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Studies in Genesis

(Leaflet 14)

THE CALL OF ABRAM

AND

THE BEGINNING OF THE HEBREW NATION

Genesis 11:10—13:4

As we enter upon another great division of the book of Genesis, let us take a backward glance, to recall how many things have had their origin in this "Book of Beginnings." The history of some two thousand years is recorded in these first eleven chapters of Genesis! No human author could have written such a record, with its story of the beginning of creation, of sin, of God's plan of redemption, of human government, of many nations, and of many languages.

And now in the latter part of chapter eleven and in chapter twelve we read of the beginning of the Hebrew nation, through whom God has sent into the world our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Bible, which is the Word of God.

The Holy Spirit devotes only eleven chapters to outlining the history of two thousand years; yet He gives thirty-eight chapters to the story of four men: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Why? Because this is more than a biography of these four patriarchs. It is God's record of His dealings with the fathers of a great nation, through whom He was to bless all nations.

Not only does the major portion of Genesis have to do with the beginning of the Hebrew people; but practically all of the Old Testament from Gen. 12:1 through Malachi is a Jewish Book. Moreover, many portions of the Gospel records; of the book of Acts; of the Jewish-Christian epistles, beginning with the book of Hebrews; and of the Revelation, have to do with God's dealings with His ancient people Israel—past, present, and future. That leaves only the epistles from Romans through Philemon, which are primarily, though not altogether, Gentile. Romans 9-11 gives us one of the most

wonderful Jewish portions in all the Word of God! But why, one may ask, does so much of the Bible tell about the Jew? Because through Israel God planned from all eternity to bless the world.

GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSE THROUGH ISRAEL

Repeatedly sinful man had failed God. The nations failed Him, and He "gave them up" to idolatry because they would not forsake their stubborn ways. (See Rom. 1:24, 26, 28.) Then He called one man, Abram, out of paganism; and taught that man about Himself. It was all of grace. And when God called Abram, He began a thing that will never end. Moreover, just as His purpose in and through the church is eternal (Eph. 1:3-12; 3:1-12), even so His purpose in and through Israel dates back from all eternity.

My friend, the things that God does are never makeshifts. When He brings something to pass, you may know that He has been planning that thing throughout the eternal ages. And when God begins a thing that He has planned, man cannot thwart the completion of that eternal plan of God.

And Israel is an eternal people. Turn with me to Deut. 32:8 to read a very remarkable verse, which sets forth this fact:

"When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel."

In our last lesson we saw that God placed Israel in the land that is the historical, geographical, and political center of the Old World, a veritable highway of the nations. Ezekiel 38:12, in the Revised Version, also makes this very plain. Here God was prophesying the entrance of "the prince of Rosh," "the king of the north," into Palestine in the days when the Antichrist shall rule. And why will "the prince of Rosh" go down to Palestine?

"To take the spoil and to take the prey; to turn" his "hand against the waste places that are now inhabited, and against the people that are gathered out of the na-

tions, that have gotten cattle and goods, that dwell in the middle (Heb., *navel*) of the earth."

Thus the margin gives us the literal Hebrew word to describe the land of Palestine, "the navel of the earth."

Now Israel was not in existence when "the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance." But Israel was in existence in God's mind. He knew what He was going to do.

You remember that when the Lord Jesus saw the five thousand without bread, He asked Philip, saying,

"Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?
And this he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do" (John 6:6).

God always knows what He is going to do in your life and in mine. He knows what He is going to do among the nations. He permits the rise of empires; but He can say to kings and emperors and dictators, "You may go just so far and no farther." God can rebuke nations. Mighty empires have risen, continued for centuries with great glory, only to fall into ruin. Sometimes archæologists dig up an old urn or a piece of pottery or the ruins of an ancient city—silent witness that such a city once flourished. But with God Israel is eternal! And one day He will restore His ancient people to their own land. In that day their possessions will extend from the Euphrates to the river of Egypt, which is the Nile; for that is included in God's eternal purpose for Israel. In that day Israel's rightful King, Jesus, the Son of God, will rule over all the earth. That, too, is a part of God's eternal purpose for the world through Israel.

Once we see this all-important truth, we do not wonder why so much of the Bible is a Jewish Book. And what about our place in all this? I refer to us who are Gentiles. Beloved, if you and I love God, we are interested in everything He does, in every promise He makes. Moreover, through Israel we and "all the families of the earth" have been blessed.

When we study about God's dealings with Abraham and Israel, we are also studying infinite, glorious truths about our Father in heaven. He is our God, even as He is Israel's God; and everything He has written is infinitely precious. So, my

Gentile friend, the Jewish portions of the Word of God are all *for* you, though they are not all *about* you. They are *about* the Jew.

"ABRAM, THE HEBREW"

In Gen. 14:13 we read first the expression, "Abram, the Hebrew," although Gen. 10:21 refers to Shem as "the father of all the children of Eber"; *i.e.*, "Hebrews." We shall devote several lessons to the life story of this father of the nation of Israel, a record that covers the most of fourteen chapters (11: 26—25:10).

But before we enter upon this study, shall we not read over and over again the sacred record? No matter how familiar we are with the life of Abraham, we need to get a bird's-eye-view of his whole life. And always God's Word holds for us treasures old and new.

Having read the Genesis story, then let us turn to at least four New Testament commentaries on the life of this man of faith:

1. *The Testimony of Stephen*, in Acts 7:2-8. Here the Holy Spirit tells us something wonderful that was not recorded in Genesis. It is concerning God's call to Abram when he was in his native city of Ur; for in his message before the wicked Jews, who afterwards stoned him to death, Stephen said, "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran (or Haran)." Abram, an idolater, saw "the God of glory"; and he turned from his "idols to serve the living and true God" (I Thess. 1:9). We are told that this was the first *recorded* appearance of God to man since he was driven out of Eden.

2. *The Testimony of Paul* in Rom. 4:1-25. This is one of the oft-repeated quotations of those important words of Gen. 15:6:

"Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:3).

We cannot go into this fourth chapter of Romans now; but read it for a clear statement of how Abram was justified

by faith, long before the Law of Moses was given. Read it for the precious truth it sets forth, that Gentiles, as well as Jews, are included in God's great plan of salvation; for Abraham "is the father of us all" (Rom. 4:16). That is, we, Gentiles, are the spiritual seed of Abraham, even as the Lord had said to this man of faith,

"As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations" (Rom. 4:17).

3. *Further Testimony of Paul*, setting forth this same wonderful truth, is found in Gal. 3:6-18. Read it for its clear, reassuring message, telling us that "the blessing of Abraham" has "come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ" (verse 14).

4. *The Testimony of the Holy Spirit*—through Paul, we believe—in Heb. 11:8-19, tells us yet more of the faith of Abraham, of his obedience to God's call, of his pilgrim character, of his utter trust in the resurrection from the dead. No study of the life of Abraham is complete without a prayerful consideration of these sublime words.

5. *The Testimony of James*, in James 2:21-23, shows us how Abraham was justified *before men* in his obedience to God, even through severe trial. *Before God* he had already been justified by faith; and his faith was "imputed to him for righteousness" (James 2:23).

Again, James gives us the beautiful title, by which Abraham was called: "The Friend of God."

6. *The Testimony of the Lord Jesus* to Abraham's faith is wonderful. Perhaps it overshadows them all; for it is our Lord's own assertion of His deity when He paid tribute to Abraham's faith, saying to the unbelieving Jews:

"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad. Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:56-58).

The Jews knew that Jesus, in these words, claimed to be God, because they "took up stones to cast at him," accusing

Him of blaspheming because He said, "Before Abraham was, I am." And Abraham lived some two thousand years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem! But we know that Jesus of Nazareth was eternal God, even "the God of glory," who had appeared unto Abram in Ur of Chaldea, and had called him to be the father of the Hebrew nation.

These are only a few of the New Testament references to "Abram, the Hebrew," "the father of us all," "the Friend of God." As we read them, may the Holy Spirit teach us many things about Christ, so wonderfully interwoven with the life story of this man who "believed God."

THE FAMILY OF ABRAM

Let us go back now to Gen. 11:10-32 to see what God tells us of the generations of Abram, noting especially the facts recorded about his immediate family. (In our last lesson we reviewed briefly the ten generations from Noah to Abram, with certain details concerning Gen. 11:10-24.)

Terah was Abram's father. Nahor and Haran were his brothers. Lot was his nephew, and a son of Haran. Nahor married Haran's daughter, Milcah; and these two later became the grandparents of Rebekah, the wife of Isaac. (See Gen. 24:24.)

The home of this family was in Ur of Chaldea. It was a great city, as archæology has proved; but it was a heathen city, and its people worshipped the moon. God's Word says plainly that in the days of "Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor . . . they served other gods" (Joshua 24:2, 14).

Abram's wife was Sarai, whose name God later changed to "Sarah." After the death of Haran, Terah, Abram, Sarai, and Lot left Ur of Chaldea "to go into the land of Canaan." Why? Because "the Lord had said unto Abram" the words that were a call to follow Him.

GOD'S CALL TO ABRAM

That call of "the God of glory" to Abram is recorded in Gen. 12:1-3. It was a call from idolatry in a highly civilized city—as heathen civilization goes—to a pilgrim walk of faith

in a strange land. Every child of God should know Gen. 12: 1-3 by heart; for every word of it is filled with priceless treasures. Let us read it together, noting these all-important truths:

1. *The Call to Leave His Country and Kindred:*

“Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house . . .” (verse 1).

Abram did not obey God fully at once; for he took with him his father, his brother, and his nephew. Nor did they go all the way to Canaan for some time; for they dwelt at Haran until Terah, Abram’s father, died. We are told that “Terah” means “delay”; “Haran,” “parched.” How often we, like Abram, delay to obey God fully, finding our satisfaction in this parched old world, void of spiritual refreshing! And how much grief came to Abram because of Lot! Yet Terah and Nahor and Lot did put their faith in “the God of glory,” who had appeared unto their kinsman in Mesopotamia. (See Gen. 31:53; II Peter 2:7, 8.) How wonderfully God overrules even our failures, if we sincerely love Him!

It was to avoid going through the desert that this company travelled northwest some 650 miles to Haran. They took the direct road to the fords of the Euphrates, “the nearest and most convenient route to the land of Canaan.” Later, when Abram went all the way into the land of promise, he travelled about 500 miles more, to the southwest.

Is God calling you, my friend, to give up country and kindred, to go with the Gospel to “the regions beyond” you? Surely He is calling us all to put Him first in our lives, even before loved ones. His best blessing for Abram came only after Abram obeyed Him fully. He knows far better than we what is His “good, and acceptable, and perfect will” for us (Rom. 12:2). And He calls to us, saying, as He did to His disciples of old, “Come, follow me.”

2. *The Call to “Go unto a Land.”* God said to Abram, “I will shew thee” a land—the land of promise.

“By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went . . . For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:8, 10).

It was an earthly land which God gave to Abram, and that land is Israel's own as long as this earth remaineth. But it was Abram's faith in a heavenly country that enabled him to obey the call of God. Abram was willing to give up Ur, the city with its pleasures and with its mercantile opportunities. He was willing to live in a tent “with Isaac and Jacob” because he was an heir to a heavenly inheritance. By faith he saw the Holy City.

My friend, have you seen the New Jerusalem, by faith in Him who is preparing it for all those who love Him? He has given us a picture of it in His Word (Rev. 21:1—22:21). Once you turn your eyes toward that “city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God,” like Abram, you will be ready to give up earthly ties and “the pleasures of sin,” which are but “for a season.” (See Heb. 11:25.)

It is just as though your little child were playing on the floor with a pair of scissors or a knife. Hurriedly you get an orange or an apple or a toy, and offer it to the baby. At once he throws down the dangerous thing for something better. God did that for Abram, and He does it for you and me. He shows us the Holy City, where we shall spend the endless ages in His glorious presence.

3. *God's Promise of Blessing upon Abram:*

“And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (12:2, 3).

Now that is the blessing promised to Abram; it is *not* the covenant, which was given later. Many people talk about “getting into the kingdom by the covenant.” But, my friends, the covenant was between God and Abram and the

nation of Israel; whereas we, Gentiles, share in the blessing, not in the covenant. Turn again to Gal. 3:8, 14 for the Holy Spirit's own explanation of our part in this greatest of all blessings:

"And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen (or 'Gentiles') through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed . . . that the blessing of Abraham might come on all the Gentiles through Jesus Christ."

"The gospel" is the story of Calvary's Cross; and "God preached the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed." Do you see, my friend, that Abraham was saved by faith in the shed blood of the coming Redeemer? And do you see that we are saved by that same "gospel" that is to "all nations" who believe in the God of Abraham? This was the eternal purpose of God in calling out one man to be the father of one nation, that through this people He might send the Saviour of all the world—all who would receive Him.

This promised blessing rings out like a clarion bell throughout the Word of God. To Isaac and to Jacob these very same words were repeated; and here we see them spoken to the Gentile Galatians, "In thee shall all nations be blessed." How unsearchable is the wisdom of our God!

Now let us note that this promised blessing of Gen. 12:2, 3 is in seven parts. We need only mention them again: (1) "I will make of thee a great nation"; (2) "I will bless thee"; (3) "I will make thy name great"; (4) "thou shalt be a blessing"; (5) "I will bless them that bless thee"; (6) "I will . . . curse him that curseth thee" (I wonder if Adolf Hitler has read that?); (7) "And in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed."

Whole volumes have been written on the basic truths bound up in these wonderful words. And how faithfully God has kept His promise to Abram—and to us who love Him and His people, Israel! Let us ever remember our debt to God's ancient people. I should be afraid to hate a Jew. "I will curse him that curseth thee." This was God's warning; and it has always held true. An awful day of reckoning

awaits everyone who despises or curses or hates Israel. Our blessed Lord was a Jew. The Jews gave us the Bible. And again, God's exhortation and promise ring in our ears:

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee" (Psalm 122:6).

ABRAM'S OBEDIENCE

How long Abram stayed in Haran, before his father died, we do not know. But when he was seventy-five years old, he and Sarai and Lot "departed out of Haran" and went into the land of Canaan (12:4, 5).

"And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Shechem, unto the oak of Moreh" (12:6, R.V.).

"Shechem," we are told, means "shoulder," the "place of strength," while "Moreh" means "instruction." When Abram obeyed God, God met him and instructed him yet further concerning His promised blessing; for in the very next verse we read,

"The Lord appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there he builded an altar unto the Lord who appeared unto him" (12:7).

This was the second time, according to the record, that God had appeared unto Abram. Was it worth obedience, my friend? Think of the reassurance, the encouragement, the joy of seeing the Lord! We see Him now by faith, but He always meets us at the place of the altar, which is Calvary's Cross. I have had missionaries tell me that they did not really know the meaning of the presence of God until they had found themselves on the ocean, bound for another land. But once they put God first, leaving country and kindred for His sake, in full obedience to His revealed will, then God met them as never before. "The Canaanite was then in the land" (12:6); yet his claim to it did not cause Abram to falter. He obeyed God; and God met him.

We get a glimpse of the measure of his God-given faith when we remember that he was seventy-five years old when

he left Haran (12:4); eighty-six when Ishmael was born (16:16); ninety-nine when his name was changed to "Abraham," and when God told him his son that was to be born should be called "Isaac" (17:1, 24); and one hundred years of age when Isaac was born (21:5). Sarah was ninety when that long-promised son came (17:17).

It was a miracle, of course, a faint shadow or type of the far greater miracle of the virgin birth of Jesus, the Son of God. Abram had waited more than twenty-five years for Isaac. True, his faith faltered when he asked God to let Eliezer be his heir (15:2-4); and again, when he hearkened to Sarah and had a son, Ishmael, by Hagar (16:1-16). But listen to God's testimony concerning Abram's faith, as given in Rom. 4:19-21:

"And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform."

Have you waited a long time for the answer to your prayer, my Christian friend? Abram waited more than twenty-five years for Isaac! And as he waited, God was teaching him, through testing and trial and blessing to know Him better, to trust Him more. God always hears and answers prayer, perhaps not as we would have it answered, but in His own perfect way.

As long as Abram was in the will of God, three things played a large part in his life—a tent, an altar, and prayer. And these three are mentioned in Gen. 12:8: (1) He "pitched his tent" between Bethel, which means "the house of God," and Hai, which means "a heap of ruin." He had left the ruins of a godless civilization for the house of God! (2) "He builded an altar unto the Lord," and always the altar speaks of the shed blood of Jesus, "the Lamb of God." (3) He "called upon the name of the Lord." That is prayer.

Living in a tent, Abram was a pilgrim all the remainder of his life. He never lived in a house in Canaan, but moved his

tent from place to place, never possessing a foot of the land, yet trusting God's promise that it belonged to him and to his seed forever. He preserved his pilgrim character. Likewise, heaven is our home, beloved. We are just pilgrims here.

Wherever Abram pitched his tent, there he builded an altar, undoubtedly of rude stones. Later God commanded His people never to build an altar of hewn stone. He wanted His people to look, not at the altar, but at the sacrifice, which pointed on to Jesus, "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Sometimes our churches are so beautiful, and there are so many candles, and there is so much perfume that people do not see Christ. Let us never forget that "the old, rugged cross" is our altar; and "the God of glory" is our Sacrifice!

A tent—an altar—and a life of prayer! These three must fill our lives if we would know the deep things of God and be well-pleasing unto Him.

ABRAM OUT OF THE WILL OF GOD

In the story which follows, in 12:10-20, we find no reference to the tent, the altar, and the place of prayer. Perhaps Pharaoh gave Abram a fine house in which to dwell for Sarai's sake; for we read for the first time that he "was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold" (13:2). At any rate, Abram was out of the will of God; for he did not trust God to provide, even through famine, but "went down into Egypt." And it was "down" spiritually speaking, for Egypt is a type of the godless world. When he got there, he was afraid; but there is no fear to one who is in the will of God.

Out of the will of God he told a falsehood, and brought a plague upon Pharaoh and his house; for he said that Sarai was his sister. She was beautiful; and Abram was afraid the Egyptians would kill him, and save her alive. Later, when he fell into the same sin, he said that she was, indeed, his half-sister (Gen. 20:12). But even so, this was a deception; and God had to intervene, and lead Abram back to Canaan. God has ways of making His will known, even to heathen monarchs, as He did to Pharaoh, thus safeguarding Sarai, who was to be the mother of a great nation.

Out of the will of God, Abram became a curse to Pharaoh's whole house, not a blessing as God intended him to be. And was it not during his stay in Egypt, doubtless, that Sarai found Hagar, the very mention of whose name reminds us of yet further sin and tears and sorrow?

"BACK TO BETHEL"

But after Abram had learned his lesson, his broken fellowship with God was restored; for he left Egypt. He had not lost his salvation; he had lost his fellowship with God.

"And he went on his journeys from the south even to Bethel, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Hai; unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first: and there Abram called on the name of the Lord" (13:3, 4).

The tent, the altar, and the life of prayer again took their rightful places; for Abram loved God, and God would not let him go on in self-will.

I wonder whether our lives are barren of fellowship with God? Was there ever a time when prayer meant more to us than it does now? Was there ever a time when we had a better testimony for Christ than we have now? We want to remember that heaven is our home; and we must maintain our pilgrim walk here if we would lead others to Christ, instead of bringing a curse upon them by our selfish lives.

And thank God! He will always restore to us the fellowship we have broken, forgiving and forgetting our sins. When God reminded Israel of Abraham's faithfulness, not a word did He say of Abram's sin. (See Isa. 51:1, 2.) He never did mention it again. A man asked me the other day whether his sins committed since he was saved would face him at the judgment seat of Christ. I told him what I tell you:

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9). "And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more," God assures us (Heb. 10:17).

The question we must ever ask ourselves, as Christians, is whether or not we are doing our work for the Lord Jesus or for our own glory. If we are self-seeking, we might as well stop our service right now. But if we are seeking Christ's glory, He will give a sure reward.

Again, we are reminded that Abram was not chosen for his goodness. He was justified by faith—and even his faith was the gift of God. My friends, God did not choose us for our goodness. Why shall we be in heaven forever? Because we have believed that Christ died for our sins. Oh, let everyone out in radio-land, listening to this message this morning, believe that. "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). But for the grace of God, everyone of us would be behind prison bars, in the depths of human degradation. We have no goodness of our own. But, like Abram, many of us have "believed God," and our faith is "imputed," or reckoned to our account, "for righteousness."

"ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD"

It was Abraham's God-given faith that made him one of the greatest characters of all history. Jews, Christians, and Mohammedans honor his name. But best of all, God honored him because Abram honored God. Not only did he become the father of the Hebrew nation, and "the father of all them that believe." But he has been in heaven for many centuries; and for all eternity he will behold the face of "the God of glory" who appeared to him in Ur of Chaldea many hundreds of years ago. And why? Simply because by faith he "rejoiced to see" the coming of the Christ of the cross; "and he saw it, and was glad."

My unsaved friend, put your faith in the God of Abraham, even the Lord Jesus Christ, and be justified, made righteous before Him forever. Set your face toward that "city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God." For in Christ alone you will find heaven and eternal life in His presence forevermore.

