

THE CALL AND RESPONSE OF ABRAHAM

Have you ever heard it said “It doesn’t make any difference what you believe as long as you believe in something?” Like so many saying that are around – there may be some partial truth in such a claim.

"It doesn't make any difference in what you believe, unless what you believe makes a difference in the way you think, in what you say and in what you do." There is a lot of truth in that idea. You could believe in communism and if it did not affect anything about you, then what difference does it make?. You can believe in Jesus Christ and if it does not affect anything about you, then what difference does it make?

This statement may capture very well the idea James expressed in his letter to the early Church in that he said "faith without works is dead." There are many people who "believe in God" but do not obey God or even try to obey His word. Does the "fact" that they believe in God really matter? Not much!

The prime example of men of faith in the Bible is Abraham. Paul tells us Abraham believed God and God counted that as righteousness. James asks the question, "How do we know Abraham had faith?" The answer is that he obeyed or carried out what God told him to do, though it did not make sense to him.

Abraham is also a good example of the fact that it is God Who chooses or initiates the relationships He has with people. It is the same way today in our personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. God initiated the action. Paul tells us "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly." Abraham had a *little* faith that grew to be a *great* faith and it is the same way with us. God grants to each one of us a “measure of faith.” If we do not exercise and act on the “measure of faith” however meager it may be, we will never grow in faith or faithfulness.

God's redemptive purpose started being revealed more clearly with Abraham who is described as "the father of all them that believe." Before Abraham, there were good men (Abel, Enoch, Noah) worshiped God. Abraham did not worship God, he and his family worshiped idols. It appears that Terah was the first in the line of Patriarchs (the first born of the descendants of Noah through the line of Shem) that strayed away from worshiping God. It was God Who took the initiative since Abraham was not especially different from his neighbors. We see at work here the sovereignty and grace of God. It is the same way in God's dealings with us.

Abraham is also a good example of God’s leadership and provision. From Joshua’s comments in 24:3 we see that after God called Abram, He started working in Abram’s life to complete the work He had begun in him.

It took a step of faith on Abram’s part. The action resulted in Abram “crossing over” from one side of the river to the other. In fact, the word *Hebrew* literally means “one who crossed over.” This is a picture of saving faith and repentance in action.

Between Adam and Abraham, God worked with men as individuals and dealt with their "sins." Starting with Abraham, God put into motion a way of dealing with the question of "sin." God's plan was to work on the question of the consequences of the Fall – the old sin nature.

If we check the generations of Noah’s son Shem and his descendants (Gen 11:11-26), we can place the call of Abram in time relative to the Flood and the Tower of Babel. Most of us find reading the “begats” about as interesting as watching paint dry. However, we can put certain events in a historical perspective relative to other more well-know happenings such as the Flood. This is a list of the first born sons of Shem and the year number after the Flood in which they were born: Arphaxad

(2), Salah (37), Eber (67), Peleg (101), Reu (131), Serug (163), Nahor (193), Terah (222), and Abram (??).

When we get to Terah we pick up some ambiguity in the times of the birth of his three sons. For example, in Genesis 11:26 it says "And Terah lived seventy years, and begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran." If we are not careful, we will say that all three had to be born in the same year and that Abram was the first born.

However, further investigation of the Scriptures (Acts 7:4) shows that Abram left the city of Haran after the death of Terah. Genesis 11:32 tells us that Terah died in Haran at the age of 205. We also know that Abram was about 75 years old when he came into the land of Canaan. That would mean that Terah was about 130 when Abram was born. Terah had a son when he was 70 and Bible scholars think that Haran was the first born. Therefore, it is probable that Abram was born about 350 years after the Flood.

If (as it appears) Abram was NOT the first born of Terah, then we see the sovereignty of God in action in choosing someone other than the first born for the "birth right" of being responsible for religious or spiritual things that was assigned to the descendants of Shem.

The call of Abram relative to the Tower of Babel and the scattering of the nations is more difficult to pin down. Many think the scattering happened in the life time of Peleg (Genesis 10:25 says "for in his days was the earth divided"). Peleg was born in about 100 AF and died in about 340 AF. The dispersion of people as a result of the confusion of languages probably happened between 100 and 340 AF. Abram was born around 350 AF which is also the approximate date of the death of Noah.

According to the account by Stephen (Acts 7:2-3) God had appeared to Abram while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran and gave him instructions to leave the old behind and find the new.

In Hebrews 11:8, we are told that upon hearing the call, Abraham believed and obeyed.

Genesis 11:31 And Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan; and they came to Haran and dwelt there.

Do you start to see a small problem in what was happening with Abram? The account states that Terah (Abram's father) took him out of Mesopotamia. We don't know if God's call of Abram brought conviction to his father for having engaged in worship of other gods or if perhaps Abram's faith was just not fully developed. It had not grown to the point where he would be able to "believe all things." He left his country but not his kindred. This imperfect faith probably produced delays in God's plan for Abraham. (Your imperfect faith will produce delays in what God want to do with your life.) Part of the problem was that he did not see the entire vision God had for all of mankind. Many times we fail to properly respond to God's direction and the circumstances in which we find ourselves because we have not seen clearly and our faith is imperfect. Sometimes we make a decision that we are not willing to pay the price to accomplish the goal God has in mind for us. The time in Haran was apparently unproductive time.

Another possibility is that Abram may have been trusting in his earthly father, but Terah died. We may fail to find God's best for our lives because we will not let go of the security blankets we have acquired along the way. It may be necessary for these support systems to be removed from us before we become fully obedient to follow God's direction.

God did not give up on Abraham though his faith was deficient or imperfect. So, we shouldn't use the excuse that we don't have the level of faith Abraham had. Remember, Abraham

didn't have a great and perfect faith at first, but his faith was a quality type (real) faith in that it led to action. How do we know that God did not give up on Abraham?

GENESIS 12:1-3 Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Actually, this passage does not indicate God told Abraham again to leave. This may be the place where the writer (Moses) chose to tell why they left Ur in the first place.

Three significant things are given here: (1) A call was initiated by God. (2) There were specific things to do – God is not wishy-washy. (3) The land was a significant part of what God was to accomplish through Abraham.

So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan. So they came to the land of Canaan. Genesis 12:4-5

The route they took from Ur to the land of Canaan was indirect because of obstacles. There were natural obstacles (high mountain range) and there were obstacles related to traditions and family. [Legend has it that Abram stopped in Aleppo after having left Haran.]

At this point, Abraham is in the land. However, he did not own the land but he was there occupying as God's representative. In the Parable of the Ten Talents, we, as the Church, are told to "occupy until Christ returns." The land of Canaan was Abraham's inheritance, so it is with us, our inheritance is the ground (spiritual ground) we take and hold for God now. We are called of God to our stations in life and we need to occupy that territory for the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, we are to implement the will of God in every situation over which we have control or influence. That which we gain control of is our inheritance. We have been taught about "individual salvation" but, we understand little about the **Government of God**. Unless God's rule is established and His enemies are overthrown, we have no inheritance. The Church today is missing out on its opportunity to build its inheritance. We do not acknowledge the power of God by affirming it in particular situations we face and, consequently, we are simply treading water spiritually. It may be that we are just "hanging out in Haran."

GENESIS 12:6-7 Abraham did not just stop at the border. He was not satisfied to be barely in. The place he came to (Shechem) means "shoulder." This is connected to the idea of consent or obedience. The territory was Moreh which means "teacher" implying knowledge and/or understanding. There is a very significant teaching here: "Consenting (obedience) leads to understanding." Most of us want it the other way around (we want to know or understand before we obey), but, Jesus said "If any man wills to do His will, he shall know." (John 7:17) All knowledge is by revelation as the result of obedience – everything else is just information.

God affirmed Abram in his obedience: He appeared to Abram and gave him the assurance "unto thy seed will I give this land." Abraham response was right and proper: he worshiped God. Notice that he built an altar unto the Lord. He sacrificed a burnt offering unto God. This is the first recording of a formal sacrifice made by Abraham, although his leaving Ur and Haran would be notable sacrifices. The burnt offering had significance in that it represented total commitment to God. This is what God wants from each of us: total surrender to Him. We can do it only when we have a personal encounter with God. True worship, sacrifice, surrender follow naturally from encounter. In speaking of salvation, the question is often asked, "Have you had a personal encounter with Jesus?" Those are not just idle words!

We often say "no man is an island unto himself" meaning that what we do affects and influences those around us. This is a very valid interpretation of that saying. One could also see that we are not "islands unto ourselves" in time as well as space. What Abraham would do, would affect future generations throughout the world. He himself would not know fulfillment of the promises except through future generation. Abraham was patient in his expectations. True faith does not abandon hope when its fulfillment is delayed.

GENESIS 12:8-9 Though Abraham had fully surrendered himself (as represented by the burnt offering) at Shechem, he did not stop there but moved on. At a place between "Bethel and Ai" he made his dwelling place. This is where we find ourselves today, spiritually. We have pitched our spiritual tents in the land. Notice the orientation of the tent. It faced eastward toward Ai, to the west was Bethel.

Ai means "heap of ruins." Bethel means "house of God." Abraham entered his tent to rest. The spiritual significance here is "we find rest in our lives as to turn our backs on the way of the world (the heap of ruins) and face or point our life direction toward the *house of God*." That also means that each morning as Abraham left his tent, he came out facing Ai or the "heap of ruins." In a spiritual sense, we often find ourselves looking at a world that is in ruin. The challenge we face each day is to find ways to bring God's salvation to a world in ruin.

In later years the Tabernacle and the Temple would face the east so that the witness of Abraham's experience in Canaan would be reenacted each time the people came to worship. Once again, Abraham built an altar as a declaration that God had brought him there to rest. We are told Abraham journeyed on to the south. He even wandered off into Egypt but he returned to this second altar, his place of rest. Don't we find ourselves doing just that. Sometimes we wander off and we may find ourselves in a place that different than that to which God has called us. It is important that we not stay in Egypt, but return to our place of rest in Christ Jesus.

Abraham stands out as a truly great man because he believed and acted on God's promises. It meant surrendering his own will to be obedient and to agree with God. Just as God called Abram to come out of the world system, He calls us today to do the same and to benefit from His salvation.

Many people could characterize their lives as "Ai" – a heap of ruins. There are many who have no idea that life can be joyful. There are many who have no hope because all they see around them is "ruin." We need to be reaching out to people who are lost and undone, people who do not know God through His Son, Jesus Christ. You may be thinking "God hasn't called me to such a ministry." Oh, yes He has. You don't have to go to Mongolia where He called Jeremy and Marsha Rhoton or to the Middle East where He call Dave and Debbie Mills. The fields are white unto harvest in our neighborhoods.

If you are here today and have never "crossed over" as Abraham did, if you have never surrender your very life to God through Jesus Christ, if you have never called upon the name of the Lord for His salvation, then you need leave "Ai" – leave the "heap of ruins" and turn to God. You cannot afford to delay. Each one of us is only a heartbeat away from eternity.

Some of you have been church members for years and yet you find your life is a mess – a heap of ruins. You're not experiencing the "rest" that God has promised to His children. You may have "made a decision for Christ" years ago but that decision did not produce any difference in your life. Some times people experience an emotional conversion – what is needed is a spiritual rebirth. So often we want to go directly to "Resurrection" and by pass the cross. We cannot hold on to the old life and experience the new life in Christ. How can you experience the power of His resurrection without experiencing the fellowship of His suffering – literally dying to self? It cannot be done!

Some may have some “unfinished business” with God in that your decision to follow Jesus was never consummated in being “born again.” If you are not 100 percent sure about this, then it is time to get it right with God.

Some of you may be thinking – “I know I have been born again, but I am not experiencing rest in the Lord.” You may need to turn your tent around. You may be out of phase with what God is doing and simply need to repent. We can let disobedience creep into our lives and we lose our sense of direction. Sometimes we think that “Repentance” is a one time thing associated with our salvation experience. Repentance is on-going and continuous – the more often we repent the better we will be lined up with what God is doing.

I know that many have some spiritual business to conduct with God today. Paul told us to present our bodies as living sacrifices upon God’s altar. The altar is open. As we sing a hymn of commitment, you come to this altar area and follow God’s leading in your life, starting right now. If you can put it off – it won’t ever get done. Do it now.

If you’ve never trusted Jesus for your eternal salvation, you come. If you need to follow up on any unfinished business in your decision to follow Christ (if you are not sure that you have been born again), you come. If you need to get your tent turned around, you come. There is room for everyone.