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GENESIS 11:27-12:9

A New Beginning

If the other planets are inhabited," quipped George Bernard Shaw, "then they must be using the earth for their insane asylum."

We may chuckle at that statement, but it reminds us of a sad fact: The world is in a mess, and it does not seem to be getting any better. What is wrong?

It all goes back to events recorded in the Book of Genesis. Except for the account in chapters 1 and 2, the first eleven chapters of Genesis record one failure of man after another, failures that are being repeated today. The first man and woman disobeyed God and were cast out of the Garden (chap. 3). Cain murdered his brother Abel and lied about it (chap. 4). Humanity became so corrupt that God cleansed the earth with a flood (chaps. 6-8). Noah got drunk and exposed himself to his son Ham (chap. 9). In their defiance of God, men built a city and a tower; and God had to send confusion to end the rebellion (chap. 10).

Disobedience, murder, deception, drunkenness, nudity, and rebellion sound pretty up-to-date, don't they? If you were God, what would you do with these sinners, men and women you had created in your own image?

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"I'd probably destroy them!" you might reply; but that's not what God did. Instead, God called a man and his wife to leave their home and go to a new land, so that He might give humanity a new beginning. Because of God's call and their obedient faith, Abraham and Sarah* ultimately gave to the world the Jewish nation, the Bible, and the Savior. Where would we be today if Abraham and Sarah had not trusted God?

Consider the elements involved in their experience.

1. A call (Gen. 12:1a)

When God called. Salvation comes because God calls in grace and sinners respond by faith (Eph. 2:8-9; 2 Thes. 2:13-14). God called Abraham out of idolatry (Josh. 24:2), when he was in Ur of the Chaldees (Gen. 11:28, 31; 15:7; Neh. 9:7), a city devoted to Nannar, the moon-god. Abraham did not know the true God, and had done nothing to deserve knowing Him, but God graciously called him. "Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you" (John 15:16).

Abraham was 75 years old when God called him, so age doesn't need to be an obstacle to faith. He trusted God for 100 years (Gen. 25:7); and from his experience, we today can learn how to walk by faith and live to please the Lord.

Abraham was married to Sarah, his half sister (20:12), and they were childless. Yet God used them to found a great nation! "I called him [Abraham] alone, and blessed him, and increased him" (Isa. 51:2). Why would God call such an unlikely couple for such an important task? Paul gives you the answer in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.

God called Abraham after the Gentiles had failed and turned away from the true and living God. That process of devolution is described in Romans 1:18-32. Man originally

*Their original names were Abram and Sarai, but we will follow the example of Stephen in Acts 7:2 and use their new names (Gen. 17), since they are more familiar.

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knew the true God, but he would not glorify Him or give thanks to Him for His gracious provision. Man substituted idols for the true and living God. Idolatry led to immorality and indecency; and before long, the Gentile world was so corrupt that God had to give it up (vv. 24, 26, 28). Then He called Abraham, the first Jew, and made a new beginning.

How God called. "The God of glory appeared unto our father, Abraham" (Acts 7:2). How God appeared to Abraham, we are not told; but it was the first of seven communications to Abraham recorded in Genesis. The revelation of God's glory would have shown Abraham the vanity and folly of the idol worship in Ur. Who wants to worship a dead idol when he has met the living God! First Thessalonians 1:9-10 and 2 Corinthians 4:6 describe this salvation experience.

But God also *spoke* to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), and the Word brought about the miracle of faith. "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17). It was a call to separate himself from the corruption around him, and Abraham obeyed by faith (Heb. 11:8). True faith is based on the Word of God and leads to obedience. God could not bless and use Abraham and Sarah unless they were in the place of His appointment (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1).

Lost sinners today are not likely to receive a special revelation of God's glory as did Abraham and Sarah. But they can see His glory in the lives of His people (Matt. 5:16) and hear His Word of faith when they *share* their witness. God spoke to Abraham directly, but today we hear the truth of salvation through the witness of His people (Acts 1:8).

Why God called. There are at least three reasons why God called Abraham and Sarah. In His love, God was concerned about their salvation; so He revealed His glory and shared His gracious promises. But even beyond their personal salvation was God's purpose in blessing the whole world. This was accomplished when God sent His Son into the world through

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the Jewish nation. Christ died for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2; 4:14) and wants His church to tell the good news to the whole world (Mark 16:15).

But there is a third reason: The life of Abraham is an example for all Christians who want to walk by faith. Abraham was saved by faith (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:1-5; Gal. 3:6-14) and lived by faith (Heb. 11:8-19), and his obedience was the evidence of his faith (James 2:14-26). Abraham obeyed when he did not know *where* (Heb. 11:8-10), *how* (vv. 11-12), *when* (vv. 13-16), or *why* (vv. 17-19); and so should we.

Abraham and Sarah were not perfect, but their walk was generally characterized by faith and faithfulness. When they sinned, they suffered for it; and the Lord was always ready to forgive when they repented. "The victorious Christian life," said George Morrison, "is a series of new beginnings." As you study the life of Abraham and Sarah, you will learn what faith is and how to walk by faith. You will discover that, when you trust the Lord, no test is impossible and no failure is permanent.

2. A covenant (Gen. 12:1-3)

Faith is not based on feeling, though the emotions are certainly involved (Heb. 11:7). True faith is based on the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). God spoke to Abraham and told him what He would do *for* him and *through* him if he would trust and obey. "Great lives are trained by great promises," wrote Joseph Parker; and this was certainly true of Abraham and Sarah. God's covenant gave them the faith and strength they needed for their lifelong pilgrim journey.

We are not saved by making promises to God; we are saved by believing God's promises to us. It was God who graciously gave His covenant to Abraham and he responded with faith and obedience (Heb. 11:8-10). How you respond to God's promises determines what God will do in your life.

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The Bible records God's many covenants, beginning with the promise of the Redeemer in Genesis 3:15 and climaxing with the New Covenant through the blood of Jesus Christ (Luke 22:20; Heb. 8). The Hebrew word translated "covenant" has several meanings: (1) *to eat with*, which suggests fellowship and agreement; (2) *to bind or fetter*, which means commitment; and (3) *to allot*, which suggests sharing. When God makes a covenant, He enters into an agreement to commit Himself to give what He promises. It is purely an act of grace.

God did not give Abraham reasons or explanations; He simply gave him promises: "I will show thee... I will make of thee... I will bless thee... I will bless them that bless thee" (Gen. 12:1-2). God promised to show him a land, make him into a great nation, and use that nation to bless the whole world. God *blesses* us that we might be a *blessing* to others, and His great concern is that the whole world might be blessed. *The missionary mandate of the church does not begin with John 3:16 or Matthew 28:18-20. It begins with God's covenant with Abraham. We are blessed that we might be a blessing.*

Notice the contrast between Genesis 11:1-9 and 12:1-3. At Babel, men said, "Let us!" but to Abraham, God said, "I will." At Babel, men wanted to make a name for themselves; but it was God who made Abraham's name great. At Babel, the workers tried to unite men, only to divide them; but through Abraham, a whole world has been blessed, and all believers are united in Jesus Christ. Of course, Pentecost (Acts 2) is the "reversal" of Babel; but Pentecost could not have occurred apart from God's covenant with Abraham (Gal. 3:14).

It must have seemed incredible to Abraham and Sarah that God would bless the whole world through an elderly childless couple, but that is just what He did. From them came the

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nation of Israel, and from Israel came the Bible and the Savior. God reaffirmed this covenant with Isaac (Gen. 26:4) and Jacob (28:14) and fulfilled it in Christ (Acts 3:25-26). In later years, God amplified the various elements of this covenant; but He gave Abraham and Sarah sufficient truth for them to believe Him and set out by faith.

3. A compromise (Gen. 11:27-32; 12:4)

First steps of faith are not always giant steps, which explains why Abraham did not fully obey God. Instead of leaving his family, as he was commanded, Abraham took his father and his nephew Lot with him when he left Ur; and then he stayed at Haran until his father died.

Whatever you bring with you from the old life into the new is likely to create problems. Terah, Abraham's father, kept Abraham from fully obeying the Lord; and Lot created serious problems for Abraham until they finally had to agree to part. Abraham and Sarah brought a sinful agreement with them from Ur (20:13), and it got them into trouble twice (12:10-20; 20:1-18).

The life of faith demands total separation *from* what is evil and total devotion *to* what is holy (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). As you study the life of Abraham, you will discover that he was often tempted to compromise; and occasionally he yielded. God tests us in order to build our faith and bring out the best in us, but the devil tempts us in order to destroy our faith and bring out the worst in us.

When you walk by faith, you lean on God alone: His Word, His character, His will, and His power. You don't isolate yourself from your family and friends, but you no longer consider them your first love or your first obligation (Luke 14:25-27). Your love for God is so strong that it makes family love look like hatred in comparison! God calls us "alone" (Isa. 51:1-2), and we must not compromise.

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4. A commitment (Gen. 12:4-9)

The seventeenth-century Puritan preacher, Thomas Fuller, said that all mankind was divided into three classes: the intenders, the endeavorers, and the performers. Terah may have been an intender, but he never made it into the land of promise. Lot was an endeavorer up to a point, but he failed miserably because he could not walk by faith. Abraham and Sarah were the performers because they trusted God to perform what He promised (Rom. 4:18-21). They committed their lives and futures to God, obeyed what He commanded, and received all that God planned for them.

Faith brings us out (Gen. 12:4-5). It may have been a son's love for his aged father that made Abraham delay (Luke 9:59-62), but the day finally came when he and Sarah had to leave Haran and go to the land God chose for them. Faith and a double mind never go together (James 1:6-8), and you cannot serve two masters (Matt. 6:24). Faith demands commitment.

I sometimes get the impression that *commitment* is a vanishing commodity in today's world. Many people don't want to be committed to their jobs, their marriage vows, or to one another. "I'm going to do *my* thing *my* way!" is the essence of today's philosophy, and this attitude has invaded the church. Many believers will not commit themselves to ministering in one church but move from church to church when pastors and music programs change. "Temporary" is a key word today: temporary Sunday School teachers and youth sponsors, temporary choir members, temporary church members, and even temporary pastors.

"It-is a day of fading declarations," said Vance Havner. "Church covenants are found in the backs of hymn books, but they have faded in the lives of most of our members—if they ever meant anything. Declarations of personal dedication grow dim, and need to be renewed. It is a day of faded declarations!"

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Where would we be today if Abraham and Sarah had not committed themselves to obey the Lord by faith? Where would we be if previous generations of Christians had not given themselves fully to the Lord? We who come along later must not take for granted the things that previous generations paid a great price to attain. May the next generation look back at us and say, "They were faithful!"

Faith brings us in (Gen. 12:6-8). God brings us out that He might bring us in (Deut. 6:23). We know nothing about their long journey from Haran to Canaan, because it was the destination that was important. Centuries later, God would give that land to Abraham's descendants; but when Abraham and Sarah arrived, they were "strangers and pilgrims" in the midst of a pagan society (Heb. 11:13).

In spite of what the folk songs say, entering Canaan is not a picture of dying and going to heaven. It is a picture of the believer claiming his or her inheritance by faith. God has appointed a "Canaan" for each of His children (Eph. 2:10), and it is obtained only by faith. Claiming your inheritance involves tests and temptations, challenges and battles, but God is able to see you through (Phil. 1:6).

Obedience leads to new assurance and new promises from God (Gen. 12:7; John 7:17). What comfort it must have brought when Abraham and Sarah had this fresh revelation of God as they arrived in a strange and dangerous land. When you walk by faith, you know that God is with you and you don't need to be afraid (Heb. 13:5-6; Acts 18:9-10; 2 Tim. 4:17). God will work out His purposes and accomplish in and through you all that is in His heart.

Most of us are not commanded to pull up stakes and go to a strange country, but the challenges to our faith are just as real. Sometimes there are serious problems in the home, on the job, or in the church; and we wonder why God has permitted these things to happen. If you are to claim your spiri-

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tual inheritance in Christ, you must display faith in God's Word and obedience to God's will.

Wherever Abraham went in the land of Canaan, he was marked by his *tent* and his *altar* (Gen. 12:7-8; 13:3-4,18). The tent marked him as a "stranger and pilgrim" who did not belong to this world (Heb. 11:9-16; 1 Peter 2:11), and the altar marked him as a citizen of heaven who worshiped the true and living God. He gave witness to all that he was separated from this world (the tent) and devoted to the Lord (the altar). Whenever Abraham abandoned his tent and his altar, he got into trouble.

Abraham pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east (Gen. 12:8). Bible names sometimes have significant meanings, though we must not press them too far. Bethel means "the house of God" (28:19), and Ai means "ruin." Figuratively speaking, Abraham and Sarah were walking in the light, from east to west, from the city of ruin to the house of God! This world system is in ruins, but true believers have turned their backs on this world and have set their faces toward God's heavenly home. "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day" (Prov. 4:18, NIV).

Faith brings us on (Gen. 12:9). The life of faith must never stand still; for if your feet are going, your faith is growing. Note the verbs used to describe Abraham's life: he departed (12:4), went forth (12:5), passed through (12:6), removed (12:8) and journeyed (12:9). God kept Abraham moving so that he would meet new challenges and be forced to trust God for new "grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). Comfortable Christianity is opposite the life of faith, for "pilgrims and strangers" must face new circumstances if they are to gain new insights about themselves and their Lord. "Let us press on to maturity" is the challenge (6:1, NASB).

How did Abraham know where to go and what to do? He

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"called upon the name of the Lord" (Gen. 12:8). He prayed to the Lord, and the Lord helped him. Abraham's pagan neighbors saw that he had an altar but no idols. He had no "sacred places" but built his altar to God wherever he pitched his tent. You could trace Abraham's steps by the altars he left behind. He was not ashamed to worship God openly while his heathen neighbors watched him.

In the pilgrim life, you must go "from faith to faith" (Rom. 1:17) if you would go "from strength to strength" (Ps. 84:7). G.A. Studdert Kennedy said, "Faith is not believing in spite of evidence; it is obeying in spite of consequence." "By faith Abraham... obeyed" (Heb. 11:8). Faith without obedience is dead (James 2:14-26), and action without faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). God has wedded faith and obedience like the two sides of a coin; they go together.

This does not mean that sinners are saved by faith *plus* works, because Scripture declares that sinners are saved by faith alone (John 3:16-18; Eph. 2:8-9). Dr. H.A. Ironside, long-time pastor of Chicago's Moody Church, was told by a lady that she expected to get to heaven by faith plus her good works. "It's like rowing a boat," she explained. "It takes two oars to row a boat; otherwise you go around in a circle." Dr. Ironside replied, "That's a good illustration except for one thing: *I'm not going to heaven in a rowboat!*"

The faith that saves is the faith that proves itself in good works (Eph. 2:8-10; Titus 2:14; 3:8,14). Abraham was saved by faith (Heb. 11:8; Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:1-5), but his faith was made evident by his obedience (James 2:21-24).

Abraham is now in the place of God's appointment, doing what God told him to do. But this is not the end—it is the beginning! Even in the place of obedience you will face tests and trials, for that is how faith grows. But the same Lord who brought you *out*, brought you *in*, and brought you *on* in your pilgrim journey will also bring you *through* if you follow Him by faith.