

Chapter 2: The Conquest of Abram

Genesis 12:4–9

Christians believe that the kingdom of Jesus Christ is both *already* and *not yet* here. From one perspective, Jesus Christ has finished the entire course of his work (John 19:30). Through his life, death, and resurrection, he has conquered sin, death, and the devil, and he now possesses all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). When Jesus ascended into heaven, he received the name above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:9–11). Jesus Christ is *already* the Lord over all creation.

Still, Jesus Christ has *not yet* brought the fullness of his kingdom into existence. The Apostle Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians that more must take place before Christ's kingdom comes in its full glory: “[24] Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. [25] For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. [26] The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:24–26). Death's ongoing reign of terror demonstrates that Jesus Christ's kingdom is *not yet* fully unveiled.

Because of this dual reality, theologians call this the “time between the times.” Jesus Christ has *already* finished his work to inaugurate the era of the new creation, but he has *not yet* returned to put his final enemies under his feet. That is, Jesus has not finished *applying* his complete victory to every square inch of creation. So, on the one hand, we recognize that the world is still fallen, broken, and thoroughly wicked, so that the church will be “killed all the day long...regarded as sheep to be slaughtered” (Ps. 44:22; Rom. 8:36). On the other hand, we confess that we are “more than conquerors” through Jesus Christ (Rom 8:37).

In this regard, Abram's story provides us with an example to follow. While Yahweh promised to give Abram both offspring and land, Abram never lived to see the complete fulfillment of that promise. He spends twenty-five years in the Promised Land awaiting the birth of his son by promise, and he never receives the land that Yahweh had promised to give him. Nevertheless, Abram demonstrates what it looks like to live by faith. Rather than doubting the promises, or hedging his bets by pursuing backup plans, Abram lives as though he has already received what Yahweh has promised to give him. Abram's example teaches us how to live to reflect the reality that *Christ's not-yet kingdom has already come*.

Acknowledging the Dissonance (Gen. 12:4–6)

When Abram receives the Yahweh's call, he responds with obedience:

[4] So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. [5] And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they

had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan.... (Gen. 12:4–5a)

The first words, “so Abram *went*,” mirror the language of the original call: “Go” (Gen. 12:1), using the verb *hālak*, which is the same verb used in Genesis 12:5 (“...they set out *to go* to the land of Canaan”) and in Genesis 12:9 (“And Abram *journeyed on*...”).¹ Yahweh told Abram to go, so Abram spends the rest of this passage *going*. To make the nature of this obedience plain, the narrator adds, “as the LORD had told him.” By faith, Abram obeys the word of Yahweh. This strong language of obedience stands against the idea that Abram sinned by remaining in Haran until after the death of his father (Gen. 11:31; 12:4; Acts 7:2–4).² The narrator describes everything that Abram does (in this event, at least) as obedience to what Yahweh told him to do.

The Pilgrim Life

Still, we should not forget that for Abram to *go* in obedience to Yahweh is a great sacrifice for him. Not only is he leaving his homeland, but he leaves Haran for Canaan after burying his father in a strange land. Abram loses his father while obeying the call of Yahweh, but long before he sees the first part of the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promise to him. In fact, after living seventy-five years with his father, Abram must wait twenty-five years without his father or his son of promise (cf. Gen. 21:5) before he can enjoy his final seventy-five years with that son (cf. Gen. Gen. 25:7).³ Yahweh promised to give Abram a new family, but so far, Abram has only buried a member of this family. Furthermore, Yahweh promised to give Abram land. While Abram has given up the land that he stood to inherit in Ur of the Chaldeans, he lives as a pilgrim, wandering from place to place: from Ur to Haran, then Haran to Shechem (Gen. 12:6), Bethel (Gen. 12:8), and then into the Negeb (Gen 12:9) by the end of our reading today. Abram has *lost* both family and land, but he has not *gained* the new family and new land that Yahweh has promised to him.

While the details of this call is unique to Abram, God likewise calls the church to be a pilgrim people in the world, following in the footsteps of Abram. John Calvin puts it this way:

In addition, we must also remember what we discussed earlier, namely, that when God withdrew Abraham from the land of his birth, he wanted him to practice what Scripture teaches about our needing to be strangers in this world (cf. *Heb.* 11:13). It is true that not everyone will be expressly commanded to leave the land of his birth, but we must always have our bags packed, so to speak, and be ready to go at God’s pleasure. And if he gives us no rest, such as we would like, let us not be displeased. Sometimes the church will be disturbed by storms and tempests, as Paul says of his time that Christians had no stability or certainty and had to be on the move, tossed like straw in the wind (cf. *Eph.* 4:14), but finding occasional rest. But in the meantime, we must not let our affections be attached to the earth and ask God to give us a stable world, but we must endure being vagabonds in accordance with his pleasure. And if he gives us respite, let us continue to look heavenward, and even when he is pleased to disturb our situation, either our finances or our location, let us know that he wants us to be conformed to our father Abraham, and let us be consoled and strengthened by that and not be unduly afflicted.⁴

Even if we experience a measure of peace and stability during our lifetimes, we must not allow such

conditions to fool us into allowing our hearts to settle into this world as though it were our home. We are a pilgrim people, called to the pilgrim life, with our bags always packed, ready to go where the Lord calls us.

Acquiring Wealth and Souls

With Terah dead in Haran (Gen. 11:32), the original group of travelers from Genesis 11:31 reduces, so that Abram, Sarai, and Lot alone continue on from Haran to Canaan (Gen. 12:5). While we do not know how long that this family “settled” (Gen. 11:31) in Haran, they remained long enough there to gather many possessions and to acquire “souls” (ESV: “people”; Gen. 12:5). The word here for “possessions” refers to “movable property, including herds; cf. 14:11, 12, 31:18; Num 35:3,” so that Abram’s “acquisition of wealth in Harran foreshadows his profitable visits to other foreign parts (cf. 12:16; 20:14).”⁵ While Yahweh’s promise to “bless” Abram (Gen. 12:2) primarily refers to Abram’s *spiritual* enrichment, Yahweh also enriches Abram *materially* along the way, beginning on the first leg of their journey in Haran. Although Abram is sometimes enriched in spite of his disobedience (cf. Gen. 12:16), Abram’s gathering of wealth in Haran seems to be an enrichment he receives in the course of his obedience. These material blessings are further evidence that Abram did exactly what Yahweh called him to by going only so far as Haran until after the death of his father.

But what about the “souls” that Abram acquired? It is possible that this is a reference to the acquisition slaves, for we know that Abram does later acquire both male and female servants for himself (Gen. 12:16). Slavery in those days was entirely different from the chattel-based slavery practiced in America until the 19th-century, for servanthood in the ancient world offered employment for those who did not own their own property. Even so, slavery has always represented a violent infringement on the order of creation, since human beings “were created for the purpose of cultivating mutual society between each other,” not for subjugating one another.⁶ Indeed, one of Abram’s servants will eventually become the thorniest problem in his household (Gen. 16:1–16; 21:1–21).

Still, it is unlikely that the “souls” here in Genesis 12:5 refer to slaves. This word, *nephesh*, is an entirely different word from the typical words for “male servant,” (*abad*) or “female servant” (*shipchah*; cf. Gen. 12:16). More likely, these “souls” refer to proselytes who have believed in Yahweh. If so, then this means that Abram has “been sharing his faith in the Lord.” Abram himself was an idolator (cf. Josh. 24:2) who came to a knowledge of Yahweh, the living God, when Yahweh sent his word to him. Part of the call that Yahweh placed upon Abram was the purpose that Abram should “be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2), which means that Yahweh has called Abram to spread the knowledge of Yahweh to all those he encounters. Evangelism is at the center of Abram’s call, and it seems that his evangelism has already borne fruit in Haran. The actual group of pilgrims therefore extends beyond Abram, Sarai, and Lot; rather, it is a “mixed multitude” who goes from Haran into the land of Canaan (cf. Ex. 12:38).

First Stop: Shechem

When Abram’s mixed multitude emerges from their wilderness wanderings to enter into the Promised Land, their first stop is at Shechem:

[5] ...When they came to the land of Canaan, [6] Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. (Gen. 12:5b–6)

The Old Testament histories relate many places that were treated as sacred, often involving trees (cf. Gen. 28:18–22; 35:8; Josh. 24:26; Judg. 4:5; 6:11, 19–20; 9:37).⁸ Since “Moreh” means “Teacher,” this place may have been “some ancient shrine where instruction was given (a terebinth tree was often used for idol worship; see Hos. 4:13) or a place where oracles were declared by Canaanite priests or simply the tree itself.”⁹ Abram did not try to find a nice, uninhabited place to settle down. Rather, he went straight into “a stronghold of other gods.”¹⁰ One of my professors described this as a “Canaanite seminary.”¹¹

With this in mind, the narrator gives us the ominous statement, “At that time the Canaanites were in the land” (Gen. 12:6). Remember, Abram has so far left his homeland, buried his father along the way, and entered into a foreign land that he knows nothing about. Yahweh has promised to bless him richly, but now he finds that the land to which Yahweh is filled with wicked men who might murder him.¹² These Canaanites were already under Yahweh’s curse (cf. 9:25), and, when Abram finds them, they are actively engaged in teaching, preaching, and worshipping pagan, idolatrous gods.¹³

Acknowledging the Dissonance

Crucially, the example Abram gives to us begins by acknowledging the dissonance between what Yahweh *promised* and what Abram is *experiencing*. Yahweh has promised to bless Abram, but everything about his circumstances seems to be a curse. His journey has been marked by hardship and loss, and now he discovers that his odds for success are stacked against him. What chance do the combined forces of Abram, Sarai, and Lot (plus their converts) have against a nation of idol-worshipping Canaanites? More than that, why would Yahweh disturb Abram’s happy, comfortable, peaceful life by sending him to another part of the world that is filled with bloodthirsty idol worshippers? Why did Yahweh not protect Abram’s family along the way, so that he lost his own father *en route*? Can we actually trust God when our first, fledgling steps of obedience are met with trials and loss on every side? If walking by faith immediately produces pain, then why should we follow God any further?

God has spoken a definite promise to Abram; however, everything that Abram can see according to the flesh seems to reduce the likelihood that that promise will come to fulfillment. Right now, Abram’s faith is caught between what he has heard from God’s word and what he sees in the world. While we should not stop walking by faith, we also should not try to ignore or downplay the severity of our circumstances. Rather than living denial or counting up justifications for unbelief, these trials will only increase the glory of God when he accomplishes his purposes in and through us. Even if we (like Abram) do not live to see the fulfillment of everything God is doing, we must never doubt that he *is* working to accomplish all his holy will.

Assuring Ourselves by God’s Word (Gen. 12:7)

Graciously, Yahweh encourages Abram further at this point: “Then the LORD appeared to

Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him” (Gen. 12:7). Previously, Yahweh “said” (Gen. 12:1)—that is, *spoke*—to Abram. Here, right next to the oak of Moreh where the Canaanites worship their idols, Yahweh *appears* to Abram in a vision called a “theophany.”¹⁴ Yahweh does not only give his word, but he gives Abram a glimpse of his glory, providing assurance, comfort, and consolation in the midst of Abram’s doubt and danger.

The Promises

In this appearance, Yahweh reiterates and clarifies both aspects of the promises that he made to Abram in the original call. First, Yahweh explicitly promises *offspring* to Abram. Yahweh promised to make of Abram a great nation (Gen. 12:2), which implies offspring, but now Yahweh states this officially: “to *your offspring*...” Second, while Yahweh told Abram to *go* to the land that “I will show you” (Gen. 12:1), he did not actually promise to *give* Abram that land. To some degree, Yahweh implied that he would give Abram that land by promising to make of Abram a great nation, since the concept of a *nation* is tied not only to people, but to land.¹⁵ Here, though, Yahweh makes the promise explicit: “to your offspring *I will give this land*.”

Nevertheless, the appearance of Yahweh is not the same thing as the fulfillment of the promises. At the end of the day, Abram still possesses only Yahweh’s “bare word, and in such a way, indeed, that Abram might deem himself exposed to ridicule. For God declares he will give the land to his seed: but where is the seed, or where the hope of seed; seeing that he is childless and old, and his wife is barren?”¹⁶ Even here, Yahweh does not formally establish a covenant with Abram; the covenant will not come until Genesis 15. Furthermore, Yahweh actually explains here that Abram himself will not receive the land, but only his offspring.¹⁷ What good is God’s *word* when everything about Abram’s circumstances oppose the fulfillment of that word, and when Abram himself will not directly benefit from what this word promises?

In fact, God’s word is exactly what Abram needs. Appearing to Abram provides an extra layer of comfort, but the assurance God gives comes through his word. As John Calvin observes, “faith has a different taste; the property of which is, to hold all the senses of the pious so bound by reverence to the word, that a single promise of God is quite sufficient.”¹⁸ Although we so often believe that we most need a change in our circumstances, God reminds us at every turn that what we most need is to believe his word. Good circumstances cannot save us, because even the best circumstances can deteriorate in a moment. Furthermore, if our circumstances lead us to put our faith in the wrong place, then we can end up astray into greater, eternal danger. On the other hand, when we put our faith in the word of God, we are entrusting ourselves to the care of the Almighty Creator of the universe. Even when God’s word leads us into in the land where the Canaanites dwell, there is no safer place that we could be.

Worship

In response to Yahweh’s appearance and word, Abram worships Yahweh: “So he built an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.” Although we do not read formally that Abram offers a sacrifice on this altar, that seems to be the clear implication of the text. Just as Noah built an altar and sacrificed a burnt offering after emerging from the ark (Gen. 8:20), so also Abram builds an altar (the first of many; Gen. 12:8; 13:18; 22:9) after he arrives in the land, in possession of Yahweh’s

promises.¹⁹ In the middle of the land of the Canaanites, right next to the oak of Moreh where the Canaanites conducted their own worship, Abram builds an altar. We do not know how long Abram remained in Shechem (or in Bethel, where he also builds an altar; cf. Gen. 12:8), but a fixed, permanent altar would allow Abram and his mixed multitude to conduct worship to the living God for as long as they remain in that place.²⁰ Then, after they left, the altar would remain as a witness to the true worship of the true God.

We will have more to consider from the pattern of Abram’s worship in the land of Canaan in the next section of this passage, but, for now, let us simply observe Abram’s faith. Abram has sacrificed much to get here, and, when he arrives, he only really possesses Yahweh’s word. It would be a challenge for any of us to maintain our faith in the midst of such hardship. Abram does not merely *believe* Yahweh’s promises in a private, personal way. Rather, he builds a visible altar to conduct public worship in the midst of the Canaanites who legitimately might try to kill him for his faith. He is not simply convinced of Yahweh’s truthfulness in the secret places of his heart, but he bears open witness to manifest Yahweh’s truth in the presence of his enemies through his conduct and worship. Following in the footsteps of Abram means, in part, that we must worship in such a way that the world *sees* where our allegiance and loyalties lie.

Announcing the Already/Not-Yet Kingdom (Gen. 12:8–9)

After some length of time (we do not know how long), Abram moves on with the rest of his journey: “From there he moved to the hill country 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” (Gen. 12:8). Abram is a man without a permanent, settled home—like Jesus after him (Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:58), and as we also are called to be (cf. 1 Cor. 4:11).²¹ The narrator draws a clear contrast between the permanent altars that Abram *built* from the tents that Abram *pitched*: “The tents are dismantled, but the altars are left standing.”²² Abram is a pilgrim, living by promise, not personal possession. After he dies, “The only structures he left behind him were altars: no relics of his own wealth.”²³

Second Stop: Bethel and Ai

So, when Abram arrives in the hill country between Bethel and Ai, he does not build himself a permanent home. Instead, he pitches his tents while he builds another altar for Yahweh. At this point, the narrator tells us something more about the nature of Abram’s worship: Abram “called upon the name of the LORD” (Gen. 12:8). The word for “call” can also mean “proclaim,” so this phrase can refer either to the acts of praying to Yahweh or of praising Yahweh’s name.²⁴ In this context, though, the emphasis seems to be on the latter by praising and proclaiming Yahweh’s name. The identical phrase “and he called upon the name of the LORD” appears in Genesis 26:25, where Isaac responds to an appearance of Yahweh in the same way that his father Abram does here: he builds an altar and calls on the name of the LORD. Additionally, Naaman the Syrian expects Elisha to “call upon the name of the LORD” to heal him of his leprosy (2 Kgs. 5:11).

More interestingly, this identical phrase also appears in Exodus 33:19 and 34:5, when *Yahweh* “proclaimed the name of the LORD” by causing his glory to pass by Moses. There, Yahweh is clearly not *praying to* (“calling upon”) himself, but instead, he is announcing the significance of his

name as he passes by:

[5] The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and *proclaimed the name of the LORD*. [6] The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, [7] keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” (Ex. 34:5–7)

Most likely, then, Abram is proclaiming, announcing, and even preaching the “name” of Yahweh to the watching world:

Martin Luther translated it “preached” (*predigte*), a good rendering in this context. The interesting feature about this proclamation at the altar is the substance—the name of the Lord (i.e., the attributes and activities of the Lord). When Abram’s proclamation is combined with the wording of the call, we can see something of the nature of true faith. The Lord promised to make Abram’s *name* great, to make him famous, and Abram responded by proclaiming the *name* of the Lord—making the Lord famous in Canaan, as it were. When we recall that the Shinarites were involved in their disobedient enterprise in order to make a name for themselves (11:4), we can see how different the man of faith was. Those who seek fame through disobedience will be given an infamous name, but those who seek to exalt the name of the Lord through their obedient service will be made famous.²⁵

Abram builds altars for public worship, and he publicly preaches the attributes and activities of Yahweh, the true, living God. This was a bold, dangerous, faithful witness to the living God in the midst of the pagan Canaanites.

Third Stop: The Negeb

In some sense, then, Abram is acting out a conquest of Canaan. Derek Kidner writes, “Abram’s action planted the flag, so to speak, at the heart of the promised land, and declared that Yahweh’s writ runs everywhere.”²⁶ The conquering nature of this passage comes into focus—albeit indirectly—with the final stage of Abram’s journey: “And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb” (Gen. 12:9). From Shechem to Bethel to the Negeb, Abram’s journey has taken him from northern Canaan to central Canaan, and from central Canaan to southern Canaan—right on the edge of Egypt to set up the following story (Gen. 12:10–20).²⁷ As he has journeyed, building altars and publicly proclaiming the glory of Yahweh, he has dedicated “to God, every part of the land to which he had access, and perfumed it with the odour of his faith.”²⁸

The Conquest of Abram

This journey, though, represents much more than a simple travel log to record Abram’s route through Canaan. Both Jacob (Abram’s grandson) and conquering Israel under the leadership of Joshua (the great nation descended from Abram) follows this same path. In Jacob’s case, he follows in Abram footsteps when he returns from his exile outside of Canaan, where he had gone to escape the

wrath of his brother, Esau. After returning to Canaan and reconciling with Esau (Gen. 33:1–17), Jacob goes to Shechem, buys a field there, and builds an altar that he calls *El-Elohe-Israel*, or “God, the God of Israel” (Gen. 33:18–20). Then, he continues on, consecrating Bethel by setting up a pillar of stone there, and pouring out a drink offering and oil on the pillar (Gen. 35:13–15), for Bethel was the place where God has spoken to him on his way out of Canaan (Gen. 28:10–22). Finally, Jacob continues down to the Negeb, in southern Canaan, settling in the city of Hebron “where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned” (Gen. 35:27).

Later, when Joshua leads Israel out of the exile of their wilderness wanderings into the Promised Land, the people of Israel follow the same path. After destroying Jericho, the Israelites conquer Ai by setting an ambush “between Bethel and Ai, to the west of Ai” (Josh 8:9), the same description for where Abram pitched his tent in Gen. 12:8 (cf. Josh. 7:2; 8:12). Then, after that great victory, Joshua builds an altar to Yahweh on Mount Ebal (Josh 8:30), located next to Shechem. Then, after the Israelites defeat the five Amorite kings at Gibeon (Josh 10:1–28), they immediately proceed to a conquest of southern Canaan, including the Negeb (Josh. 10:40). Before Joshua dies, he renews Israel’s covenant with Yahweh at Shechem, setting up a stone of witness near the terebinth beside the sanctuary of Yahweh there (Josh. 24:25–28).

The account of Abram’s travels through the land of Canaan in Genesis 12, then, shows “that what happened to Abraham also happened to Jacob and then also to their descendants. This is to show that the conquest of the land had already been accomplished in a symbolic way in the times of the fathers, demonstrated by means of their building their altars and purchasing property.”²⁹ So, Genesis 12 is something like an “acted prophecy.”³⁰ Abram will not take possession personally of the land of Canaan within his lifetime; however, by walking through the land and publicly worshiping Yahweh there, he is symbolically proclaiming that his offspring will worship Yahweh in this land long after he himself is dead and buried.

Abram the Church Planter

Abram’s example, then, serves as a typological pattern for the call that Jesus has left his disciples: to make *more* disciples through planting churches in every nation. As Abram goes through life, he proclaims the name of Yahweh wherever he finds himself. When in Ur, Abram makes disciples out of his wife Sarai, his father Terah, and his nephew Lot. When in Haran, Abram gathers together a core group of disciples (“souls”; Gen. 12:5) who travel with him from Haran into the land of Canaan. When Abram gets to Shechem, he builds an altar to Yahweh next to a Canaanite seminary, leaving it behind as a witness to the true God when he moves on (Gen. 12:7). When Abram gets to Bethel and Ai, he not only builds an altar, but he proclaims the name of Yahweh there (Gen. 12:8) on his way down to the Negeb. Everywhere Abram goes, he makes disciples for Yahweh and conducts public worship in the midst of pagans. His obedience is both costly and dangerous, but he faithfully bears witness to the word that Yahweh gives to him.

In the same way, we too are called to make disciples of all nations by planting churches. Tim Keller writes this:

The Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20) is a call not just to “make disciples” but to baptize. In Acts and elsewhere, it is clear that baptism means incorporation into a worshipping community with accountability and boundaries (cf. Acts 2:41–47). The only way to be truly

sure you are increasing the number of Christians in a town is to increase the number of churches.³¹

Furthermore, church planting is (statistically speaking) the primary means for making new disciples, so that “the average new church gains most of its new members (60–80%) from the ranks of people who are not attending any worshipping body, while churches over ten to fifteen years of age gain 80–90 percent of new members by transfer from other congregations.”³² Furthermore, planting churches leaves centers of worship (like Abram’s altars) that will remain long after we are dead.

The whole process of planting churches, then, anticipates the coming, universal reign of Jesus Christ. One day, we will reign with Christ over all creation (2 Tim. 2:12). But, like Abram, we look forward to that day from afar, recognizing that we must live out our days now as pilgrims, awaiting that full possession of creation. As we plant disciple-making churches in every corner of this earth, we live out an “acted prophecy,” anticipating in part what we will experience one day in full. Until then, the visible church of visible, local congregations is “the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”³³

Therefore, Abram’s bold, audacious faith that follows the lofty commission of Yahweh should inspire us to do the same, for we too have a lofty commission. Iain Duguid writes this:

What about you? Are you settling for a vision that is too small in your life? Are you choosing the easy option because you don’t really believe God can bring about something great in your life? Yes, God sometimes calls us to be faithful in the little things, but is that *really* your calling, or are you afraid to hope for anything more? And what about your church? Do you expect to see God do great things there? Do you pray for God to do great things there, or are you content just to survive? All too often we don’t really expect God to do anything dramatic, do we? It all seems too difficult to imagine. Yet we are part of an army with a great commission. We have received our marching orders to take the gospel to the ends of the earth: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Along with those instructions comes the divine promise: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (v. 20). If God is with us, then what task is impossible? Like Abram, you and I need to hear the challenge posed by God’s promises.³⁴

This isn’t name-it-and-claim-it prosperity theology; rather, it is obedience to the direct commission of Jesus Christ. Like Abram, we have no certain idea of where obedience will lead us, or to what degree we will see fruitful success from our obedience in this life. Nevertheless, the call Jesus has given us is clear: plant churches that will make disciples of *all* nations. Whether we see much fruit or little fruit rests in the hands of the God who gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:6); our job is simply to be faithful in planting and watering the gospel of Jesus Christ by proclaiming that word publicly in the midst of the lost with whom we dwell. May God grant us the same bold, audacious faith that led Abram to build altars and proclaim the name of Yahweh in the land of Canaan.

Discussion Questions

1. What dissonance do you experience in your life? Where do you really feel the way in which the

lofty promises of God do not at all match the pain, struggle, and fears of your current reality? What has God called you to do that is foolish and dangerous apart from the power of his promises?

2. When you are discouraged, alone, and afraid, do you turn to your Bible for encouragement? What promises in God’s word have become precious to you in your darkest hours? In what ways is God’s word to us today better than the word and the appearances that God gave even to Abram? How might you encourage yourself in God’s word right now?

3. What does the contrast of Abram’s *building* altars versus *pitching* his tents teach us about the pilgrim life that Christians are called to? Where do you seek permanence and stability in life—in the worship of the eternal God, or in the passing-away circumstances and possessions of this world? What would it look like for you to proclaim the reign of Jesus in a world that refuses his rule?

4. What is the call that Jesus Christ has given to the church? Why does that fulfillment of that commission require us to plant churches? What role might you play in helping to plant churches, both in your community, and around the world? What roles might God be calling you to step up to fulfill as a part of fulfilling the Great Commission?

Notes

1. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 264–65.
2. Calvin, *Genesis*, 350–51. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xviii.i.html>>
3. Umberto Cassuto, cited in Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 278.
4. Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis: Chapter 11:5–20:7*, 80.
5. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 278.
6. Calvin, *Genesis*, 351–52. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xviii.i.html>>
7. “Cassuto argues that this expression probably refers to proselytes ([*Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 2], p. 320). If he is correct, then the narrative implies that, already in Haran, Abram had been sharing his faith in the Lord.” (Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 265.)
8. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 279.
9. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 265.
10. Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 126.
11. Allen Ross, Class Lectures at Beeson Divinity School.
12. Calvin, *Genesis*, 352–53. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xviii.i.html>>
13. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 265–66.
14. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 377.
15. “Whereas ‘*am* [people] refers to people or nations in terms of centripetal unity and cohesiveness, *gôy* [nation; cf. Gen. 12:2] is linked with government and territory.” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 372.)
16. Calvin, *Genesis*, 353. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xviii.i.html>>
17. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 377.
18. Calvin, *Genesis*, 353. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xviii.i.html>>
19. “Abram’s first act on being informed that he had reached his goal was to build an altar and presumably

offer sacrifice, just as Noah did as soon as he came out of the ark (8:20). Subsequently Abram built altars at Bethel, Hebron, and Mount Moriah (12:8; 13:18; 22:9); Isaac at Beersheba (26:25); Jacob at Luz (35:7); and Moses at Rephidim and Sinai (Exod 17:15; 24:4). Sacrifice was the normal mode of worship in the OT, and theophanies often prompted it (22:14; Exod 20:24; Judg 13:16; 1 Kgs 3:15).” (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 280.)

20. “Is it not possible that the altar is simply built so that the clan can conduct their worship during the time they remain there? There is no reason to assume that Abram’s itinerary represents constant or regular movement. He may have remained at Shechem or Bethel for some time before moving on. When he builds the altar at Hebron in 13:18, its purpose seems simply to service his worship needs while he is there.” (Walton, *Genesis*, 395.)

21. Calvin, *Genesis*, 356. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xviii.i.html>>

22. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 378.

23. Kidner, *Genesis*, 126.

24. Calvin, *Genesis*, 354. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xviii.i.html>>

25. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 267.

26. Kidner, *Genesis*, 126.

27. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 281.

28. Calvin, *Genesis*, 357. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xviii.i.html>>

29. Umberto Cassuto, *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, 8 vols. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1955–1956), 1:65–66. Cited in Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 140–41. Cassuto’s extended quotation is the source for all the material in the previous two paragraphs.

30. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 283.

31. Timothy Keller, “Why Plant Churches?” (©2002 by Timothy Keller, ©2009 by Redeemer City to City), 1. Available online: <http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/Why_Plant_Churches-Keller.pdf> Accessed January 23, 2018.

32. Keller, “Why Plant Churches?”, 3. Citing Lyle Schaller, quoted in D. McGavran and G. Hunter, *Church Growth: Strategies That Work* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 100. See also C. Kirk

Hadaway, *New Churches and Church Growth in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987).

33. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 25.2.

34. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham*, 20.