

## LESSON 10

### *THE BOOK OF GENESIS*

#### CHAPTER 12

#### *INTRODUCTION*

Chapter 12 begins a new section which develops from the concluding section of the previous chapter. Genesis 1-11 record truthfully and without error the beginning of all things which happened in the Heavens and in the Earth. The record highlights the beginning of time and space, the first man and woman and all living things on planet Earth, the first marriage, the first lie, the first murder, and the beginning of nations. In the first section of Genesis, God deals with the whole human race. These first eleven chapters are virtually foundational to the whole Biblical record. If we use the tree as a comparison, Genesis 1-11 is the *root* of the tree, Genesis 12-50, the *trunk*, and the rest of the Bible the *branches*.

The second part starting from chapter 12 to 50 records the history of the Patriarchs, namely, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and it is interspersed with a detailed account of the life of Joseph (chapters 39-50). The attention here is focused on one man and his family. Abraham was chosen to be the channel through whom God would carry out His

plan of redemption for mankind. The importance of Abraham is clearly shown by the fact that no less than fourteen chapters in Genesis are allotted to his life. The fourteen chapters can be divided as follows: chapters 12-14, God called Abraham; chapters 15-16, God made a covenant with Abraham; chapters 17-21: God reaffirmed His covenant He made with Abraham; chapters 22 God put Abraham to the test; and chapters 23-25, the passing away of Abraham.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 12 is interesting and instructive. As all men are imperfect, Abraham was no exception. We learn how a thrice-holy God treated and worked through him. The call of Abraham is given to us in this chapter. It portrays the faith of Abraham. Abraham showed dynamic faith in God when He called him to forsake his country and kindred to go to the land which God had not even told him. And when he was confronted with a life-and-death situation, he acted in such a manner that could have put the promise of God to him in jeopardy. We can learn something about what God says in His Word (Habakkuk 2:4): *The just shall live by faith.*<sup>2</sup>

The chapter can be divided into the following ways:

1. The call of Abraham (vv. 1-3);

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Griffith Thomas, *Genesis*, 114.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 1:17 *For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.*

Galatians 3:11 *But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith.*

2. The obedience of Abraham (vv. 4-5);
3. The altars built by Abraham (vv. 6-9);
4. The flight of Abraham to Egypt (vv.10-13)
5. The rebuke of Abraham by Pharaoh (vv. 14-20)

### ***STUDY THE WORD***

#### **God Calls Abraham**

The LORD called Abraham. The divine commentary on the call of Abraham is given in Acts 7:2: *And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran,* The call first came to Abraham when he was in *Ur of the Chaldees* (Genesis 11:28, 31). This city was in southern Mesopotamia.<sup>3</sup> Abraham then journeyed to Haran together with Terah, his father. God repeated His call to Abraham when he was in Haran.<sup>4</sup> Abraham's ancestor was idolatrous.<sup>5</sup> So when God called

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<sup>3</sup> John J. Davis, *From Paradise to Prison*, p.165. Davis argues for the location of the Ur of the Chaldees in southern Mesopotamia. According to Davis, this is "the more likely and generally accepted view." Another view purports that the location of the Ur was in northern Mesopotamia. Hamilton supports this view (see *Genesis: chapters 1-17, 365ff.*).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 166. Davis pointed out the "the pluperfect 'had said'" used by the translators of the King James Version.

<sup>5</sup> Joshua 24:2 *And Joshua said unto all the people, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel,*

him, it was purely out of Divine grace, and not of any merit which Abraham had.

Abraham's faith has been set as an example for all posterity. If one considers the opulence of the city Ur in which he lived at that time, it would require a great amount of faith on his part to forsake his country, his relatives, and his siblings (Genesis 1:1). He and his father Terah were city dwellers. For him to uproot himself from the comforts and conveniences of city life to a more nomadic and country lifestyle would take much courage to accept that change. However, the important point is that *he obeyed God*. True faith in God is shown by obedience to God's Word.

In calling Abraham, God promised him seven things:

- 1) I will show thee a land;
- 2) I will make of thee a great nation;
- 3) I will bless thee;
- 4) I will make thy name great;
- 5) I will make thee a blessing to others;
- 6) I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curses thee, and
- 7) I will bless all the families of the earth in thee.

Whenever God commands, He accompanies His commandments with

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*Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods.*

His blessings. The promise of a LAND is the first promise. This promise of a piece of real estate is significant. God's promise to Abraham is not something that is ambiguous. Land is tangible. It has boundaries, it has to be possessed and occupied, and it must be cultivated and conserved to support a people. Hence, God's first promise to Abraham is something, which can be seen and measured in real terms. People can see success and failure with regard to the promise.<sup>6</sup>

God promised that out of him there would be *a great nation* (v.2) The Hebrew word for "nation" is *goy*, a word frequently used in the Old Testament to refer to the Gentile nations of the world. The promise here to Abraham is not to make a great "people," (Hebrew, *'am*), but a *nation*. Abraham's descendants or the Israelites would attain "the status and stability of nationhood in a land designated for that purpose." Israel is to be a nation among nations.<sup>7</sup> It has been said that the contributions of the Jews to universal progress and advancement far exceeds those of other nations. It is out of proportion percentage-wise!

God promised that He would bless Abraham. In these two verses (vv.2, 3) the word "bless" is mentioned five times! Abraham had just heard from God that He would give *a land* and that his descendants would become

*a great nation*. How could this be when Abraham was 75 years old and Sarah, who was ten years younger, was barren? Sarah could not conceive. Yet Abraham and Sarah would be the parents of a great nation. God said that He would bless Abraham. The blessing of God bestowing upon a person ensures goodness befalling on that person. So, in Abraham's case, he would experience and enjoy God's direction, protection and preservation in the course of his life.

God promised to make Abraham – *thy name great*. The name of Abraham is held in high esteem among the Jews, Muslims and Christians. It is not through any self-initiated effort on his part, but rather it is a gift from God. God promised that Abraham would be a blessing to others – *in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed*. Abraham was to be a channel of blessing to others. He is not just to be a recipient of God's blessings; he would also be an agent of the blessings, which God bestowed on him to others. God gave Abraham the joy of giving to others. This is the character of God, for our Lord Jesus Christ says, *It is more blessed to give than to receive* (Acts 20:35). This aspect of Abraham's character is indeed evident in his life. He was never a burden to others; He was always a blessing to others wherever he went.

God promised that His relationship to others would be determined by their relationship to Abraham—*I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee*.

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<sup>6</sup> Joyce G. Baldwin, The Message of Genesis: 12-50, p.30.

<sup>7</sup> Victor Hamilton, pp. 371-372.

Interestingly, the singular pronoun in the matter of cursing emphasises that God would in return curse every single person who curses Abraham. Israel as the descendants of Abraham enjoys this promise. God will bless Israel's friends but will curse Israel's enemies. God will bless those who bless the Jews and curse those who curse the Jews.

And finally, God promised that *all families of the earth* would be blessed in Abraham. What this promise meant is that Abraham would be the channel of blessing for the whole world. The passive voice of the verb "be blessed" intimates that divine blessing for the whole world can be received only through Abraham. This is how Paul interpreted this verse (v.3) in his letter to the Galatians 3:8: *And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed.* The Apostle, Peter, also referred to this verse in the same light as Paul, when he preached in the temple to the multitude (Acts 3:25): *Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.* The divine blessing of salvation would be available to the world through Abraham's seed, who is none other than, by natural descent, the Lord Jesus Christ. This promise is an

intimation of the *protevangelium* (the first gospel message) in Genesis 3:15.<sup>8</sup>

### **Abraham Obeys**

Abraham departed as the LORD had directed him. The key word is "obedience." Abraham obeyed. Even at an old age of seventy-five, Abraham obeyed and took with him, Sarah, his wife, and his nephew, Lot. The older a person is, the more difficult it is to get him to change his thinking and lifestyle. All the more, Abraham's obedience to God's directive to him to leave his country, his relatives, and his siblings, speaks a lot about the courageous quality of his faith. Abraham's decision to give up the riches and security of Mesopotamia is not an easy decision, let alone natural. It was more advantageous and beneficial for him to remain in Mesopotamia. But the fact is that he went anyway. True faith in the heart is evidenced by obedience in action. This is believing-faith according to God's Word — believing God and acting on that belief!

### **Abraham Builds Altars unto the LORD**

The initial directive to Abraham did not specify precisely the land of Canaan. The divine commentary states that Abraham went out, *not knowing whither he went* (Hebrews 11:8b).

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<sup>8</sup>Genesis 3:15 *And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.*

Providentially, Abraham seemed to move in the right direction, out of Haran – southwards towards the land of Canaan. He passed through Shechem (located between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim), and into the plain of Moreh. And the land was already inhabited by Canaanites. Moreh in Hebrew means “teacher.” It was a place where the Canaanites gathered to hear teachings of their soothsayers, and to indulge in idolatrous worship. Some pagan shrines might have been erected and instructions given.<sup>9</sup> When Abraham was in the plain of Moreh, the LORD appeared and spoke to him. The LORD’S word to him was brief but very important: *Unto thy seed will I give this land* (v.7). The LORD granted Abraham a vision of Himself, and specifically pointed out to him that the land on which he had just entered would be given to his descendants. This is God’s direct revelation and *confirmation* of His promises to Abraham and his seed. From here the children of Israel and the land were inseparably bound together. This promise can never be changed. Abraham immediately responded by building an altar there (Moreh) to worship the LORD (v.7b). The place was a geographical centre of the land. Later as he moved further south to Bethel (the house of God), his next stop, he built another altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD (v.8). This act was Abraham’s public

proclamation of his faith in the LORD (Yahweh). It would include his exalting the greatness and goodness of the LORD. Then Abraham journeyed further south of the land which is Negev. As he journeyed from the north to the south building altars to the LORD and living in the land, it can be said that he symbolically took possession of the land.

### **Abraham Flees to Egypt**

A severe famine broke out in the land. Under this very harsh condition, Abraham journeyed to Egypt, a land of plenty. He instinctively decided to flee to Egypt where there was food. The river Nile had always ensured the Egyptians ample food. Abraham probably wanted to live temporarily in Egypt until the famine was over. Then he would return to the Promised Land where he came from. But the problem lies in the fact that he did the natural thing and did not consult God whether he should flee to Egypt or not. If he had asked God for His will, things could have been quite different. Abraham had forgotten about God. Knowingly or unknowingly, Abraham’s faith was being tested. He was in the land which God had promised him. He would have expected it to be a great land of plenty and beauty. But there were Canaanites, who had settled in the land, and now, drought and famine occurred causing him to flee to Egypt for his own survival.

There was another problem in going to Egypt. His wife Sarah was

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<sup>9</sup> Allen P. Ross, p. 265.

beautiful in spite of her age (65 years old; Sarah died at the age of 127, Genesis 23:1). Abraham feared that some Egyptians would covet his wife and would resort to kill him. In order to save his life, Abraham's ploy was to tell the Egyptians that Sarah was his sister and not his wife. Sarah indeed was his half sister.<sup>10</sup> But in reality Sarah was his wife. Although it was half truth, Abraham's ploy was a deliberate lie. One can appreciate the fear that was in Abraham. He feared for his life, he should have trusted the LORD to protect him. While it is not easy for Abraham, one should not tell a half-truth or a half-lie. The beauty of Sarah was told to Pharaoh. Pharaoh took Sarah into his house, obviously with intent eventually to make her his concubine. Understandably, Pharaoh showered Abraham with many gifts. Because of Abraham's lie the situation became more serious and dangerous. The LORD'S plan and His promises to Abraham would be in jeopardy. The sad thing is that Abraham did not realize the dangerous situation which he had created.

### **Abraham is Rebuked by Pharaoh**

The chapter ends with the description of the LORD'S intervention

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<sup>10</sup> Genesis 20:12 *And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.*

in the affairs of men. Abraham's lie had complicated the situation in which God's plan and purpose through Abraham was then in danger. If Pharaoh went ahead to take Sarah to be his wife, the "purity of the ancestress" of Abraham's seed would be tainted, thus jeopardising His promise. So the LORD intervened. It must be stressed that the LORD'S intervention to save the situation in no way lessens the sin of lying. The LORD acted for His own sake, that is, His promise to Abraham. No man can ever thwart His will.

The LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his household with great plagues. The exact nature of the plagues is not mentioned. It must be terrible enough for Pharaoh to realise the sin of his intended action. His action to take Sarah to be his wife would be abominable to God when he later would find out the real identity of Sarah. Presumably, Sarah who lived in Pharaoh's house was not afflicted. Consequently, Pharaoh reprimanded Abraham for lying to him instead of telling the truth. Pharaoh then ordered Abraham to take his wife Sarah back to him undefiled. Pharaoh ordered his men to send him and his entourage away from Egypt. It was indeed a shameful exit for Abraham who was reprimanded by a Gentile.

### **PRACTICAL VALUE**

Abraham's faith is an example for us to emulate. He believed God and obeyed God's commandment. True and genuine faith must be accompanied by

actions in the light of that faith. Faith without works, as James stated, is dead. Faith in God if it is not acted upon is mere mental knowledge which is of no value. If one believes all his knowledge of God is true, then he must apply and act on it. Then his faith is real and useful.

The confession of our faith in God must be manifested in our worship of God. If we believe in God and come to know who He is, we must demonstrate our belief by worshipping Him in a manner that would reflect His attributes and activities. Today, many Christians show a lack of reverence and fear of the LORD. They should go to church on the LORD'S Day punctually and be well prepared to worship Him in spirit and in truth.

People often respond to danger by deception. Telling half-truths to deliver them from dangerous and dire situations is commonplace among many men. We need to remember that the LORD will not always intervene to save His people from every predicament and problem, especially when they sin. However, one thing must be made clear again and that is the LORD'S plan and purpose cannot be thwarted, changed or determined by man. God is true and faithful to preserve His promises.

Another point concerning the prevention of Pharaoh from taking Sarah to be his wife is the preservation of the honour of marriage. The LORD showed Himself to be the protector of the marriage of Abraham and Sarah.

The extent to which God went to preserve the marriage should move Christians to make every effort to keep their marriage sacred and honourable.

Yet another valuable lesson is that faith in God will always be tested. Abraham believed that God would keep all His promises. Thus he was severely tested. There were already other settlers in the land – the land which God had promised him. And then drought and famine happened in the land so much so that he had to flee from the land in order to survive and be alive. Similarly, our faith in God will be tested. This is God's way. And when we obey the first command, God reveals more to us. God called Abraham to leave his country and kindred, and when Abraham obeyed, God promised and specifically named the land which He had promised him.

GOD BLESS YOU.