," not knowing that Abram and Sarai had deceived him.

God preserved Sarai through this sordid episode, because God had bigger plans for Abram and his **זרע** *zera* ' - **seed** than any of them knew. For his part, Abram had apparently forgotten about God's messianic promise to bless all the families of the earth through him. Either that, or he just didn't understand what God meant when He made that prophecy. Maybe Abram was so worried about saving his own skin that he didn't stop to consider that God had said nothing about blessing all the families of the earth through **Pharaoh's** offspring.

¹⁷But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. ¹⁸So Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go." ²⁰And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had. Genesis 12:17-20 (ESV)

Isn't it intriguing that Pharaoh – the leader of an idolatrous nation who worshiped many false gods – recognized the hand and purpose of the one true and living God, when God's chosen people Abram and Sarai apparently did not. This wouldn't be the last time Abram and Sarai (Abraham and Sarah) tried this deceit, and Pharaoh would not be the last Gentile leader whom God used to chastise and humble them as we shall learn in Genesis 20.

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¹So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb.

²Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. ³And he journeyed on from the Negeb as far as Bethel to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, ⁴to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of the LORD. Genesis 13:1-4 (ESV)

This is the second instance in God’s Word where we find reference to someone calling upon the Name of the LORD. The first time was a general reference found in Genesis 4:26 which says that during the time of Adam’s grandson Enosh, people began to call upon the Name of the LORD. But what does this really mean? Certainly, God has been speaking since the very instant He created the world by the power of His Word. The first instance in which we find God speaking to people was His blessing of Adam and Eve and His command for them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it (Genesis 1:28).

The first instance where we find mankind speaking with God was Adam’s response after God created woman – ***“this at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh...”*** (Genesis 2:23). Since then, the Bible reports many times when people spoke with God and God with them. But this calling upon the Name of the LORD we find here in Genesis 13:4 is something different.

The Hebrew verb קָרָא *qārā’* translated here as “called upon” carries the connotation of crying out or voicing a plea – in short, a prayer of supplication in God’s Name. With that, we find the obvious implication that Abram recognized aspects of his life that were beyond his own power to manage on his own – that he needed help. Furthermore, Abram recognized that God **does** have the power and the will to handle such aspects of our lives in the manner most beneficial to us. This is an important concept that Jesus taught succinctly.

¹³Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. John 14:13 (ESV)

Please don’t misunderstand me. I certainly would **never** advocate any “prosperity gospel” that teaches we can receive anything we ask for as long as we ask in Jesus’ Name. First, the context of John 14:13 makes it clear that Jesus was speaking of doing mighty works ordained by God the Father such as those Jesus Himself had done during His earthly ministry.

But there’s a more subtle principle here. When we pray in Jesus’ Name, it implies that we also pray in God’s will and in the power of His Spirit. This in turn implies that our prayers made in His Name will be for empowerment to serve Him and His people, not to be served ourselves. Therefore, James warned us about wrongful, selfish prayer.

³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. James 4:3 (ESV)

We can well imagine that Abram’s own prayers were not an appeal for increased earthly wealth. After all, we read here in Genesis 13:2 that God had already blessed Abram with great earthly wealth. Perhaps Abram’s prayers were for discernment about how God would fulfill the promises He had already made to Abram – particularly that in Abram’s זָרַע *zera* ‘ - **seed** all the families of the earth

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would be blessed. Perhaps Abram wanted to learn his role in God’s plan of salvation that He would fulfill through Abram’s life.

5And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, 6so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together, 7and there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were dwelling in the land.

8Then Abram said to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. 9Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.” Genesis 13:5-9 (ESV)

Abram had raised and cared for his nephew Lot since Lot’s father died in the family’s original home – Ur of the Chaldeans. Recall that Abram was 75 when God called him to leave Haran and journey to the land of promise. So, Lot was probably 40-50 years old by the time the family returned from Egypt. Although Abram was the elder, he gave Lot first choice from the land as pasture for his herds and flocks. As we will see next time, this wouldn’t be the last time Abram helped Lot.

10And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) 11So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other. 12Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. 13Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD. Genesis 13:10-13 (ESV)

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From the heights of Judea at Bethel/Ai looking eastward toward Jericho, one can see the entire lower Jordan river valley, the Dead Sea, and the Jordanian mountains beyond. The lower Jordan valley today is a well-watered fertile agricultural area sharply contrasted with the surrounding mountainous desert. Small wonder then that Lot chose this green pastureland for grazing his livestock. For his part, Abram settled in the land of Canaan just as God had commanded him when He called Abram out of Haran.

Note that Genesis 13:13 gives a foreshadowing of the destruction God brought down onto Sodom. As Lot led his animals closer to Sodom, he was unknowingly bringing his family into increasing danger. Yet he chose the green pasture of the lower Jordan, based on his own seemingly sound judgment without consulting the will of the LORD first.

¹⁴The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, ¹⁵for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. ¹⁶I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. ¹⁷Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.” ¹⁸So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD. Genesis 13:14-18 (ESV)

Recall from Genesis 12:7 that God appeared to Abram at Shechem and promised to give the land to Abram’s offspring. As we have seen, this was God’s means of fulfilling the Messianic prophecy made by God Himself when He cursed the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Abram’s response then to God’s promise was to build an altar to the LORD just as he did when God reiterated the promise here at Mamre. The land God promised to Abram’s descendants here in Genesis 12 & 13 is only a small portion of the land they will eventually inherit – stretching from the Nile to the Euphrates (Genesis 15:18).

Looking Ahead

Next time, God willing, we’ll look at one of the most important passages in all of God’s Word – Abram’s meeting at Salem (later Jerusalem) someone whom I believe was none other than Jesus – God the Son appearing to Abram in the form of priest and king Mechizedek.