

FATHER ABRAHAM HADN'T ANY SONS

GENESIS 11:37-12:9 NOVEMBER 10, 2021

Do you remember the name Seabiscuit? He was the remarkable racehorse who became the top money winner of the 1930's, upsetting champions and winning hearts. He was voted *American Horse of the Year* in 1938.¹ He may be in the Racing Hall of Fame, but he didn't have a great start. He didn't win *any* of his first 17 races and only a quarter of his first 40. Early on, he was seen as lazy and lethargic, and became something of a laughing stock around the stables.² But then, Seabiscuit was given a new trainer - one with unorthodox methods. Under his care, Seabiscuit won 11 out of 15 races in a single year and his fame began to spread. It wasn't all smooth sailing. He suffered a major setback in his career when he fell and was injured in 1938. But, with faithful attention, his trainer brought him back to health and speed, and Seabiscuit famously won "The Hundred Grandeur" at Santa Anita in 1940, setting a track record in his final race.³

Tonight we begin a study of a man whose story has some Seabiscuit-like elements. A man who became famous throughout the world. In fact, it's not going too far to say that he is of the most famous people in all of human history. If you knew him at the beginning, you'd never have guessed that he'd make it into any hall of fame. He not only had some significant setbacks in his spiritual career, he had a pretty rough start. And yet, we're told that this man, though he was as good as dead, became the father of the faith, the friend of God, and the human fount from which all the world is blessed. How did it happen?

Like with Seabiscuit, it happened because Someone came in from the outside. Not just a trainer, but God Himself. Abraham's story is a demonstration of what *God* is able to do. It's not a story of *man's* greatness or achievement. No, Abraham shows us again and again how *weak* we are. Instead, his life is an example of the truth given in Philippians 1: "He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it." And though we too may have sputtering starts and falterings along the way, God will not give up on us. When we are faithless, He remains faithful. Let's see the beginning of this amazing relationship as we pick up in Genesis 11, verse 27.

Genesis 11:27-28 - ²⁷These are the family records of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran, and Haran fathered Lot. ²⁸Haran died in his native land, in Ur of the Chaldeans, during his father Terah's lifetime.

This is about 2,000 years into human history and 2,000 years before Jesus' birth.⁴ Terah and his family live in a city called Ur - a Sumerian city in Mesopotamia.

Was Abram an idol worshiper? There's a lot of disagreement among scholars. And, as usual, there's a spectrum of opinion. There are those which say that Abram was *most definitely* a worshiper of

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seabiscuit>

² <https://horseyhooves.com/seabiscuit-facts/>

³ <http://www.chasingthefrog.com/video/seabiscuit-wins-1940-santa-anita-handicap/>

⁴ <https://viz.bible/visualizing-the-genesis-timeline-from-adam-to-abraham/>

the moon god.⁵ Then, all the way over on the other side there are those who suggest that Abraham was a staunch monotheist even before God spoke to him.

Maybe you've heard of the Talmud or the Mishnah. They are a collection of the oral traditions of Judaism, collected and compiled in the first couple centuries AD.⁶ The Mishnah teaches that Abram spent 39 years growing up in the homes of Noah and Shem. That he boldly contended against idolatry in his father's own idol shop, and that he stood up against wicked king Nimrod and had a sort of battle of wits which led to Abram being thrown into a fiery furnace, but that he was miraculously preserved, coming out like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego.⁷

Of course, nothing like that is found in the word of God. We're really not told *any* details about Abram's early life or behavior at all until we find him here, a grown man, married, living with his extended family in a place called Ur - famous for moon worship. While there, Abram's brother Haran died. And it seems that Abram will sort of adopt his nephew Lot.

Genesis 11:29 - ²⁹ Abram and Nahor took wives: Abram's wife was named Sarai, and Nahor's wife was named Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milcah and Iscah.

This was a tight-knit family. Abram marries his half-sister, Nahor marries his niece. Abram is keeping Lot under his umbrella. The problem is, the family was steeped in idol worship.⁸

Genesis 11:30 - ³⁰ Sarai was unable to conceive; she did not have a child.

We know the rest of the story, but let's try to not fill it in quite yet. We'll learn that Milcah gave birth to 8 sons. But, year after year, decade after decade, Sarai was unable.

Now, God had said from the beginning that His plan to restore the world would come through human offspring. And we'll find out in a moment that He has chosen Abram and Sarai as the conduits of that plan. So, being told here that Sarai was *unable* to conceive is startling. It seems like game over for God's plan. His effort has bottlenecked down from Seth through Noah, then Shem, now to this *one* man, Abram, and we're at the end of the line. As Bruce Waltke points out, barrenness in this context and time meant *hopelessness*. It meant they had no future.⁹

Why would God allow this unfair circumstance? Milcah gets 8 sons, Sarai gets *none*? If His whole plan was to *give* them offspring, why permit these long years of disappointment and suffering? Here are two reasons: First, God wants the world to know that it's all Him. *He* is the One who accomplishes deliverance, not us. Second, there is a devotional principle: Your hope, your future is dependent on God's grace. Luckily, God is a God of grace! But while the world was filled with

⁵ Ray Stedman *The Beginning Of Faith (Genesis 11:31-12:9)*

⁶ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Mishnah-midrash.html>

⁷ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/112063/jewish/Abrahams-Early-Life.htm
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_and_the_Idol_Shop#Content_of_the_Midrash

⁸ Joshua 24:2

⁹ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

people going their own way, building their cities and empires, making their own plans, living their lives according to their own design and ultimately finding only ruin, God comes along and draws out this man and wife to do something amazing and be an example to us that *all* of our hope is found in God alone. That He is able to do something greater with our lives than we could ever design or measure.

Genesis 11:31-32 - ³¹Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot (Haran's son), and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there.
³²Terah lived 205 years and died in Haran.

Why Terah decided to go, we can't be sure. What we're told is that, though they set out with the *intention* of stopping in Canaan, they stopped half-way¹⁰ at *another* city full of moon worshippers.¹¹

Genesis 12:1 - The Lord said to Abram: Go from your land, your relatives, and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

If we want to have a proper understanding of Abram, it's important that we let the Bible comment on itself. You see, in the book of Acts, Stephen explains that Abram did not receive this call from God in *Haran*, but back in *Ur*. This changes things significantly. It means that God spoke to Abram, giving him this clear command, but Abram *did not obey* - not *really* or at least not *fully*. He obeyed one half of one third of God's commands. He didn't leave his father's house or his relatives. He *did* go from their land, but *not* to the place God was showing him, instead they stopped part way at a place that was just like Ur. We don't know how much Abram told his family, but it seems they all had a meeting and decided to move together. But this is *not* what God had asked.

Let's not miss a few important principles: First, we shouldn't take for granted that we serve a God Who *speaks*. Today the idol most people worship is money. Money doesn't love you. It doesn't tell you what to do. It's a silent and cruel master. But the God of the Bible is a God Who *speaks*. Second, He is a God of *grace*. If you had a subordinate who only obeyed one half of one third of what you asked him to do, how frustrated would you be? But God does not throw up His hands and give up. But third, we should consider just how detrimental our failure to obey really is, not only for us but for the world at large.

Abram spent *years* at Haran. Those years were years that put off God's work of deliverance. It's like when the children of Israel delayed entrance to the Promised Land by 40 years because of disobedience. We have this clear-speaking, gracious God coming and saying, "Ok, I'm going to send the Messiah through *YOU* and I'm going to do so in connection to a specific land that I want to get you into." And Abram's response is, "Yeah, at some point I'll get around to that, maybe."

¹⁰ Stedman

¹¹ Waltke

Now, God's mercy is great, and we won't obey perfectly, but we shouldn't settle for slow or partial obedience. The examples of Scripture, like Abram, demonstrate the far-reaching consequences of failing to obey God. It sometimes causes bigger problems than a simple delay of spiritual fruit. Sometimes disobedience leads to a consequence like Ishmael. That's one whose deadly ramifications have been playing out for thousands of years on a global scale. This is recorded for us not to *shame* Abram, but to *teach* us how to avoid the mistakes that he made.

When God spoke to Abram, He didn't give him a lot of information. He effectively said, "Follow Me. Come and see what I want to do in your life." That is, of course, the call we receive at first. To follow God. Not just to believe He exists. Not just to say we're sorry for the wrong things we've done. But then to actually *follow* after Him in faith and obedience. Now, as far as starts go, Abram's isn't amazing. But that's not to say he was totally blowing it. He *did* believe. He *did* have saving faith. The New Testament explains that he really had no idea where he was going but he went anyway. His problem was that he was being *selective* in which parts of God's Word he was obeying. For years he stayed with his family and under the direction of his father, Terah. But God was calling him out of that. God was saying, "You need to understand that now *I'm* your Father. *I'm* the Decider for your life. *I'm* the One who will provide for you and shelter you." He says as much in verses 2 and 3.

Genesis 12:2-3 - ²I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

God gives 5 "I will" statements here. In these promises we can get a hint as to whether the Mishnah is right about Abram. First off, why would this staunch monotheist who was willing to die not have fully obeyed when God spoke to him? But also, if the story of Nimrod and the fiery furnace were true, then Abram's name would already be great. He'd be famous throughout the world!

We notice that in these promises God doesn't only plan to do His own thing (bringing the Messiah), but He also intends to interact with Abram on a daily basis - giving him help and direction and protection and a future. That doesn't mean Abram wouldn't face struggles - people would curse him and treat him with contempt - but God assures Abram that He would be with him.

Genesis 12:4-5a - ⁴So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. ⁵He took his wife, Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated, and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan.

After stumbling out of the gate, Abram is on his way. He's obeying 2/3 of God's commands now. He still has Lot with him, but it's possible that he considered Lot to be an adopted son. It's also possible that Lot decided to tag along without being asked. Either way we'll see that, in the end, God wanted Abram completely out from this family. He was to be set apart from the world.

With Noah, God was going to take the world and its influence away from His people. He put them on an ark and swept the world away. But here, instead of taking the world away, He takes His people away from the influence of the world. He told Abram, "Follow Me, out from your culture, out from the influence of the unbelieving world, and we're going to go to a new place together. It's a place where there are a bunch of worldlings living, but you and I are going to have our own, special relationship, set apart from the rest where I explain truth and goodness to you."

The New Testament calls us to this sort of separation, saying: Don't be polluted by worldly idolatry, don't love the world or the things of the world. Friendship with the world is hostility toward God because we have been called out and set apart for holiness and for specific, Godly purposes.

In verse 5 we're told Abram took "people they had acquired." Did Abram own slaves? He undoubtedly had servants, but here's an interesting thought: Some scholars suggest that this is referring to a group of people that Abram had actually proselytized during his time in Haran.¹² It's not outside the realm of possibilities, and it drives home an important spiritual principle: Even though we all fall short of obeying God perfectly and to the utmost, the Lord is so gracious that He will still use our lives as a testimony so that others can come to know Him. Abram is such a great example of this. Though he followed God imperfectly, especially in the beginning, look at what God can do with mustard seed faith. He is a God who uses ordinary, imperfect people, living ordinary lives, to proclaim the extraordinary magnificence of the Gospel.

Genesis 12:5b-7 - When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land to the site of Shechem, at the oak of Moreh. (At that time the Canaanites were in the land.) ⁷The 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.

Abram will build at least 4 in his walk with God. This one, being built under an oak tree, indicates he was still carrying over some of his cultural background in his relationship with God.¹³ That's how the pagans made altars. But as he obeys, God is able to reveal more to him and gives him a greater understanding. No longer is the land promise some vague "land I will show you." It's *this* land. More importantly, God goes on record saying that Abram will have offspring of his own. This seems impossible and, we'll find that Abram has a hard time grasping it. Just like the disciples had a hard time understanding the Christ had to suffer, die, and rise again. That's ok. God doesn't demand perfect understanding. He doesn't even demand perfect obedience - otherwise none of us could serve Him. What He wants is a living faith. He wants us to believe Him and, in doing so, allow Him to direct us and develop us. Abram shows us how quickly God can reveal Himself and move in our lives when we choose to obey His word.

Genesis 12:8 - ⁸From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. He built an altar to the Lord there, and he called on the name of the Lord.

¹² *Bible Knowledge Commentary*

¹³ Waltke

We see Abram growing and developing. He's following after God and calls Him by name. He builds another altar. Altars in this period had a lot of significance. First, they showed that the builder needed cleansing. Abram knows he's not on equal level with God, but that he is guilty before Him. Altars were also the place of worship - where a person could physically thank God and honor Him and give generously to Him for Who He is and what He's done. These are all aspects of what our worship should be today. In Hebrews 13, the writer talks to us about the altar we now have, not under the Old Testament system, but in the New Covenant, established by Christ.

Hebrews 13:15 - ¹⁵Therefore, through [Christ] let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.

Jesus became the altar and now we are able - at any time - to bring that offering of praise, full of thanksgiving and submission and recognition of all the Lord has done for us.

Genesis 12:9 - ⁹Then Abram journeyed by stages to the Negev.

Why did he journey around instead of just camping at Shechem or Bethel? Well, on a practical level he had herds that needed to graze and the Lord had a lot to show him.

As we close, let's consider a few ways to take this example and apply it to our own faith. First, it's not always an easy thing to obey God. Abram had to separate. He also had to downgrade his living situation. He was still rich in possessions and herds, but Ur was a very advanced city. Archaeologists have discovered that maybe half the houses there had indoor toilets.¹⁴ The city had a library.¹⁵ It was a place of advanced development and culture. God asked Abram to leave it behind. And He asks us to leave things behind. It might look like Ur. It might look like fishing nets and a boat. It might look like a tax booth. Seeing Abram's story we can be sure that *whatever* God asks us to leave behind is worth the cost because He has something truly irreplaceable planned for us.

A second way to apply this is to remember that, like Abram, God wants us to be blessed, to be a blessing and to do a great work in us.¹⁶ What sort of blessing does God want us to experience? The blessing of His presence. The blessing of Christian fellowship. The blessing of contentment and peace and satisfaction found in living a righteous life. How are we meant to bless the world around us? By being proclaimers of the Gospel, agents of grace. By being a source of hope, light, and wisdom to a world that is trapped in destructive ideologies. And what kind of "greatness" does the Lord want for us? Well, how does the Bible define greatness? Not the way the world does, that's for sure. No, the Lord wants our greatness to be in compassion, mercy, humility, purity, meekness, worship, generosity, endurance. These are ours to enjoy and produce as we walk with God in faith, not perfectly, but progressively, following the Lord with our hearts for the rest of our lives, trusting Him, obeying Him, and building altars of praise in our hearts along the way.

¹⁴ <https://www.asor.org/onetoday/2016/04/trash-and-toilets-in-mesopotamia-sanitation-and-early-urbanism/>

¹⁵ Henry Morris *The Genesis Record*

¹⁶ John 14:22