

WHEN GOD CALLS

Genesis 12:1-9

As we read account in the Bible of how God called individuals to do certain things, we tend to think that such things are no longer happening today. I think that people may come to such a conclusion if they consider just their own personal experience. Sometimes we think that if it is not happening to us, then it doesn't happen. If we are not experiencing things that are common in the Scriptures, our first step should be to determine why things are not happening.

If you were coaching someone and a key step to their development was to accomplish a particular goal, then you would not give them another step to work on until the previous key step was completed. The same thing happens with us when the Holy Spirit is training us in righteousness, holiness and in Kingdom living. If we fail to accomplish the simplest step in our spiritual growth, then we will hinder our transformation and will not be given other calls or commands.

One of the things in vogue today is PC - Political Correctness. In striving to be Politically Correct some people will make statements like "It doesn't make any difference what you believe as long as you believe in something." Like so many **wrong** sayings that are around – there may be some partial truth in such a claim. "It doesn't make any difference in *what we believe*, **unless** *what we believe* makes a difference in the way we think, in what we say and in what we do." There is a lot of truth in that idea. We could believe in communism and if it did not affect anything about us, then what difference does it make? We can believe in Jesus Christ and if it does not affect anything about us, then what difference does it make? The other side of this same coin is that "If we genuinely believe in something, then it **will** make a difference in our lives."

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 asked 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. Sometimes we let our *finite* and *faulty* reasoning power get in the way of carrying out God's *infinite*, *perfect* and *eternal* purposes for our lives.

Abraham is also a good example of God's leadership and provision. Look at Joshua's comments in Joshua 24:3: "Then I took your father Abraham from the other side of the River, led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac."

From these we see that after God called Abram, He started working in Abram's life to complete the work He had begun in him. Notice all the "action" words that are attributed to God in this verse. took, led, multiplied, gave.

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 Genesis 11:31 we find that Abram was closely connected to his father's family and we see the following: "And Terah (teh-rakh) took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran (haw-rah), and his daughter-in-law Sarai (saw-rah-ee), his son Abram's wife, and they went out with them from Ur (oor) of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan; and they came to Haran and dwelt there."

Do we 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. (Our imperfect faith will produce delays in what God want to do with our lives.) 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. That is a bad decision. We tend to focus on the short term and we need to have our focus on eternity. Short range decisions have a greater and opposite reaction on the long-range results. 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 and follow God's directions. Many do not trust in God until they have nothing else in which to trust.

God did not give up on Abraham though Abraham's 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**. Nothing comes merely by thinking about it. Excellent ideas are not enough! Let's look again at the Genesis 12 account of God's call of Abraham.

God Calls – 12:1-3

¹ Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; ² And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; ³ And 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 will be blessed." Genesis 12:1-3 (NASB95)

In this first verse we see three things: (1) A call was initiated by God. (2) There were specific things to do. (3) The land was a significant part of what God was to accomplish through Abraham.

A Call Initiated by God – Abraham is 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. If you are saved, it is because God initiated the action. Paul tells us "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly." We'll see as we explore the Scriptures, Abraham had a *little* faith that grew to be a *great* faith. It's 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 nor in faithfulness.

God's redemptive purpose started being revealed more clearly with Abraham. Abraham is described as "the father of all them that believe." Before Abraham, there were good men (Abel, Enoch, Noah) who worshiped God. According to Joshua 24:2 Abraham did **not** worship God, he and his family worshiped idols. That is a surprising statement to most of us. It is thought that Abraham's father Terah was the first of the Patriarchs (the first born of Noah's descendants through the line of Shem) that strayed away from worshiping God. But it was God Who took the initiative since Abraham was not especially different from his neighbors and also

he was not the firstborn. We see at work here the sovereignty and grace of God. It is the same way in God's dealings with us.

Specific Things to Do – In every relationship with various persons that resulted in a covenant with God, not only did He initiate the interaction, God also instructed the person to do something before a covenant was introduced. In Hebrews 11:8, we are told that upon hearing the call, Abraham believed and obeyed. 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.

A closer look at what Abram was told to do shows two things. The first is rather obvious and that was to "leave and go." The second directive followed the first three promises that God made to Abram. These first three promises were actions that God would take on Abram's behalf. God would make him a "great nation," God would bless him, and God would make his name great. Contrast these three promises with what the people (led by Nimrod) were trying to achieve that we saw in chapters ten and eleven. They were building a city and God promised Abram a nation. They were climbing up to try to get closer to heaven so they could be blessed and God promised to bless Abram simply for believing. They wanted to make a name for themselves and God promise Abram that his name would be great. God exceeds our expectations and goals, if we will simply trust and obey.

As we get to the end of the three promises, we see what God expected of Abram. He was to be a blessing to others. Most translations treat this directive from God as a fourth blessing; however, it is an expectation of Abram's response to being a recipient of the three promises of God. These three promises would enable Abram to be a blessing to others. In the same way our salvation allows us to be a blessing to others as we walk in the promises of our salvation in Christ.

The Significance of the Land – It would appear that what God was going to accomplish through Abram required that Abram abandon the area (land) of his birth and move to a brand-new area (land) that God would show him. A change in where we live is part of our salvation experience. We were living in the realm of the "kingdom of this world" and the salvation we have in Christ allows us and requires us to leave that realm and move into the realm of the "kingdom of God."

It may be significant that God (at this point) did not promise to give what would be identified as the "promised land" to Abram but would allow him to "see" it. We can recall that Jesus told Nicodemus that a person must be born again (of the Spirit) before he could even "see" the kingdom of God. The promises of God to Abram and his descendants would be realized as they lived in the promised land. In the same way, we enjoy the promises of God as we live and occupy the realm of the kingdom of God rather than hanging around in the kingdom of this world.

In verse three, we see three additional promises given to Abram. These promises are related to how God would interact with other people with regard to how they would relate to Abram (and his descendants). God would bring about good things (blessings) for those who treated Abram well and for those who showed disrespect to Abram, God would bring about bad outcomes (curses). The third promise of this group declared that God had already provided a blessing for all humanity and that blessing would come about through Abram's descendants. The literal translation of the last part of verse three is "blessed in thee have been all families of the ground." This wording would indicate that the outcome was already settled and we know that this is a reference to the coming of the Messiah.

So, how did Abram respond to God's call?

Abram Obeyed – 12:4-5

⁴So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan. Genesis 12:4-5 (NASB95)

Tradition has it that Abraham lived in Haran about five years before moving on in the journey to the land that God was going to show him. When they left to complete the trip, Abram had accumulated things that would be needed for the journey and for setting up a place to live once they reached their goal. Not only did Abram have to take tents and the contents, but he also needed to take animals for food and animals for helping with transporting the stuff. Verse five mentions “persons which they had acquired.” Commentators have suggested that this was a reference to hired helpers (or perhaps slaves) or to people whom Abram told about God's call on his life and they decided to go with him or maybe it was a combination of both. This was a large group and they had a long way to go.

The route they took from Ur to the land of Canaan was indirect because of obstacles. There were natural barriers (high mountain range) and there were obstacles related to traditions and family. [Legend has it that Abram stopped in Aleppo after having left Haran and then he headed south.] In our walk with the Lord we also will find obstacles in the way of being obedient. Just because you find a mountain between you and what you know is God's call on our life is not an occasion to give up but it is a signal to find away around the obstacle.

Follow Through and Affirmation – 12:6-7

⁶Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite *was* then in the land. ⁷The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. Genesis 12:6-7 (NASB95)

Abram 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 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, and surrender follow naturally from such an 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 generations. Abraham was patient in his expectations. True

faith does not abandon hope when its fulfillment is delayed.

Pitching Our Tent – 12:8-9

⁸ Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. ⁹ Abram journeyed on, continuing toward the Negev. Genesis 12:8-9 (NASB95)

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. It appears that wherever he pitched his tent he built an altar. This time, Abraham “called upon the name of the Lord.” That could mean several things such as “he prayed to God” or it could mean that he taught those who were with him what he knew about God’s call on his life. If there were any of the Canaanite people around, then what Abram did would have been a declaration of his faith and worship of Jehovah.

We are told Abraham journeyed to the south. This move may have been necessary to find grazing areas for his animals and because the Canaanites were already in the land and had probably claimed the good pasture areas. Abram moved into the desert area to the south. Some see this as the need for us to move on in our journey with Lord and not be satisfied to become stagnant and never experience new truths and take new steps of faith.