

First Revelation - Genesis 11:26-12:1-5 ¹

Before the Lesson: Print the handout, “Faith is a Journey” for each class member to be used in the Information session and in the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship Question: (Use one of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

As a child, how many times did your family move?

What is the earliest “road trip” you remember taking?

Information:

Last week, we looked at genealogies in general. We learned that, although genealogies are not so important in 21st-century America, they are very important in many other cultures. A genealogy not only tells who you came from, but who you are allowed to be - your place in society. A genealogy not only tells you about your family tree but tells you if any of the fruit from that tree is coming to you – your inheritance.

Sometimes, the Biblical genealogies have tiny stories within them such as a specific act of courage or why a city was named after them.

Today, we want to begin our study of Abraham with a glance at his genealogy.

- Have a class member read Genesis 11:26-32.

The first thing we note is that Terah, Abram’s father, had three sons. Note the pattern! Adam had 3 sons. Noah had 3 sons. Now Terah has 3 sons.

Adam, Noah, and Terah are beginning points, new ways that God is relating to people.

Haran dies before Terah. Here is a story within a story – why did he die? What is it like to have a child die before a parent dies? We are not told these stories, but the stories are dormant. Terah, for no stated reason, leaves Ur of Chaldees to go to Canaan. Then, again with no explanation, he stops at the city of Haran and lives there for the rest of his life.

Was it because the city had the same name as his departed son? Was the city named one thing, then later changed to honor Terah’s son? We are not told. We only know Terah decides not to go any further. Abram and Sarai are with him, as is Lot, the son of Haran (thus the nephew of Abram).

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The rest of the book of Genesis is the story of seven conversations or revelations that God has with Abram/Abraham. Here is where we begin our study of the seven conversations God had with Abram. Abraham (as he came to be known in the fourth conversation) is known as the father of the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian faiths. These conversations give us lessons about how faith begins and grows. Ultimately, understanding these conversations will help us understand one of the most seemingly bizarre stories of the entire Bible: God telling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. But we have to begin here, with the first conversation.

What is faith? (belief in doctrine; trust; obedience; partnership; intimacy; righteousness; stewardship; there will be provision; confidence in spite of the unknown; faith is before experience; give it a shot; a first date)

- Have a class member read Genesis 12:1-2.

God commands Abram to move. Does Abram have a choice?

What does Abram know about his future home? (There will be provision; he is confident in spite of the unknown – cf. Hebrews 11:1; etc.)

“Abram...is here addressed by God, though he himself as yet says nothing, responding only by obedience.”²

Faith is a journey. In Genesis 11-50, we are observing the faith of Abram and Sarai. We want to see how their faith grows as God reveals God’s plan for them (and ultimately for the world!)

- Distribute the handout, “Faith is a Journey.”

Here are some steps in faith. Which step(s) would you say Abram is making? Belief. Trust. Obedience. Partnership. Intimacy. Righteousness. Stewardship.

Let’s recall the big picture. God created humanity. God invited humans to be partners with God. How were they partners in Eden? (tending the garden; naming the animals; etc.)

How personal was God with Adam and Eve? (God spoke directly with them; God walked with them; God looked for them; etc.)

Then, we have sin and the banishment from the Garden of Eden.

Cain and Able, Adam and Eve’s children up to that point, present an offering to God. Cain is angry that God is more pleased with his brother’s offering. God warns Cain not to give into his anger. But Cain does and he kills his brother, Abel. God hears Abel’s blood cry from the earth and God punishes Cain with yet another exile. *Cain wanted to make his name great before God.* He wanted to impress God with his presentation.

² Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 50.

- Have a class member read Genesis 4:16.

So, the distance between humanity and God is growing even further apart.

And after a long genealogy, we come to Noah.

- Have a class member read Genesis 6:5-8.

Noah is a righteous man. God partners with Noah to build an ark for the keeping of Noah, his family, and the animals of the creation.

Following the flood, there is another genealogy. The descendants are repopulating the earth.

Then, we have the story of the tower of Babel. Again, as with Adam and Eve, as with Cain, *these people wanted to make a name for themselves*. They wanted to stick together rather than follow God's command to scatter and populate the earth.

Time and again, God has longed for faithful partners in keeping the earth and in taking care of humanity. Time and again, people have let God down.

Then, we have another genealogy which brings us to today's passage. Abram receives a vision from God.

- Have a class member read Genesis 12:3-5.

Is this a conversation?

For our purposes, we will call it a conversation, although it is actually a divine monologue. Maybe it would be better to call this Abram's first "trial" by God. Or the first "revelation" that Abram receives.³

God tells Abram to leave Haran and go to where? (TBA - To Be Announced)

- Have a class member read Hebrews 11:8.

What is the "pay-off" for Abram if he leaves Haran and goes to wherever God shows him?

"Doubtless it is also deliberate that the promises to Abram fall into seven clauses in 2-3, just as do the promises to Isaac and Jacob in 26:3-4; 27:28-29: seven is the OT holy number. Maybe too the fivefold use of the word 'bless' in vv 2-3 consciously negates the five curses on man and his world pronounced in the preceding chapters (3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25)."⁴

Is "being a blessing to all nations" of personal benefit to Abram?

³ Martin Buber, *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 36.

⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), 270.

“The partnership between Abram and God doesn’t happen overnight. Starting with this first visit, it is always the same: God challenges and God promises – and Abram responds. ... Each visit is a back-and-forth affair with similar choreography, like a dance: you do this, says God; I’ll do that.”⁵

So, Abram gathers his family and his stuff and he heads out.

Do you think this was a hard decision for him? (Maybe not – following in his father’s footsteps of leaving a homeplace; Maybe it was – leaving friends and loved ones, normalcy, etc.)

One of my students pointed out that this decision is like a taking a person on a first date. He said, “There is faith before there is experience. So, you are willing to give it a shot. Why not?”

“There’s at least one important detail that suggests immediately the difficulty of letting go of homeland. ... ‘I will bless you and make your name great,’ God says. It’s a promise that contains a challenge. Leave homeland and family – and the quest for a name, God says, leave it to me. Abram can relinquish home and the normal Babel-like quest for ‘name’ - or not. The two stories, Babel’s and Abram’s, are linked by the name game and what lies at the heart of all human ill, this fear-filled urge to count for something, to have a place in the sun.”⁶

This is the first conversation/trial/revelation that Abram will receive. But all seven are connected.

“The seven revelations to Abraham are precisely and significantly related both to one another and to the stories with which they are interspersed. Each of the revelations and each one of the other stories has its particular place in the pattern and could not stand in any other. The revelations appear as stations in a progress from trial to trial and from blessing to blessing: not one of them can be transposed without disrupting the whole.”⁷

If this is Abram’s first trial, his baby step in his faith journey, what can we say about a “faith journey?”

⁵ Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 58-59.

⁶ Borgman, 60.

⁷ Buber, 36.

Transformational Exercise

[Use the bottom of the hand out with the following paragraph to lead class members to share their initial step of faith.]

Think back to your first decision to follow God as a disciple of Jesus.

- On a scale of 1-10 (1=easy, 10=hard) was that a hard decision for you?
- Did it seem natural or unnatural?
- Did you have to give up anything, anyone, any place?
- How does your first step in faith compare to Abram's?

[After class members have shared, close in a prayer something like this: *Each of us has a unique journey with you, Lord. Help us to appreciate our own pilgrimage of faith as well as the pilgrimages of our fellow pilgrims. Thank you for calling us, leading us, and remaining faithful to us. Amen.*

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Partnership

Intimacy

Righteousness

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