

A Walk Thru the Life of
ABRAHAM

Faith in God's Promises

Walk Thru the Bible



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Contents

Introduction	5
Session 1 Chosen	11
Session 2 Challenges	19
Session 3 Faith and Action	26
Session 4 Faith and Friendship	34
Session 5 Fulfillment	42
Session 6 An Epic Test	49
Conclusion	59
Leader's Notes	61
Bibliography	63

Introduction

It was a desperate attempt at some semblance of immortality. Long before a pharaoh died, the construction of his tomb would begin. Passages and compartments within the pyramid would be designed for maximum security to throw grave robbers off track. The mummification process would protect the king's body and organs against decay for centuries to come. Helpful items—statues of laborers, scrolls of magic spells, boats for travel—would be placed in the inner chambers to assist the dead king in the afterlife. And the pyramid itself would stand practically forever as a monument to the king's grandeur. It was as close to an eternal legacy as a human being could get.

Most Egyptian pyramids had already been built long before Abraham was born. But the nomad from Ur ended up with a legacy far greater, far more lasting than anything the pharaohs ever dreamed of. How? Not by conquering kingdoms, building monuments, or exploring new lands, but by living a life of faith in response to a God who chose him from among masses of other men. Simply by entering a covenant with this God, the otherwise unremarkable sojourner and his descendants impacted billions of people throughout history. Abraham became the

vehicle through whom God would reveal himself to humanity in specific, tangible ways.

His story is a model for anyone who wants to leave a legacy and make a lasting difference in the world. The way to impact the history of an eternal kingdom is to enter into a covenant with the eternal God. And the only way to do that is by faith. Those who accept the revealed truth of God and live accordingly, regardless of what they see with their eyes, become a part of the family of the wandering Aramean named Abraham.

Abraham

As the story goes, a craftsman named Terah made idols. His oldest son, Abram, began having doubts about all the gods worshiped by the people of his culture. So one time when his father was out, Abram smashed all the idols in the family's shop except the largest one, then put a stick in the hands of the one remaining statue. When his father came back, he was furious. But Abram blamed the vandalism on the standing idol, who had gotten angry at all the smaller statues. His father accused him of lying on the obvious grounds that idols can't speak or move—to which Abram responded, "Then why do you worship them?"

This rabbinic tale and others like it are fanciful attempts to explain why God chose this particular man out of multitudes of others in a polytheistic society. In truth, we have no information about anything that went on in Abraham's life before God called him to leave home and go to a land of promise. We have no indication that Abraham was monotheistic before God spoke to him (see Josh. 24:2), or even that he was monotheistic for some time afterward. God didn't give him a theology; he gave him a command. In obedience, Abraham left the poly-

theism of Mesopotamia and entered a relationship with one God whom he would learn about in a series of experiences over many years.

We don't know exactly when Abraham lived. Most estimates place him sometime between 2000 and 1800 BC. His family originally came from Ur, but even that isn't very specific. A large city on the Euphrates called Ur was a prosperous, highly developed area with spacious homes and a relatively high standard of living. Much farther north was a smaller city called Ur about which little is known. Most scholars assume that the family migrated to Haran from the larger, southern Ur, but no one knows for sure. Regardless, we know Abraham was in Haran when his adventure with God began.

Abraham's life is neatly divided. He lived seventy-five years before his call and before the promise of a son and descendants was given; twenty-five interim years between the promise and its fulfillment; and seventy-five years after Isaac's birth. The middle twenty-five years—plus the somewhat later offering of Isaac—are the key focus of the Genesis story. During these years, Abraham wrestled with God's purposes, exhibited great faith, sometimes expressed doubts, made some mistakes, and drew closer to the God who had called him. As this divine-human relationship unfolded, Abraham became God's friend—so designated in much later writings (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; James 2:23).

Themes

Up to this point, the history of God's dealings with humanity had been on a grand scale; after the exile from Eden come stories of the great flood and the tower of Babel, both large-scale judgments. With Abraham, salvation history zeroed in

on one man and his family, which grew into a people, then a nation, and finally, through a Messiah, spread over the entire world. And it was all made possible because one very human nomad became a friend of God. Abraham became the hinge between macro- and micro-history, between the general and the particular revelation of God.

We can learn a lot about God's purposes by the themes that show up in Abraham's life. It's significant that his story begins with barrenness and wandering—perfect conditions for a God who wants to make extravagant promises of descendants and land. In fact, barrenness becomes a recurring theme in Scripture. After Sarah came Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's mother, Hannah, and, in the New Testament, Elizabeth. What better way for a God of hope to demonstrate his love and his power than to step into hopeless situations? This is what he does again and again, and it starts with Abraham and his wife.

Such hardships are the stage on which God's promises are best displayed. Perhaps the dominant theme of Abraham's life is faith. He becomes "exhibit A" for how God chooses to deal with human beings. God establishes covenants and invites his people into them in such a way that they can only relate to him by faith. Abraham's life is a decades-long case study in this truth. That's why God's promises are reiterated so often in Abraham's life and why Abraham is stripped of all human possibilities for realizing those promises. To qualify as a patriarch in the kingdom of God, he must learn to trust God radically and exclusively. In so doing, he becomes an eternal prototype of God's relationship with human beings.

One thing we learn from Abraham through all of his experiences with God is that it isn't easy being chosen. God's people have found that to be true throughout history. But it's far better than the alternative. The privilege of walking with

God, even when the path is painful, is always worth the effort. The blessings that come to Abraham—and then through him to the world—make that abundantly clear.

How to Use This Guide

The discussion guides in this series are intended to create a link between past and present, between the cultural and historical context of the Bible and real life as we experience it today. By putting ourselves as closely into biblical situations as possible, we can begin to understand how God interacted with his people in the past and, therefore, how he interacts with us today. The information in this book makes ancient Scripture relevant to twenty-first-century life as God means for us to live it.

The questions in this book are geared to do what a discussion guide should do: provoke discussion. You won't see obvious "right" answers to most of these questions. That's because biblical characters had to wrestle with deep spiritual issues and didn't have easy, black-and-white answers handed to them. They discovered God's will as he led them and revealed himself to them—the same process we go through today, though we have the added help of their experiences to inform us. Biblical characters experienced God in complex situations, and so do we. By portraying those situations realistically, we learn how to apply the Bible to our own lives. One of the best ways to do that is through in-depth discussion with other believers.

The discussion questions within each session are designed to elicit every participant's input, regardless of his or her level of preparation. Obviously, the more group members prepare by reading the biblical text and the background information in the study guide, the more they will get out of it. But even in busy

weeks that afford no preparation time, everyone will be able to participate in a meaningful way.

The discussion questions also allow your group quite a bit of latitude. Some groups prefer to briefly discuss the questions in order to cover as many as possible, while others focus only on one or two of them in order to have more in-depth conversations. Since this study is designed for flexibility, feel free to adapt it according to the personality and needs of your group.

Each session ends with a hypothetical situation that relates to the passage of the week. Discussion questions are provided, but group members may also want to consider role-playing the scenario or setting up a two-team debate over one or two of the questions. These exercises often cultivate insights that wouldn't come out of a typical discussion.

Regardless of how you use this material, the biblical text will always be the ultimate authority. Your discussions may take you to many places and cover many issues, but they will have the greatest impact when they begin and end with God's Word itself. And never forget that the Spirit who inspired the Word is in on the discussion too. May he guide it—and you—wherever he wishes.

Chosen

GENESIS 12

They had left the homeland bound for Canaan, but they stopped and settled down before they arrived. That often happens in life—you set out with one goal in mind, and then your goal gets redefined along the way. There’s no shame in that. But Scripture gives the impression that Terah’s family didn’t just settle down; they settled. Stopped short. Compromised. As Genesis 11 closes, they have put down roots in an in-between place.

We don’t know much about what that was like for Abram, the oldest son in Terah’s family. We know his family worshiped a variety of gods (Josh. 24:2). Who didn’t? The world was polytheistic. That’s what people did. And we know that the gods hadn’t shown Abram much favor, at least in the hugely important area of leaving a legacy. Abram was seventy-five and childless. His

wife was barren—a profound crisis for a man of his time. According to the laws of his society, Abram could have divorced her, impregnated a household slave girl in her place, or hired a prostitute to carry his child. But there’s no indication that he even considered such action. Instead, he lived without expectations of a legacy, seemingly destined to leave his inheritance to a nephew or a servant. Lingered somewhere between his past home and his original goals, he was a man without prospects.

If we’re honest, that’s where many of us live. We’re somewhere between where we started out and where we’re going, and we tend to settle down—or settle for less than what we had hoped for. We suspect that God may have something else in store for us, but we don’t know how to get there. So we lower our expectations, compromise our dreams, and consent to the status quo. We think the in-between land is all we have, so we try to get comfortable in it.

Abram is a symbol of a life that has grown stagnant and perhaps restless. We don’t know that he actually felt that way—the Bible is silent about his beliefs and attitudes before God called him. For all we know, he was dreaming of doing something great or expecting a miracle. But that isn’t how Scripture portrays him. We aren’t told why God singled him out above all his peers. All we’re told is that God chose a member of a migrant family who was just about past the age of hoping. And that choice would change the world forever.

The Call: Genesis 12:1–9

Seemingly out of nowhere, God speaks, and his message is radical. Abram is to leave his family home and go to a place that God will reveal later. His father is about 145 at this time and will live sixty more years; that’s how the chronology adds

REVERSING THE CURSE

In Genesis 3, God exiled Adam and Eve from Eden, multiplied the pain of childbirth, cursed the ground so that it would produce food only through hard labor, and subjected human beings to death. God's promises to Abram don't completely reverse those curses, but they do begin to address them positively. Instead of exile, Abram and Sarai are promised a land. In contrast to the pain of childbirth, they are promised the joy of having a child and many descendants. Instead of hard, futile toil, they are promised abundance. And instead of the finality of death, they are promised a lasting legacy that will bless the entire earth.

up, even though his eventual death was reported at the end of chapter 11. So Abram isn't just venturing out on his own. He's leaving behind everything—his inheritance, the protection afforded by the family's gods, his means of provision, and his security—to follow God into the unknown. He takes along his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and a substantial entourage of servants he has acquired over the years, but this is essentially a divorce from his ancestral past and a denial of any predictable future. And in taking Lot with him, he is also taking Terah's only grandchild. In many families, this breach of expectations would be an affront. In Abram's, it's a divine calling.

But it's a calling that comes with astounding promises: he will become a great nation, he will be blessed, his name will be magnified, he will bless others, those who honor him will be blessed, those who dishonor him will be cursed, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through him. And just in case he misheard, these promises will be repeated and emphasized again and again—to Abram in Genesis 15 and 17, and to his grandson Jacob in Genesis 28. God is serious about this plan.

Needless to say, migrating by God’s invisible hand will require some adjustments. God hasn’t laid out a detailed blueprint for Abram but has simply given him an initial command and a big-picture promise. The details will be a matter of trial and error over the next few decades. And the land he will settle in—God eventually specifies Canaan in 12:7, after Abram comes into it—is unfamiliar. Its hills, especially in the north, slow down travel. Its people may be hospitable to those who pass through, but those who come to stay often encounter resistance. It’s easy for an outsider to get caught between tribal rivalries or fall victim to plundering. The land is good, but it isn’t entirely welcoming. It may take a lot of time before a sojourner can call it home.

Even so, Abram sets up altars within the land. This voice that called him, this God that has reached out in a way that other gods don’t, is worthy of his worship. Abram will stake his claim to the land with altars at Shechem, Bethel, Hebron, and eventually a mountain of Moriah—sites that will become sacred in the course of Israel’s history. Though he is in unfamiliar territory, he begins to mark it for the God who called him there.

Discuss

- Why do you think God didn’t tell Abram up front where he would be going? Why do you think God didn’t extend the invitation to the entire family—Abram’s father and brothers included?

- In what ways is this very first experience between God and Abram representative of everyone’s experience with God throughout history? In what ways can you relate to Abram’s calling?

A Diversion: Genesis 12:10–20

There’s a famine in Canaan, and Abram is faced with a choice: stay in the land God has just designated as his inheritance or leave that land to feed the family. He chooses to leave. Is it because he doubts God’s ability to provide in the land of promise?

SARAI’S BEAUTY

Twice in Genesis, Abram fears that Sarai’s beauty will attract unwelcome attention from rulers looking to expand their harems. This poses somewhat of a problem for interpreters because Sarai was in her late sixties in the first episode and in her late eighties in the second. It’s hard for Bible commentators to imagine her being irresistible to kings whose harems were filled with twenty-year-olds. There are several potential explanations, however. It’s certainly possible that Sarai supernaturally retained her youthful beauty; after all, she was supernaturally rejuvenated to bear a child at the age of ninety. She may have also been beautiful for her dignity or for having a regal demeanor. And because many references in Genesis seem to point to Abram’s status as a powerful tribal chieftain, she may have been highly attractive as relationship collateral, for her wealth, and for a variety of other reasons. But these latter explanations can only be part of the story, as the text insists that she was more than just attractive. She was very beautiful.

Or is it an act of faith that he will be brought back in due time? The text doesn't say for sure, but it does hint at compromise. Throughout Scripture, Egypt is symbolic of living by sight rather than by faith, of depending on human strength rather than on God. And Abram and Sarai do encounter difficulty there. The promise of descendants is immediately threatened by the prospect of Sarai being taken into Pharaoh's harem.

A savvy traveler, Abram has a policy of telling powerful kings that his beautiful wife is really his sister. Technically it's true—he spells this policy out in 20:12–13 when the situation comes up again—but it's a risky strategy. His options are to (1) truthfully say that Sarai is his wife and trust God to protect them both—though if God doesn't, he will be killed and his wife will be taken into the king's harem; or (2) semi-truthfully say that Sarai is his sister, in which case Abram's life will be spared and she will be taken into the king's harem anyway. He chooses the latter, the less gallant option, and finds that God protects them both. Pharaoh even sends them away with parting gifts. God is apparently watching over his promise.

The scene foreshadows a much greater exodus to come. Abram's beloved is held tightly in the grip of a pharaoh, God sends plagues on the Egyptians, and the beloved is released—with added wealth. More than five hundred years later this scenario will be played out again on a grander scale as God rescues his people from slavery in Egypt. But in Abram's case, what could have been a rape and murder in the worst-case scenario turned into a blessing and greater wealth. It's the first time God's promise is threatened, but it won't be the last.

Discuss

- Do you think the famine was a test to see if Abram would stay in the land that had been promised to him? Why or

why not? In what ways have you found God's promises tested in your life? How have you been tempted to compromise them?

- In what ways did God demonstrate his protection of Abram and Sarai? To what degree do you think his protection was dependent on their making the right choices?

A CASE STUDY

Imagine: Several years ago, you got a new job and moved to a new city along with your family. Only now is it beginning to feel like home, and even though it isn't the perfect situation—after all, there's probably no such thing—you feel that you could grow roots here and live out the rest of your days. But God suddenly intervenes in your life with an irresistible and growing conviction that you're called to do a greater work somewhere else. When your family asks you what the work is and where you're supposed to go, all you can tell them is that you don't know. You only know that you're supposed to uproot and begin driving in the one direction you've never been before. Only then will God give you more specifics.

A Walk Thru the Life of Abraham

- How certain would you be that your conviction is God's voice? Do you think he would really tell you something so disruptive and inconvenient? What would you say to him about the lack of specifics he has given you?
- How do you think your friends and family would react to your sense of calling? Would any of them be supportive? Would any of them try to talk you out of it?
- In what ways, if any, does this scenario reflect the life of faith for everyone?