

The Call of Abram

^{NRS} **Genesis 12:1** 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. ² 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. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."¹ ⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵ Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

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Today we return to our series of studies that we refer to as Bible Stories for Adults. As we move from the first eleven chapters of Genesis into the rest of the book, there's a significant change. The early chapters are about events that involve all of humanity – creation of the universe, a flood over all of the earth, and in the story of the tower of Babel, humanity coming together to try, by their own plans and efforts, to reach what they believed was the home of God. Beginning in the twelfth chapter, the focus changes from universal events - to the story of a single family. In the first eleven chapters, people live for legendary lengths of time. Beginning with Abram in chapter twelve, lifetimes are much more familiar in length. In chapter six of Genesis we read a fuzzy story of divine beings lusting after human women and having children by them. There is much in the first eleven chapters of Genesis that seems very different from the world as we know it, and even quite different from the world of the rest of the book of Genesis. Chapters one through eleven tell of the universal failings of humanity, especially wanting to make ourselves into gods by eating forbidden fruit, having sex with divine beings, building structures to penetrate into God's dwelling place. Those universal failings receive universal punishment – being driven from Eden, the flood, and being divided by many languages.

Now, Genesis turns the focus to one family. The scriptures tell us nothing about Abram except that he was the son of Terah, the uncle of Lot (who was an orphan), and that he had a wife named Sarai who was unable to have children. They lived in Haran. That's it. We're told nothing about Abram's character, what he did for a living, whether or not he had dreams of changing his life in some way, or if he was devout in any fashion to any perceived divinity. He doesn't stand out in any way. He isn't commended for any virtues. If we get desperate to uncover something about Abram from these scant facts, we might try to draw some conclusions from the fact that he appears to only have one wife – and she can't have children. Ancient cultures placed enormous importance on having children, especially male heirs, and most cultures accepted multiple wives as permissible or even as the normal state of affairs. From all of that we might decide that Abram loved Sarai so much that his devotion to her was stronger than the desire to have children or the lure of additional wives. But, as we'll soon find out, that dog won't hunt. That train of thought leads in a mistaken direction.

An extraordinary thing happened to this nobody, this unknown person, this Abram. God told him to pick up and leave. Leave your extended family. Leave your emotional security, your financial security, leave the only life you know. Pack up and leave. Never mind where it is you're going. I'll fill you in on that along the way. And then the strangest thing happened – Abram gathered up his family and his stuff and left town! People must have thought he had just had a wild dream caused by something he ate. Some must have thought he had taken leave of his senses, that he had gone crazy. Imagine how this hurt his father, who must have felt rejected and abandoned, or just as bad, that insanity had entered the family blood.

This decision by Abram to leave all he knew and head into an unknown future was phenomenal! Around two thousand years later people were still marveling about the immense level of trust that Abram had. In the book of Hebrews, chapter eleven, verse eight, the writer says, “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.”

We often hear about Abram and his great faith, his unshakeable trust in God. He’s held up as an ultimate example of how strong our trust in God should be. When we don’t measure up to that high standard, we can feel like failures. Our guilt can become such a heavy burden that we despair. We might try to find some comfort by thinking of Abram as some sort of exceptional person who, because of his extraordinary qualities, was singularly suited for the role God placed on him. We’d like to think that, but we have no reason to presume that. From all that we know – and don’t know – Abram appears to have been someone who didn’t stand out in any fashion, just an ordinary person, seemingly unworthy of God’s notice.

God has a habit of singling out unremarkable and unworthy people to do divine tasks. An escaped criminal and humble shepherd named Moses was summoned to confront the world’s most powerful ruler. The youngest son of seven, another sheep herder named David, was called by God to unite the people of Israel. A peasant girl from Nazareth was given the task of carrying and raising Jesus. Smelly uneducated fishermen were called to be apostles. The good news is that you don’t have to be somebody for God to think you’re somebody. The bad news is that you can’t hide in your ordinariness from the call to do bold and risky things for God.

We might think that Abram was motivated by the promise that his family would become a great nation and his name would become famous. I think we misread this because of our individualistic culture in which we’re motivated by greed for fame and fortune. We think, “What a glorious promise! Abram’s going to be the famous leader of a powerful nation!” We overlook two things. First, it takes a lot of generations to give birth to enough people to make even a small nation. Abram isn’t going to live long enough to see all of this. Second, the promise contains a commission, a purpose: “so that you will be a blessing. . . . in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” You will be blessed in order to be a blessing. Through Abram and his descendants, the rest of the world will learn of the one God, the God of all creation, the God of all people. Abram and all who come after him are charged with this holy task.

And so, we realize that when Abram heard God speak to him in Haran, he understood that he was to leave for parts unknown where God had a job for him to do. Wonder of wonders, Abram did as he was told, and God lead him to the land of Canaan.

In the rest of chapter twelve we learn that a famine struck the land of Canaan. Having immigrated to Canaan, based on a promise from God, that was probably an unpromising turn of events. Canaan depended on rain for its crops and when there was little rain, there was famine. But Egypt depended on the annual flood of the Nile River and that was more dependable than local rain. So Abram and Sarai headed for Egypt.

Do you remember that I said we shouldn’t draw too many conclusions about Abram’s devotion to his wife Sarai? Here’s why. As they got close to Egypt, Abram said to his wife Sarai, "I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; ¹² and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account." (Gen 12:11-13 NRS) When they got to Egypt, things worked out much like Abram expected. Sarai is beautiful, so beautiful that Pharaoh takes note and adds her to his household. That’s a euphemism, folks. She didn’t become a potato peeler in the kitchen. She was added to the harem. Pharaoh was delighted to have her and

Abram got flocks, donkeys, men and women servants as a result. Then Pharaoh figured out that Sarai was Abram's wife and he asked, "What have you done to me? Take your wife and go! And Abram was expelled from Egypt with his wife and everything he had.

There's one blow after another in this story. Abram didn't have enough faith to stay where God led him: when the famine came, he went to Egypt. He didn't trust God's promise about his future. In fact, he's afraid for his life, so he tells Sarai that they'll both lie and say she's his sister. He didn't fess up when she's taken off to the harem. Instead, he prospered with lots of flocks, and servants as a result. Now, let's call a spade a spade. Abram pimped his own wife to get rich and because he valued his life more than their marriage.

There's an interesting translation possibility in verses 17 & 18. They're generally translated, "The LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife." ¹⁸ So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, "What is this you have done to me?" (Gen 12:17-18 NRS) A more literal translation would read, "The LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues. Upon the word of Sarai, Pharaoh called Abram and said, 'What is this you have done to me.'" This would explain how Pharaoh knew the real situation and it would reveal that Sarai had her own thoughts about being in the harem. Maybe Sarai is one of the feisty women of the Bible.

The honorable person in this story isn't Abram – it's Pharaoh. Pharaoh calls Abram out. Why did you put me in this position? Then, instead of killing Abram for his lying and deceit, Pharaoh gives his wife back and sends him packing with all the wealth that Abram had accumulated by his deception. And here's the kicker. You'd think that Abram had learned his lesson. But Abram pulls the same sordid stunt again. The whole "she's my sister" routine is repeated in chapter 20 with King Abimelech.

There are lots of lessons to learn in this sordid story. First, God doesn't call perfect people. That means you can't say, "I'm not good enough to do God's work." It also means that you shouldn't expect perfection in others who are called to serve God – not in the ruling elders you elect to serve on session, nor in the teaching elders, the ministers that you call to fill the pulpit. If you thought otherwise, I'm sorry that you're disappointed, but God doesn't call perfect people.

The second lesson that's an even bigger surprise is that the higher moral ground is held by the foreigner, the pagan. Never dare to assume that the one who isn't a Christian, the person who you consider to be outside the circle of the saved, the stranger who doesn't know God like you do – never assume that they're always wrong or that you have nothing to learn from them.

We do God a disservice when we think God works with perfect people who have no weaknesses, no flaws, and no glaring faults. We're the ones who put ourselves outside the family of God when we decide that we can't be inside the circle of God's love. Don't push God's love, God's gifts, and God's call away. Don't make excuses. Don't say, "No." Just pick yourself up and hit the trail. Amen.