

Chapter 1: The Call of Abram

Genesis 11:27–12:3

We cannot overstate the depraved, ruined condition of God's creation at the end of Genesis 11. The construction project to build a tower in the plains of Shinar may not seem terribly wicked to us, but Yahweh recognized it for what it was: outright rebellion against his reign and rule (Gen. 11:6). At Babel, humanity sank so far into sin, rebellion, and wickedness that they attempted to raise themselves up to heaven to confront God there. They believed that if they could only build a tall enough tower, they could challenge God. This was more than simply transgressing God's boundaries, as Adam and Eve did in the garden of Eden. At Babel, men and women created in the image of God sought to overthrow God altogether. As the fruit of their evil, Yahweh confused their language and scattered them across the face of the earth (Gen. 11:7–9).

How could the story of human history possibly overcome such a setback? God was justified to confuse their language and scatter them abroad, but he would also be justified to destroy the human race altogether. Does God intend to start over, or perhaps to abandon his work in creation forever? While Yahweh will no longer relate to the whole world in a general way, he will not forsake the world altogether. Rather, Yahweh chooses to raise up one man, Abram, through whom he will bless all the families of the earth. As we will see, Yahweh does not instruct Abram to build a taller worldly tower. Instead, Yahweh tells Abram simply to believe his heavenly word.

Now, as we have seen in the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis, there will be much to do to unwind the tangled cords of sin that have gripped God's creation. If we were in charge of planning this work of redemption, we would probably send Abram with blueprints for how to build a better, taller tower in the world. Whether that tower consisted of bricks and mortar, a program for social reform, or a path to personal enlightenment, we expect to see Abram teaching *worldly* solutions to solve the world's problems. For this reason, Yahweh's actual plan for redeeming the world will seem counter-intuitive and paradoxical to our minds: *In order to bless the world, God calls his people out of the world.*

Called Out of the World (Genesis 11:27–32)

The first counter-intuitive factor in God's plan for redemption has to do with Abram himself. Yahweh does not choose Abram because Abram stands out from the evil of his generation. Rather, everything we know of Abram tells us that Abram was right in the thick of the world's wickedness. The narrator of Genesis first introduces us to Abram as a part of the "generations" (*tôledôt*: i.e., genealogy, or "family history")¹ of Shem (Gen. 11:10–26) in Genesis 11:26: "When Terah had lived 70 years, he fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran." Then, in Genesis 11:27–32, the narrator records for us the generations of Abram's father, Terah. Here are the first four verses of Terah's family history:

[27] Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. [28] Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. [29] And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. [30] Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

From this brief history, we learn a few important details about Abram's past. To begin, we learn that Terah's family originates from Ur of the Chaldeans. The "Chaldeans" come to be another name for the Babylonians (2 Kgs. 25:13, 24; Ezra 5:12; Is. 13:19; 47:1), and, in fact, Ur is not too far from Babel (that is, Babylon).

Rather than swimming against the idolatry of the culture, the names of Abram's family suggest strong ties to a religion of lunar worship that was prominent in Ur and Haran. Terah's name itself likely means "moon," Sarai's name is closely related to *Šarratu* (the wife of the moon god Sin), and Milcah's name is similar to are similar to the names of the *Malkātu*, the name of the daughter of Šarratu and Sin.² Beyond this evidence, later Israelites readily acknowledge the background of idolatry in Abram's family. Joshua reminds the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods'" (Josh. 24:2). Abram was never a bright shining light who attracted God's attention and favor on the basis of his own righteousness. Rather, Abram lived *in* the world, pursuing the values and religions *of* the world. To save the world from idolatry, Yahweh begins by calling an idol-worshiper *out* of the world.

We should not pass by this point too quickly. Abram is not an example of how God blesses a righteous man. Rather, Abram is an example of how God extends his grace and mercy to the most miserable of sinners. John Calvin puts this well:

Moreover, this calling of Abram is a signal instance of the gratuitous mercy of God. Had Abram been beforehand with God by any merit of works? Had Abram come to him, or conciliated his favor? Nay, we must ever recall to mind, (what I have before adduced from the passage in Joshua,) that he was plunged in the filth of idolatry; and now God freely stretches forth his hand to bring back the wanderer. He deigns to open his sacred mouth, that he may show to one, deceived by Satan's wiles, the way of salvation. And it is wonderful, that a man, miserable and lost, should have the preference given him, over so many holy worshippers of God; that the covenant of life should be placed in his possession; that the Church should be revived in him, and he himself constituted the father of all the faithful. But this is done designedly, in order that the manifestation of the grace of God might become the more conspicuous in his person. For he is an example of the vocation of us all; for in him we perceive, that, by the mere mercy of God, those things which are not are raised from nothing, in order that they may begin to be something.³

First and foremost, the story of Abram teaches us about God's free grace in election. Yahweh blesses Abram and makes Abram's name great (Gen. 12:2) not because of *Abram*, but because of *God*. Yahweh will reveal his glory not by honoring a righteous man, but by calling, transforming, and blessing a wicked man.

Family Dynamics

The narrator of Genesis also introduces some of the major factors in Abram's family dynamics that will so much influence the story moving forward. First, we meet Lot as the son of Haran (Gen. 11:27), but then discover that Haran (Abram's brother) dies in Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 11:28). The death of Haran helps to explain the reason that Lot goes everywhere with Abram: after Haran's death, Lot's uncle Abram becomes something of a father—and yet, a “brother” (Gen. 13:8)—to him.⁴ Just as Esau will trouble his brother, Jacob (Gen. 25–33), and just as the other sons of Jacob will trouble their brother, Joseph (Gen. 37–50), so also Lot will trouble his father/brother, Abram (cf. Gen. 13:1–18; 14:12–16; 19:1–38).⁵

Second, we learn that Abram's wife, Sarai, “was barren; she had no child” (Gen. 11:30). If strife between the “brothers” of the patriarchs will be a running theme in Genesis, the barrenness of the patriarchs' wives will be another theme. The sorrow of infertility will feature prominently into the storyline not only in the case of Abram's wife, Sarai, but also with Isaac's wife, Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), and with Jacob's wife, Rachel (Gen. 29:31–30:22). Sarai's barrenness will become a source of deep strife, especially when she gives Hagar, her maidservant, to Abram as a surrogate mother (Gen. 16, 21). (And, in the same way, Rachel's barrenness will also become a source of strife when her sister, Leah, is able to conceive children with Jacob; Gen. 29:31–30:22.)⁶ Primarily, Sarai's barrenness stands as a threat to God's ability to keep his promises of making Abram into “a great nation” (Gen. 12:2). Since we know the rest of the story, however, this early reference to Sarai's barrenness leaves us with “a sly, knowing smile.”

Additionally, we will learn later that Sarai is Abram's half-sister, sharing the same father (Terah), but not the same mother (Gen. 20:12). Marrying a half-sister would later become forbidden in the Law of Moses (Lev. 18:9; 20:17; Deut. 27:22), as would marrying two sisters in rivalry, as Jacob does (Gen. 29:1–30; cf. Lev. 18:18). Gordon Wenham writes, “This suggests that Leviticus is introducing incest rules that were unknown in patriarchal times.”⁸ Furthermore, these marriages may also suggest further depravity within the family of the patriarchs. Yahweh not only called Abram out of idolatry, but out of relationships that will later be explicitly forbidden as sexual immorality.

Moving the Family

At this point in the narrative, we learn that Terah uproots his family to move away from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Haran:

- [31] Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there.
[32] The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran. (Gen. 11:31–32)

Within the overall story of how Yahweh calls Abram, this passage raises a major question of chronology. How does the coming of the word of Yahweh come to Abram in Genesis 12:1–3 relate to the two-stage move reflected here—first, from Ur to Haran, and then from Haran to Canaan (Gen. 12:4–5)? In the New Testament, Stephen clarifies the sequence of events when he testifies that the call from Genesis 12 comes while Abram and his family are still in Ur:

[2] And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, [3] and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ [4] Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.” (Acts 7:2–4)

So, the complete chronology of Abram’s life runs like this: (1) while still in Ur of the Chaldeans, Abram receives the word of Yahweh to leave his country, kindred, and father’s house (Gen. 12:1–3); (2) Abram, along with Terah, Lot, and Sarai move from Ur of the Chaldeans to Haran, settling there for a time (Gen. 11:31); (3) After Terah’s death in Haran (Gen. 11:32), Abram, Sarai, and Lot continue on from Haran to go to the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:4).⁹ Abram is seventy-five years old when he departs from Haran to go to Canaan (Gen. 12:4), which tells us that Terah fathered Abram at the age of 130. Abram’s brothers, Nahor and Haran, were born over the previous sixty years, beginning when Haran was seventy years old (Gen. 11:26).¹⁰

We do not know how old Abram is when he receives the call from Yahweh, nor how long it took him to leave Ur of the Chaldeans to travel to Haran. The family remained in Haran long enough to accumulate many possessions and servants (Gen. 12:5); however, Genesis does not assign Abram any blame for remaining in Haran until after the death of his father. In fact, we should notice that the call in Genesis 12:1–3 does not actually specify where Abram will eventually end his journey.¹¹ Therefore, we have every reason to believe that Abram *did* obey the call of Yahweh *as fully as he knew how* by going first to Haran. Then, it seems that Abram came to understand *more* of the call after the death of Terah, prompting him to move his family and his possessions from Haran to go the rest of the way that Yahweh ultimately intended for him, all the way into the land of Canaan.

The Faith of Terah?

From this, it seems that Terah may go along with Abram because Terah also believes the word of Yahweh. The text of Genesis does not explicitly address this question, although we should note that Terah is the one who “took” his Abram and the rest of his family out of Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 11:31). That is, the narrator tells us that it is *Terah* who obeys the word of the Lord! If so, Terah must know that he will have no share in the great nation which Yahweh will cause to come forth from Abram (Gen. 12:2), since Terah represents Abram’s past, not Abram’s future. Therefore, Terah stands to gain nothing, but to lose everything. Why, then, would Terah suddenly uproot himself from his country, his kindred, his friends, his status, his influence, his power, and his privilege in Ur?

The most likely answer is that, after hearing the word of Yahweh, Terah now repents from the idol worship into which he led his family his entire life. Otherwise, why should Terah follow the word that Yahweh gives to his son unless he now believes that Yahweh is the only true God? And, from the opposite perspective, why should Yahweh permit Abram to remain in Haran until the death of his father (Acts 7:4), when Yahweh explicitly instructs Abram to leave his “father’s house” (Gen. 12:1)? Unless Terah has repented, so that Abram’s “father’s house” is no longer devoted to the worship of idols, but rather to the worship of Yahweh, remaining with his father for so long seems like a violation of Yahweh’s command.

Again, the text of Genesis only tells us that Abram does not leave Haran until after Terah’s death,

without telling us *why* Abram delayed so long. But, if Abram remains with Terah because of Terah's new faith, then it may be that Abram's family settled in Haran because of the failing health of Terah.¹² Regardless of his age and poor health, Terah believes the word of Yahweh and determines to obey Yahweh to the greatest extent possible with the remainder of his life. Although Yahweh intends for Abram to continue on to Canaan, Yahweh does not lead Abram on to Canaan until after Terah's death (Acts 7:4). It seems that Abram must finish the requirements of his calling to care for his ailing father before he can move forward with his new calling to follow Yahweh into the land of Canaan. Sometimes the Lord does call us to leave behind our family members in order to obey his call (Matt. 10:37; 19:29; Luke 14:26). On the other hand, the story of Abram seems to demonstrate that the Lord sometimes calls us to what can feel like far more radical obedience: putting aside the hopes of our own enrichment by caring for those whom he has entrusted to us.

Called to Die to the World (Genesis 12:1)

So, the first principle for understanding Abram's call is to remember that this word of Yahweh comes while Abram is still living in the midst of his idolatry in Ur of the Chaldeans. Yahweh's word opens with a command: "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your land and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (Gen. 12:1).¹³ In the next two verses, Yahweh will combine this command with promises of great blessings that will come along with Abram's obedience; however, Yahweh first stresses the costliness of what he will ask Abram to do. Abram must leave his land (difficult), his kindred (more difficult), and even his father's house (most difficult): "The quick progression from 'land' to 'father's house' draws attention to the costliness of obedience."¹⁴ In order to bless the world, Abram must first die to the world.

Losses for Promises

Furthermore, Yahweh draws an implicit contrast the land (ESV: "country") that Abram currently possesses with the *land* that Yahweh is giving to him as a promised inheritance. Additionally, the references to "kindred" and "your father's house" contrast with the "great nation" that Yahweh promises to make of Abram (Gen. 12:2), in whom "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). The overarching idea of leaving his family affects his inheritance. Since Abram's brother Haran already died (Gen. 11:28), Abram stands to inherit much of his "father's house." By asking Abram to leave his father's house, Yahweh is asking Abram to give up his worldly inheritance.

This is a serious decision, since Abram must choose between what he already possesses *by birth* versus what he stands to gain from Yahweh *by promise*. This basic question of trading what he already owns in favor of what Yahweh promises to give him runs through this entire call, for Abram "must decide whether to abandon his land in favor of the land Yahweh offers. He must decide whether to abandon what family he still has in favor of the family Yahweh promises (against all logic, given Sarai's infertility). He must decide whether to set aside his blessing, his inheritance, for the inheritance Yahweh describes."¹⁵ Yahweh promises to enrich Abram greatly; however, to take possession of Yahweh's promises, Abram must give up everything he has.

Gains by Sacrifice

Moreover, we see the costliness of this command when we compare this *first* word that Yahweh

speaks to Abram with the *last* word that Yahweh speaks to Abram, in Genesis 22:2: “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” Victor Hamilton writes:

Yahweh’s first and last words to Abram (12:1; 22:1) begin with an imperative (“Go....Take...”). Both times the imperative is followed by a triple object: “Go forth from (1) your country, (2) your homeland, (3) your father’s house”; “Take (1) your son, (2) your only son whom you love, (3) Isaac.” The objects in 12:1 are arranged in a sequence of less intimate to more intimate. Each succeeding phrase narrows the base as far as Abram is concerned. In both chs. 12 and 22 God’s directive to Abram falls short of supplying explicit directions; Abram is simply pointed in the right direction. About the terminal point of that pilgrimage he is unclear. Here he is told to go to a land “which I will show you.” In ch. 22 he is told to take Isaac to a mountain “of which I shall tell you.”¹⁶

On the one hand, Yahweh *contrasts* the land, family, and inheritance that Abram stands to receive in Ur with the land, family, and inheritance that Yahweh promises to give him. On the other hand, Yahweh *compares* this sacrifice that Abram must make with the eventual sacrifice that he must make by offering up his own, beloved son, Isaac. Obedience to the word of Yahweh will force Abram to sacrifice everything he loves, right from the outset.

A Pilgrim People

In other words, Yahweh extends to Abram a call to discipleship, demanding that he leave every worldly attachment behind in order to follow a new God into a new land, to gain a new family. In order to save the world, Abram must first die to the world, relinquishing his ties to what the world offers him for the sake of what Yahweh promises him. The author of Hebrews assesses Abram’s faith with great respect:

[8] By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. [9] By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. [10] For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (Heb. 11:8–10)

With this passage in mind, John Calvin applies the example of Abram to our own lives in this way: “we must also imitate our father Abraham and be pilgrims here below, not, as I have said, that we must trudge through different regions, but we must be ready and not be attached to the earth, but rather be citizens of heaven even though we must live a while here below.”¹⁷ Like Abraham, God calls us to live as a pilgrim people as “strangers and exiles on the earth” (Heb. 11:13). Our homeland is not of this world, but we journey through this life *seeking* the homeland that God himself will give to us in his heavenly country (Heb. 11:15).

This does not mean that we must try to escape *out* of the world somehow. Jesus clarifies this distinction in his High Priestly Prayer: “[15] I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. [16] They are not of the world, just as I am not of the

world” (John 17:15–16). Jesus does not want us to depart from the world, but to remain in the world. Nevertheless, just as the kingdom of Jesus is not of this world (John 18:36), so also we are citizens of his heavenly kingdom (Phil. 3:20). Dying to the world, then, paradoxically requires that we remain *in* the world, even though God calls out *out* of the world to gain a new citizenship from heaven. We are a pilgrim people, recognizing that this world is not our home, and yet we must sojourn here as we look forward to that city with everlasting foundations that God himself will both design and build.

What, then, does this paradox look like? How do we live *in* the world, while yet *dying* to the world? What does it mean for Jesus to insist that we are not *of* the world, while also clarifying that we cannot yet depart *out* of the world? This is where we see the beauty and brilliance of God’s redemptive plan coming into focus: in order to *bless* the world, God calls his people *out* of the world.

Called to Bless the World (Genesis 12:2–3)

Yahweh’s call to Abram extends beyond command. While Yahweh wants Abram to understand from the beginning that following him will require great loss and sacrifice, Yahweh also promises rich blessings to Abram. Yahweh continues:

[2] And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. [3] I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen. 12:2–3)

Calvin writes that Yahweh here “annexes the promise...to the command; and that for no light cause. For as we are slothful to obey, the Lord would command in vain, unless we are animated by a superadded confidence in his grace and benediction.”¹⁸ This does not mean that the promises are easy to believe. After all, Abram’s “wife is sterile and he is a poor decrepit old man....If he had opened the fleshly eyes of his understanding and stopped there, as we have said the wise of the world did when engaging in their great discourses and intrigues, it is certain he would have thought God was mocking him.”¹⁹ While these promises *anticipate* the formal covenant that Yahweh will cut with Abram in Genesis 15, right now Yahweh only gives Abram his *word*.²⁰ Nevertheless, Yahweh calls Abram not only *believe* the promises, but also to risk his fortunes, his family, and his future to follow the call he receives.

The Structure of the Blessings

Yahweh promises, then, that he will *both* bless Abram *and* then the whole world *through* Abram. Structurally, Victor Hamilton observes that there are seven parts to this promise of blessings.²¹ First, Yahweh begins in Genesis 12:2a with three blessings for *Abram* specifically: (1) “And I will make of you a great nation,” (2) “and I will bless you,” and (3) “and make your name great.” Last, Yahweh ends this list in Genesis 12:3 with three blessings for *the world* that God will extend *through* Abram: (1) “I will bless those who bless you,” (2) “and him who dishonors you I will curse,” and (3) “and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Between those two sets of blessings is a transition clause: “so that you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2b). As Hamilton explains, “The blessings of God are not all to be turned in on Abram. A great nation, blessed, a great name—yes. But Abram must be

more than a recipient. He is both a receptacle for the divine blessing and a transmitter of that blessing.”²² With this general outline in mind, let’s study each of these sections.

Blessings for Abram

First, Yahweh promises, “I will make of you a great nation.” This is a shocking statement, in part because of the barrenness of Sarai that the narrator has already noted in Genesis 11:30. How can Abram become a nation if his wife cannot conceive children? Even more, this is also a shocking statement because Yahweh says that he will make Abram into a great *gôy*, using a word that is “detestable to the Jews,” since it commonly refers to the *Gentile* nations.²³ The people who come from Abram will be a *nation* (*gôy*) like the other *nations* (*gôyim*)? The meaning of this expression is that Abram will expand beyond simply being a general group of *people* (*‘am*), but a *gôy* descending from Abram into a group of people bound as a nation, with “linked with government and territory.”²⁴ The nation descending from Abram will become a great nation—*Yahweh’s* nation—in the midst of all the other nations of the earth.

Second, Yahweh promises, “I will bless you.” The idea of *blessing* is at the heart of this passage specifically (appearing five times in various forms) and of the book of Genesis more generally (appearing 88 times, compared to 310 times in all the other 38 books of the Old Testament combined).²⁵ In the context of making Abram into a great nation, the idea of blessing must refer partially to the idea of bearing children.²⁶ Indeed, the first uses of blessing in the book of Genesis focus on the idea of reproduction, including the reproduction of birds and fish (“And God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth’”; Gen. 1:22) and the reproduction of humans (“And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it...’”; Gen. 1:28). Nevertheless, the idea of *blessing* has a broader meaning than only reproduction. Gordon Wenham writes the following:

What modern secular man calls “luck” or “success” the OT calls “blessing,” for it insists that God alone is the source of all good fortune. Indeed, the presence of God walking among his people is the highest of his blessings (Lev 26:11–12). Material blessings are in themselves tangible expressions of divine benevolence. Blessing not only connects the patriarchal narratives with each other (cf. 24:1; 26:3; 35:9; 39:5), it also links them with the primeval history (cf. 1:28; 5:2; 9:1). The promises of blessing to the patriarchs are thus a reassertion of God’s original intentions for man.²⁷

The last sentence in that quotation is particularly important: Yahweh is suggesting that the blessings which were lost at the Fall will be restored to the world in and through Abram.

Third, Yahweh promises Abram that he will “make your name great.” In part, this language functions as a “deliberate contrast with the Tower of Babel incident,” since the builders said to one another, “let us make a name for ourselves” (Gen. 11:4).²⁸ Additionally, this promise to make Abram’s name great is *kingly* language.²⁹ To clarify the royal nature of these words, Yahweh will later promise that “kings” will come from him and Sarai (Gen. 17:6, 16), and the Hittites will refer to Abram as a “prince” (Gen. 23:6).³⁰ Later, Yahweh will reinstate this promise in his covenant with David, a descendant of Abram (2 Sam. 7:9), and ultimately in the greater Son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ, who receives “the name that is above every other name” in his exaltation (Phil. 2:9).³¹

The Purpose of the Blessings

As noted above, the purpose of these blessings is not for the benefit of Abram alone. The ESV accurately captures the sense of the fourth, transitional statement: “so that you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2b). The blessings that were swallowed up by curses at the Fall (Gen. 3) will now be restored in and through Abram. As we will see, this means more than simply saying that the world will gradually become good again through Abram’s presence. Rather, as Allen Ross writes:

This Word probably meant that, along with the promises of God that granted enrichment, Abram would share the knowledge of God. The blessings given to Abram could never be dissociated from the relationship with the Lord through faith and obedience. It thus became Abram’s responsibility to transmit this message wherever he went. If an Abimelech or a Laban shared in the bounty, they had to know that it was the blessing from the God of the fathers.³²

Yahweh is calling Abram to go into the land of Canaan in order to receive blessings, but he is also *sending* Abram as a missionary to proclaim the word of Yahweh to the world. Just as Abram was called out of darkness of idol worship and into the light of worshiping the one, true God, Yahweh, so Abram is called to bear witness to the light of the glory of Yahweh in the world.

This theme will take the rest of our study to explore, but in a sense, Yahweh sends Abram in much the same way that the Lord Jesus Christ sent his first disciples into the world. Yahweh sends Abram to bear witness that Yahweh alone is God, while Jesus sends his disciples to bear witness to the fact that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). Just as the disciples of Jesus proclaim the blessings that have come into the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, so Yahweh sends Abram to proclaim the blessings that will come into the world through *him*. In Genesis 12:3, then, Yahweh defines exactly what those blessings for the world will be.

Blessings for the World

First, Yahweh promises, “I will bless those who bless you.” After all the nations were judged and scattered at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:8–9), Yahweh will no longer deal with the world as a whole. Instead, Yahweh will reach the nations through his chosen missionary, Abram. Ultimately, this promise finds its fulfillment in the great descendant of Abram, Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul makes this point in his letter to the Galatians: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:13–14). Through Abram (in seed form), and ultimately through Abram’s offspring Jesus Christ (in the fullest form), “The way of life and blessing, which was once marked by the ‘tree of the knowledge of good and evil’ (2:17), and then by the ark (7:23), is now marked by identification with Abraham and his seed.”³³ The nations of the world will be blessed by blessing Abram and the nation that descends from Abram.

Second, Yahweh promises, “and him who dishonors you I will curse.” The word to describe *dishonoring* Abram means “to hold in contempt, speak lightly, or curse,” but the word that Yahweh

uses to describe the *curse* he will bring on those who dishonor Abram is much stronger, meaning “to impose a barrier or a ban, a paralysis on movement or other capabilities, or to remove from the place and power of blessing.”³⁴ Yahweh does not casually promise to help out Abram wherever it is convenient for him; rather, he binds himself to curse anyone who would dishonor Abram. The fate of *both* blessings and curses in the world will depend on how the world treats Abraham and his offspring. This raises a question, though: To what extent will Yahweh’s blessings extend to the world?

To answer this question, we find Yahweh’s third promise: “and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Yahweh does not promise that every *individual* will be blessed in Abram; however, Yahweh does promise that the blessing of Abram will extend to all the *families* of the earth. That is, the blessing of Abram is universal in scope, even if not absolutely universal in actual reception. All the families of the earth shall be blessed!

Blessings through Jesus Christ

Nevertheless, even here we should not imagine that this blessing extends to the world because of Abram himself. As we discussed earlier, this blessing comes to Abram not because of his own righteousness, for Abram was an idolator when God called him. Instead, this blessing comes for no other reason than the grace and mercy of God. Furthermore, this blessing does not come to the world through Abram’s obedience, although Abram does indeed obey the word of Yahweh by going to Canaan (Gen. 12:4). Just like everyone else who is blessed *in* and *through* Abram, Abram himself must receive these blessings by faith—that is, he must look forward to the fulfillment of these promises in the Lord Jesus Christ. As Jesus later explains, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

What these promises to Abram only begin to demonstrate is that the problems in the world go far deeper than we realize. According to the world’s wisdom, we simply need to build a taller tower, stretching ever higher up into the heavens (Gen. 11:4). So, the world promises us that salvation is just around the corner, if only we could elect the right political candidate, implement the right legislation, launch the right social programs, or educate people in the right way. Just a tweak here, an adjustment there, and blessings will once again flow to the entire world. According to this worldview, the best thing that good people can do is to band together *in* the world to extend that tower farther up into the heavens. So, the culture regularly admonishes religious people not to be so heavenly minded that we are no longer any earthly good.

And yet, God demonstrates in the call of Abram that our problem goes much deeper than we realize. Therefore, God’s solution must likewise be far greater than we imagine. If the world tells us that we will find salvation by building a taller worldly tower, then God offers a radically different solution: “Believe my heavenly word.” Within this world, we have no way of reaching back up to God, so our only hope is to cling in faith to whatever he sends down to us. Ultimately, God himself will scandalously enter this world, being born in the line of Abram, to shed his blood for the salvation of the world. Today, on the other side of the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, we live under King Jesus’ mandate to remain *in* the world, and yet to be *called out* of the world’s methods of seeking salvation. Indeed, the very word “church” in the Greek of the New Testament means “called-out ones.” Like Abram, we are called out of the world in order to proclaim the other-worldly blessing that Jesus Christ has accomplished in the world and for the world.

This does not mean that we should neglect the needs of the world. King Jesus himself calls us to be salt in light in the world (Matt. 5:13–16; cf. Gen. 12:7–8), to care for widows and orphans (Jas. 1:27; cf. Gen. 14:1–16), and to pray for all people (1 Tim. 2:1–2; cf. Gen. 18:22–33). For however long we must sojourn in Babylon, we must seek the good of our city (Jer. 29:7). Nevertheless, we must recognize that these efforts can never function as a tower by which we raise ourselves up to God in heaven. That is, we cannot bless and save this world through the kingdoms, structures, and systems of the world. Rather, God calls us to bear witness to the coming of a *heavenly* kingdom that will sweep away the world's injustice, unrighteousness, and wickedness forever—the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. The only hope of humankind is that God promises to bless whoever believes in Abram's offspring, Jesus Christ; however, God also swears to curse anyone treats Jesus lightly (Gen. 12:3).

So, while Abram can only see Jesus “from afar, in a shadow...we do indeed have another declaration of it that he did not have.”³⁵ That is, we have the benefit of the entire revelation of what Yahweh is calling *Abram* to do, but also what Yahweh will call all of Abram's offspring to do—Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and, ultimately, Jesus. We must follow in Abram's footsteps to walk by faith (Gal. 3:7, 9, 14), but we have much fuller, more complete revelation of what our faith entails. What Yahweh is calling Abram to do is both real *and* a shadow that points forward to greater things. Let us, therefore, follow Abram to where his footsteps ultimately lead us, to our Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected from the dead. Let us live as a pilgrim people, sojourning in this world as we await (and proclaim!) the heavenly homeland that Jesus has promised to prepare for us and take us into when he returns (John 14:1–3).

Discussion Questions

1. What is in your past? What does your family history look like? What kind of upbringing, education, and experiences make up who you are to this day? What parts of your past are good? How might God call you to die to those things? What parts of your past are not so good? How does God's demonstrate his glory in calling you out of those things?
2. What parts of your life do you cling most closely to in life? What is the hardest to hold loosely, with an open hand, as you seek to obey God? As you wrestle with what it means for us to be a pilgrim people in this world, what good things might you need to sacrifice as you follow God's call on your life?
3. How has God blessed you? Try to list out as many blessings as you can. How thankful are you for those blessings? Do you find yourself taking them for granted, believing that you own them or deserve them in a way that you do not? Why has God chosen to bless you, while passing over others? Meditate and reflect on Romans 2:4.
4. What fruit does God seek from blessing you? In other words, what are those blessings for? Think back through the list of blessings you brainstormed in the last question. How might God seek to use those blessings for the sake of your family, your neighbors, your church, and the wider world? What practical step can you take today to use God's blessings in your life for the blessing of other people?

Notes

1. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 268.
2. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 252, 272.
3. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King (Reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 343. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xviii.i.html>>
4. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 272.
5. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 256–57.
6. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 257.
7. Walton, *Genesis*, 389.
8. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 273.
9. Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 258.
10. “Abram was placed first because of his importance, but he was not the firstborn.” (Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 251.).
11. Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 371.
12. Calvin, *Genesis*, 341–42. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xviii.i.html>>
13. The ESV translates the first use of the word “land” as “country,” but this obscures the contrast between the *land* that Abram must leave and the *land* to which Abram must go. Both words are *’erets* in Hebrew.
14. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 274.
15. Walton, *Genesis*, 392.
16. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 370–71.
17. John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis: Chapter 11:5–20:7*, trans. by Rob Roy McGregor (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 56.
18. Calvin, *Genesis*, 346. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xviii.i.html>>
19. Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis: Chapter 11:5–20:7*, 65.
20. “...the sequence of historical anticipation of a covenantal relation followed by a formalizing ceremony of covenant inauguration finds repeated manifestation in Scripture. God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees and declared to him all the promises that belonged to the covenant (Gen. 12:1ff.). But only subsequently did God formally institute his covenantal bond with the patriarch (cf. Gen. 15:18).” (O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987), 30.)
21. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 371.
22. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 373.
23. Calvin, *Genesis*, 346–47. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xviii.i.html>>
24. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 371–72.
25. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 275.
26. Calvin, *Genesis*, 347. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xviii.i.html>>
27. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 275.
28. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 372.
29. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 275–76.
30. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 372.
31. Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 25.

32. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 263.

33. John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 140.

34. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 264.

35. Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis: Chapter 11:5–20:7*, 63.