

## **The Call of Abram**

**Fall Quarter: God's Exceptional Choice**

**Unit 1: God Calls Abraham's Family**

**Sunday School Lesson for the week of September 4, 2022**

**By Craig Rikard**

**Lesson Scripture: Genesis 12:1-7; 15:1-7**

Lesson Aims

1. To become acquainted with the biblical story of redemption expressed in God's gift of covenant.
2. To understand the need to recognize human sin, failure and mistake in order to more fully grasp God's offer of relationship through the covenant with Abram, his family, and in the end, the world.
3. To better understand the proper human response to God's grace as we live in covenant with God and one another.

### **The Call of Abram**

Background text: Genesis 12:1-7; 15:1-7

Key Text: *The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him. Genesis 12:7*

Author's note: The lesson is designed to supplement the lesson plans in the teacher's manual. The masculine pronoun is used of God, though God cannot be bound by any gender.

### **Introduction: Covenant in the Book of Genesis**

One of the great gifts of Judaism to the world was monotheism. After our fall from grace, expressed in the story of our expulsion from Eden, and due to our limited understanding of the world, we ascribed gods to those actions we could not understand or control. Thus, we developed gods of the sun, stars, seas, weather, and in turn fashioned idols of wood and stone to make them tangible. Idolatrous rituals developed in an attempt to make the gods manageable. Certain actions were taken to appease the gods in an attempt to turn away the painful events in life. In turn, actions were taken to invoke the good will of the gods as well.

Into this dark, murky world of idolatry and polytheism, God revealed the truth that there is one God. This one revelation would alter human life and the development of civilization forever. The reality of this one true God was most clearly stated in the great moral statement of the Shema in Deut. 6:4: "Hear O Israel! The Lord your God is one!"

The magnificent book of Genesis introduces us to the one God, and further reveals this one God has chosen to reveal His divine presence and nature to us through creation, Word, and human interaction. We learn from Genesis this one God desires a relationship with His creation, and especially with humankind. There are two major thrusts in Genesis related to this grand truth:

1. God chose to reveal Himself to us. Without this revelation humanity might reach the conclusion that a divine being exists, and we might understand that God is powerful and even all-knowing. However, we could not understand “*what God is like*” in relation to humankind. We would struggle to understand if God is kind and loving, or angry and vengeful. Apart from God’s revelation of the divine nature we would be left to our own assumptions and conclusions. We would struggle to understand the heart, thought, passion and love of God apart from God’s personal choice to reveal Himself. This act of revelation is an act of grace.

It is very important when studying the Bible to understand this revelation of God is *progressive*. That is, God reveals the divine nature and purpose to us at an appropriate time and in an understandable manner. For example, we have no mention of “atoms” in the book of Genesis. Yet, atoms are fundamental in understanding the created world. However, in the beginning it was not possible for us to understand the concept of atoms. Many years of progressive revelation and observance would occur, creating stepping-stones of knowledge. Eventually, the humankind could recognize the atom. Likewise, there were facets of God’s personhood that fallen humanity could not fully grasp. However, God, through grace and love, revealed to us the foundational truth upon which all other truth about God would follow. The early Israelites would have struggled to grasp the sacrificial love of God through Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection. However, at the appropriate time, God revealed the greatest expression of his truth and love in Jesus. The world was prepared for that revelation and it continues to transform human life. Read Galatians 4:4. Consequently, it is important to realize God has been revealing the divine nature to us as an act of grace. God wants us to know Him!

2. The second thrust In Genesis is a divine/human interaction of *grace-failure-redemption*. In the beginning God blesses us in Eden, then our sin invites chaos and pain, and in turn God responds with redemption. This pattern then reoccurs. If we conduct a quick overview of Genesis 1-12 we recognize this pattern:
  - a. God creates us and places us in Eden. Our sin results in our being cast out.
  - b. In spite of their sin and the accompanying expulsion from Eden, Adam and Eve continue to live and begin to procreate. They are blessed by God with life and children. We are especially introduced to their first two sons: Cain and Abel. In spite of God’s blessing, Cain slays his brother, inviting violence and more suffering into the human condition.
  - c. Cain is marked by God for protection, an act of grace on God’s part, and Cain begins his protected family in a hostile world. Adam and Eve’s other children fill the earth. In response to God’s continued grace, humankind sadly becomes sated with violence and wickedness. The violence is of such offense against the divine nature that we read the strong statement of God repenting having ever created humankind. Read Genesis 6:6. God judges humanity for the willful violation of His grace and informs Noah of the approaching flood. However, God chooses not to destroy all of creation, instructing Noah to construct an ark to save humanity and representatives of the created world. The compassionate heart of God is

- revealed in the gift of the ark and in the designation of the rainbow as the promised sign of God's protective grace from that day forward.
- d. Soon after embarking from the Ark, sin quickly rears its ugly head in the shame brought about through Noah's drunkenness and accompanying behavior, followed by the sin of his children dishonoring him.
  - e. Noah's descendants begin to multiply, yet, do not seek to "fill the earth." Instead of filling the earth with God's creative diversity and beauty, humanity seeks human-uniformity through two actions. First, there is the attempt to create one language for all. However, it is the second action that seems most grievous: building a tower to the heavens. Our ancient ancestors created polytheism and believed that gods actually existed in the heavens. The worldview was much akin to a platter with a domed cover. The flat platter was the earth. The world was what they could see and experience, and the world ended just beyond their ability to travel, see, or grasp. The heavens were perceived as a dome covering the earth. The gods dwelled in the heavens. Thus, building a tower to the heavens was an act of idolatry. God had continually come to His people. God was with them where they lived and was active in their life. Yet, humankind reached for the gods when the one true God had continually reached for them. This was a destructive sin (as all sins are). The Tower of Babel is destroyed as both an act of God's displeasure and also as an act of redemption. The scattering at Babel proclaimed God's great power and purpose. Humankind should fill the earth, become its stewards, and especially become stewards of one another.

### **The Need to Recognize Our Frailty and Sin and to Recognize God's Offer of Relationship**

In the above narratives, we identify the pattern of God's grace bestowed upon us, followed by our sins and failures, followed by God's redemptive grace. However, as we approach Genesis 12, our text for today, there is one noteworthy truth that must be grasped to fully appreciate the importance of the covenant with Abram and Sarai. **It is obvious that humankind cannot save itself!** In spite of God's renewal and redemption, we repeatedly find ways to invite chaos, suffering and destruction. Instead of becoming stewards we become abusers of creation and each other. Only God can save us! Genesis 12 is that moment when humanity's only hope lies in the love of God and God's choice to initiate a relationship of grace with us that will transform us. The Creator would be our God, and we would be God's people.

Thus, we are lead through the narratives in Genesis 1-12 into this special moment when an eternal covenant is initiated by God with Abram and Sarai, and thus, with the world. The text for our lesson captures the climactic moment toward which chapters 1-11 have been leading. Our Christian faith stands upon the truth that it was God who loved us first. I John 4:19 reads, "We love because He first loved us." God is the initiator of a loving relationship with humankind and creation. We share an intimate relationship with God because God chose not to forsake or abandon us in our sin and failure. God's love transcends our sin. How we love that grand gospel hymn "Grace Greater Than All Our Sin!"

Jesus was and is the revelation of God's perfect love for us. He is the personification, the embodiment of God's initiative to redeem us from our sin for one major reason: God loves us!

Each of us can examine our past histories and recognize the pattern revealed in Genesis 1-11. We were born in grace and love. John Wesley referred to such grace as prevenient grace, which means “grace that goes before.” Even when we were unaware of God’s love, God loved us. All the touches of grace in our life began before we could see, understand, or grasp the depth and breadth of that grace. Our choice to neglect or ignore that grace did not, and cannot, negate the redemptive love of God. In Romans 8 Paul states in his great doctrinal masterpiece that God’s love for us is unstoppable. He asks, “What shall separate us from the love of God?” The question in Roman’s 8 is rhetorical. The answer is “nothing”! Certainly, there are consequences for neglecting and abusing grace. However, God’s love for us is never withdrawn.

The gift of Jesus is the incarnation of that redeeming love. In my earliest years as a Christian I employed the phrase, “I gave my life to Jesus.” I’ve since grown in my understanding, and realize I didn’t so much give my life to Jesus; instead, I surrendered! God’s prevenient grace conquered my abuses, sins, and failures. God’s love overcame my objections and rejections. All the touches of grace, all the prayers, and all the interactions in life were used by God’s Spirit to draw me into a fuller awareness of God’s love for me and everyone. This is the manner in which God draws all of us unto Himself.

**Can you recognize the pattern of Genesis 1-11 in your life? Can you share examples of God’s continual love for you in spite of your sins and failures? Can you share expressions of God’s prevenient grace in your life? What do you believe is our proper response to the love of God through Christ? Can you recognize the continuation of this love in your life since following Christ?**

### **The Need to Recognize a Relationship with God Is Not Earned, It Is a Gift to which We Respond!**

It is important to recognize that God’s covenant with Abram, Sarai, and the world preceded the giving of the Mosaic Law. The giving of the law would occur generations later. The law was not given to save us. Grace saves us! Paul stated in Galatians 3:24 that the law was given to be our teacher. The law reveals how we should live. Our inability to keep the law perfectly reveals in turn our need of God’s grace. The law reveals to us how we are to respond to grace, especially in our relationships with one another. Another way to consider this great truth is: *law did not birth grace, grace birthed the law*. One needs to respond to the grace of God by living a life of love and grace that honors, respects, and loves others. Jesus taught that the proper response to God’s love was to live in “the law of love.” Jesus summarized the entire Mosaic Law in his affirmation of the Shema, found in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, soul, mind and strength; and, they neighbor as thyself.” Our response to the initiating, preceding, unstoppable love of God is to love as God loves. Thus, we do not earn our relationship with God, we accept it. Abram and Sarai did nothing to earn the gift of covenant. They were chosen by God according to God’s great will. They would become the first of many to experience and share the grace of God. Their descendants would be as the “sands of the sea.”

Consequently, we do not work for grace or earn the love of God. In Ephesians 2:8, Paul reminds us we are “saved by grace, not by works lest any person should boast.” Abram and Sarai had

done nothing to earn that special moment of covenant in Gen. 12. In God's great wisdom, He chose to initiate this covenant through Abram and Sarai according His higher will and purposes. Like Abram and Sarai, we have done nothing to merit the love of God for us. We have done nothing to earn the relationship God established with us in the "New Covenant" in Christ. The New Covenant in Christ is actually the culmination and fulfillment of God's covenant established with the entire world in Gen. 12. Jeremiah prophesied the coming of a day when the covenant would be written "in the heart" (Jeremiah 31:33). The Covenant would no longer be lived by attempting to keep the approximately 612 laws but by living in God's heart. The heart that truly lives in the love of God keeps all law. The person that loves as God loves will not kill, steal, covet, etc. That moment of internalization of the law was realized in Jesus. Thus, we can better understand Jesus' statement, "I have not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it" (Matthew 5:17)

**What do you believe is the proper response to the truth that grace has been freely given to us, often in spite of our sins and failures? How can we respond to this grace as we worship? What state of mind, or state of heart can we bring to worship in response to this overwhelming love and grace of God? How can we live in such a manner that allows others to see this love and grace of God in us? Do you believe our world is in need of hearing Christianity's message of grace and love? Do you find the culture around you seeking to earn, or seeking to understand God apart from the good news of Jesus? How does such seeking apart from the Gospel lead to frustration, futility, and emptiness? How can recognizing and accepting the grand news of God's prevenient grace and love in Jesus transform the individual life and our life together? In what manner is the Mosaic Law still important to human life? How do you believe the covenant with Abram, the Mosaic Law, and Jesus are important in understanding God's love in your life?**

### **The Need to Respond to God's Grace as a Covenant People**

The generations following Abram and Sarai would once again engage in neglecting God's grace, in spite of the overwhelming nature of that grace. Instead of sharing the good news of God's desire for relationship with the world, the Jewish people began to understand that grace almost solely for themselves. The covenant with Abram was intended to bring the light and love of God to the entire world. Remember, through the covenant with Abram "all the world would be blessed."

As stated previously, God reveals His love for us in a manner we can understand. The promise of a human family, sharing a common Creator and Parent, was a facet of life the people in Abram's day could understand. They would need to walk with God by faith in the days ahead to understand that his family is intended to serve as a model and picture of the "spiritual family to come." It would be a family that grows in number - not by bloodline but through faith in God. It would have proved difficult for the Hebrew people to realize or envision this spiritual family, bound together by faith. Thus, they started with God's revelation of a covenant family bound together initially by bloodline. They would have also struggled to understand a spiritual Kingdom for all humanity. Yet, they could grasp the promise of a homeland of their own. Again, as the people of God journeyed by faith through the coming years, they would receive more and

greater light. Genesis 12 is important, for it foreshadows God's redemptive activity among his people for all time. A family of faith would dwell in the Kingdom of God!

One of the destructive consequences of human sin has always been our temptation to "divide, alienate, and exclude." When we observe the development of children we discover, in their infancy and early childhood, they desire relationship. Small children do not act in prejudice or intentionally exclude others. Such behaviors are learned and are expressions of fallen humanity. By the time many of us reached adolescence, we were already establishing groups and gatherings that accepted some while excluding others. Such behavior does not disappear in adulthood. It simply rears its head in more subtle forms of racism, sexism, classism, and many of other forms of exclusion. Alarming, some of these forms are not subtle. If such exclusive behavior is the antithesis of God's intent in Genesis 12, then inclusive love and acceptance of the worth of every person is the intended will of God through the covenant with Abram and Sarai. Again, this covenant was most fully and powerfully expressed in and through Jesus Christ.

**As Christians who follow Jesus, can you recognize the destructive patterns and expressions of exclusion that occur in our life? In what ways can we become complicit with such exclusion and division? In what ways can we allow God's love in us to conquer and transform all forms and structures that seek to exclude others from the knowledge of God's grace and love?**

The covenant with Abram, Sarai, and their descendants will not reach completion until the Kingdom of God fully appears, destroying every barrier and instrument of division. There will be a "new heaven and new earth" as the ultimate expression of the divine will be initiated with Abram and Sarai, "fleshed out" through the Mosaic Law, internalized through the gift of Jesus Christ, and moving in the world through the Holy Spirit. Consequently, we should never separate the redemptive activity of God in the Old Testament from the New. What began in Genesis continues until the grand vision in the book of Revelation is fully realized.

**Do you think the church today adequately understands our place and role in the redemptive covenant of God? Do we understand our current mission to be that of expressing the unstoppable love of God in the world? Do we understand this mission must be expressed and be present in and through the intimate relationships we share with all people through Christ? Indeed, God is the same yesterday, today and forever! Consequently, the mission of God's people began yesterday, continues today, and will continue into God's future. Do you believe the ministries of the church today clearly articulate that mission in a manner that empowers the Christian family to properly understand our purpose in the world? If not, how can we do it more effectively?**

### **The Need to Move Beyond Our Comfort Zones in Walking Toward God's Promise**

God's call upon His people almost always asks us to move beyond our "comfort zones." The world of Abram and Sarai was hostile. Their strength was found in their numbers and unity. In our text God calls Abram and his family to leave the comfort of home and follow Him into the future. Some claim it was an unknown future. It was, in the sense that Abram and Sarai could not

clearly conceive of that future. However, they did know it was God's future into which they would walk. Thus, faith became an important facet of covenant life.

Still, strength in numbers and familial unity alone would prove insufficient apart from their trust in God's promise. In the days following God's initial promise to Abram, his family would encounter many struggles and difficulties. Their faith that God would prove true to His covenant was paramount. Faith allows us to see the reality of God's promise even when our circumstances do not allow us to see it in the moment. The Old Testament offers a great metaphor for this "vision of faith." Elisha and his servant are surrounded by Syria's army. The servant is terrified that they will meet a certain death at the hands of that hostile host. However, after the servant informs Elisha the army has them surrounded, Elisha prays for God to grant the servant the ability to see through the eyes of faith. The servant's eyes are opened, and he sees the army of God standing behind and surrounding the army of Syria (II Kings 6:17-20).

As we minister in a world of division and hostility, it is easy to lose sight of God's promise. God's promise does not mean that hostility and division doesn't exist around us. We are not insulated from the world. We walk by faith in and through it! Abram and family would experience difficulties as a people and as individuals. Abram and Sarai would doubt their ability to have a son. Abram would be asked to place his son on an altar. There would be difficulties as a result of Lot accompanying them on their journey. Had their circumstances dictated their behavior they would have returned home! However, they walked by faith in the promise of God.

Faith allows us to see God's glory in the present and God's future beyond our current circumstances. Thus, we are empowered to continue our journey in God's Kingdom, following Christ through human existence and history towards its grand culmination.

**How easily do we forget the promise of God in light of our current circumstances? What are the consequences of failing to remember God's promise of relationship in times of difficulty? What can we do to help us remain rooted in God's promise and to regularly revisit that promise in our Christian walk? How do the Christian disciplines of prayer, worship, and service keep us anchored in the promise of God?**

### **Prayer**

*Almighty God, we bow with grateful hearts, thankful for the gift of yourself to us. We experience your grace and the wonder of your love as we read our sacred story. We experience that grace and love in our hearts through the precious gift of Jesus. Teach us to walk as a covenant people. Teach us humility in a proud world. Teach us wisdom in a world of ignorance. Teach us justice in an unjust world. Teach us mercy in a world lacking compassion. Grant us a renewed vision of your redemptive purposes in life and the world. Open our eyes to see you in places others fail to look, and open our ears to hear your call in the midst of the clamor and noise. In Jesus name, Amen.*

Dr. D. Craig Rikard is a South Georgia pastor. Email him at [craigrikard169@yahoo.com](mailto:craigrikard169@yahoo.com).