

A Nation's Journey from Beginning to Enslavement

Genesis 12 – Exodus 1:14

Introduction

The story of the Old Testament is the story of a nation – a covenant people – a people of God's own choosing for his sovereign, divine purpose. This nation is Israel and its people – the Israelites. Andrew Hill and John Walton, in their book *A Survey of the Old Testament*, write:

God chose them as his instrument of revelation. God revealed himself to the world through Israel – through the law he gave to them, through their history (which demonstrates his benevolence, grace, faithfulness, and sovereignty); through the writing of the Bible; and most of all, through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This morning we begin a study in the second book of the Pentateuch, or the Torah – the book of Exodus. It is important for us to put the beginning account of this book into its broader context. To understand this enslaved people in Egypt, we must review their history to see how they have come to this point in their national life and appreciate the relationship they have with their God.

I. God's Call of Abraham

God begins this grand project with a call to a man who would be the father of this covenant nation. The man's name is Abram. Turn in your Bible to Genesis, the first book in the Old Testament – chapter 11.

The latter half of the chapter focuses upon the descendants of Shem, one of Noah's sons preserved from the Flood through the ark. This is the line through which would ultimately come the Messiah.

Genesis 11:27-32

The family's home is in the city of Ur. Ur was a very advanced city with refined systems of writing, educational facilities, expertise in mathematics and business, great wealth, art and impressive architecture. The city was located in the southern border area of modern day Iraq and Iran – about 125 miles northwest of the Persian Gulf.

God selected a man to become the father of this new nation. In the New Testament book of Acts, Stephen – one of the servant leaders in the early church in Jerusalem, stood before the Jewish Council and gave a defense of his preaching about Jesus. He made his case by

recounting Jewish history – what would be common knowledge among these Jewish leaders who opposed Stephen and the followers of Christ. 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, and said to him, “Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.” 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.

Genesis, chapter eleven, ends with Terah taking his family clan and journeying some 600 miles to the north/northwest to the city of Haran which was located in what is now modern day Turkey. Here, God reiterates his call of Abraham.

Genesis 12:1-3

God calls Abram to start a new nation, a distinct people. As far as we can tell from Scripture, there is nothing in Abram that commended him to God; it would be all because of God’s sovereign grace. Abram might well be a pagan at this point. Or perhaps, though we don’t know, he has learned from his forefathers about the true God – the God of Adam and Noah. Maybe he was a seeker for truth.

On the basis of what we do know, God sought out Abram. He was the one who initiated this call for faith. This fits with all the teaching of Scripture that God is always the one who initiates; he is the seeker of men and women who are morally fallen and spiritually dead.

There was a young boy down south years ago who wanted to join a church. So the deacons got together to interview him. They asked, “How did you get saved?” His answer was: “God did his part, and I did my part.” Their ears perked up and they discerned there might be a theological problem with this. So they questioned him further.

“What was God’s part, and what was your part?” His explanation was a good one. He said, “God’s part was the saving, and my part was the sinning. I done run from him as fast as my sinful heart and rebellious legs could take me. He done took out after me till he run me down.” This boy understood grace!

This is the story of Abram; it is the story of every one of us who has a relationship with God. God seeks; God initiates; God bestows grace; God saves.

God’s call comes to Abram in Haran. Notice the ascending order of the call for faith that God puts to Abram:

- Leave your country
- Leave your relatives
- Leave your father's household

All these represented security and identity to Abram. God was asking Abram to give up those things that might hinder his following God and his plan. It was a call of not only geographical separation and family separation, but also a spiritual separation. God was calling Abram to a new land, a new way of life, a new inheritance, a new spiritual identity.

God's covenant call of Abram included a great nation, a great name and a great blessing. It was a covenant that would have a universal impact. Through Abram all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

Two things are important for us to understand about this promise and its fulfillment. First, the redemptive plan of God, from the very beginning, embraced the whole world. The Apostle Paul, writing to a Gentile audience in the region of Galatia, says:

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. – *Galatians 3:7-9*

Second, this promise would be ultimately fulfilled through Abraham's descendant – Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah. In that passage in Galatians, Paul goes on to say:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. – *Galatians 3:16*

Now, here is the key – **Genesis 12:4**

Abram obeyed! His faith was demonstrated or manifested through his obedience. Did he understand all that God's call and promise entailed? I don't think so. Someone has said:

Faith is the daring of the soul to go farther than it can see.

This is Abram. He cannot see into the future, certainly can't see the fulfillment of God's call for faith. But he responds to what he does know: God's call to leave, to step out, to trust.

This is a reminder of what faith requires of us. I cannot imagine that Abram really understood what God's plan meant for him, certainly not in any definitiveness or detail.

God, likewise, calls us to trust him, often without that understanding. Oswald Chambers writes:

Faith is the deliberate confidence in the character of God and the word of God. And so, in obedience he sets out for the land of Canaan – the place that God has told him to go.

Abram first settles in the area around Shechem, the geographical center of Canaan. This is the area known in the New Testament as Samaria.

Now look at **Genesis 12:6**

It is a statement regarding the opposition. The Canaanites were a vile and sinful people. They would become the enemy – those who stood in the way of the possession of God’s promise of the land.

God never promised Abram he would have no opposition. God never promised it would be easy to live in obedience to him. And you know what? God never promises you will have no opposition in your faith journey. He never promises it will be easy to live in obedience to him. He promises you just what he promised Abram – his presence.

The Lord appeared again at this time to Abram. I think it is significant that God appears to Abram when he is in the land, when he has been obedient to God’s call. In some fashion, God spoke to Abram in Ur and in Haran. But now, he appears to him. And look what he says – **Genesis 12:7**.

Abram responds by building an altar. In so doing, I see him planting a flag for God. Just like a mountain climber or an explorer plants the flag of his country on the mountain top or in a new land, Abram claims by faith this Promised Land.

I wish I could say it was all “hunky-dory” from here on out. That Abram just went on trusting in God – a paragon of faith. But that isn’t the biblical record. Twice in the coming years, Abram will tell a half-lie to save his own skin. He will pass off Sarai as his sister, rather than his wife for fear he will be killed and his wife taken away.

Not only do we see faith in Abram’s character, we also see fear. Later on in the Biblical story, we see another aspect of Abram’s character – impatience. God gives him the promise of a son, but after time passes, he and Sarai tire of waiting for God and implement Plan B – their own effort to produce an heir through Sarai’s handmaid, Hagar. The consequences of Abram’s fear and impatience are immense – then and now!

Here’s Abram’s problem. A sailor started talking with a pirate, and they took turns telling about their adventures on the seas. The sailor noted that the pirate had a peg-leg, a hook-

hand, and an eye patch. The sailor asked "So, how did you end up with the peg-leg?" The pirate replied "We were in a storm at sea, and I was swept overboard into a school of sharks. Just as my men were pulling me out, a shark bit my leg off."

"Wow! What about your hook?" "Well..." replied the pirate, "We were boarding an enemy ship and were battling the other men with swords. One of the enemy cut my hand off."

"Incredible!" remarked the sailor. "How did you get the eye patch?" "A big bug flew into my eye," replied the pirate. "You lost your eye to a bug!?" the sailor asked.

"Well, yes...", said the pirate, "...it was my first day with the hook..."

Some of you here can relate to this story. Things happen in life, but it seems that we have a tendency as people to inflict more pain on our own lives than is necessary. That's Abram. He suffered from self-inflicted wounds, wounds that would have significant consequences.

And yet, through it all, God remained faithful to Abram. Genesis 15 tells of God's establishment of the covenant with Abram and the promise of a son. Genesis 17 has a restatement of the covenant and involves a name change for Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah.

Now, look at this covenant promise of the land – **Genesis 17:7-8**

God blesses Abraham and Sarah with a son of the promise – Isaac.

II. God's Covenant with Abraham's Descendants

A. Isaac

Genesis 25 recounts the death of Abraham and the story line shifts its focus to Isaac and his family. **Genesis 26:3-5**

The story of man's dysfunction and God's faithfulness continues in Isaac's family. Betrayal, deceit, petty favoritism, etc. all plays a role. The covenant promise, though, continues on through Jacob.

B. Jacob – Genesis 35:9-15

III. God's Care for his People

The story of Joseph could occupy us for weeks. But alas, I feel like the Egyptian mummy: pressed for time!

If you don't remember the story of Joseph, take some time this week to read Genesis, chapters 37-50. A great story of God's faithfulness, provision and protection.

Joseph, sold as a teenager to a slave caravan by his brothers, ends up in Egypt. Beginning as a slave, God prospers him. Eventually, he comes to the attention of the Pharaoh because of the God-given ability to interpret dreams. The end result is that Joseph is raised to the position of prime minister of Egypt.

He prepares the nation for a coming famine, stockpiling grain. When famine strikes Canaan, Jacob sends his boys to Egypt to buy grain. Eventually, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, who then tell Dad back in Canaan. The one who was thought lost now becomes the savior of his people.

Joseph brings his father and the entire family clan down to Egypt for their preservation amidst the famine. – **Genesis 46:26-27**

They settle in the land of Goshen – the northeastern section of the Egyptian Delta region. Under the sanction of the Pharaoh himself, the Israelites settle in and grow very prosperous.

The final chapters of Genesis tells of the death first of Jacob and then later, Joseph. **Genesis 50:22-26**

This is where the book of Exodus picks up the story. In the Hebrew text, the very first word of Exodus is “and.” This book is the continuation of the story from Genesis – a seamless story line.

Exodus 1:1-7

The Israelites enjoyed the blessings of God; they were fruitful to the point of swarming over the land and becoming very large in number and very strong in presence.

IV. Conclusion: The Drama Begins

The history of Israel now takes a dire turn.

Exodus 1:8-14

Not only does Israel become increasingly strong and powerful, they become a threat. Over time, the political climate changes. Once welcomed and honored in Egypt, they are not feared and despised.

Now, lest we think that this situation somehow crept up on God and surprised him, turn back to Genesis, chapter 15.

The context is that God is making his covenant with Abram. **Genesis 15: 5-6**

Here was the basis of Abraham's righteous standing before God; he believed God's word. God made a promise; Abraham believed God; Abraham had right standing before God.

Now, pick up in verse 12 – **Genesis 15:12-16**

God is telling Abraham what is going to happen over 300 years before it came to pass. God is going to give the people of Canaan 400 years before his judgment and wrath will be brought upon them. That time will have Israel in Egypt, including their enslavement.

The book of Exodus is the account of God's intervention on behalf of his people. It is God remembering his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and bring them out of their captivity and preparing them for their return to Canaan.

God is the central focus throughout this story. Philip Graham Ryken comments:

From beginning to end Exodus is a God-centered book, a theological history. To read Exodus, therefore, is to encounter God. The book is about the mercy, justice, holiness, and glory of almighty God, who rules history by his sovereign power and who saves the people of his covenant.

This is a book given to us for its practical message. Paul references this whole exodus experience as being of benefit to us. Turn to the New Testament book of First Corinthians, chapter 10.

I Corinthians 10:1-11

Exodus is for us today – instructive and cautionary. It is the great story of God's redemption, a wonderful picture of God's deliverance and salvation we enjoy because of Christ's work on our behalf.