



Trusting the Lord in the Gap

Grace Reigns: God's Gospel for All Peoples Series #23

Genesis 12

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Please turn with me in your Bible to Genesis 12. We are going to be starting a new series on the life of Abram. Where we lived in Morocco, if you asked a child or an adult, everyone knew who Abram was. It was great. Think about the world religions. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all have Abram as their father, which is nice because then you can just create a conversation right on the spot. They know quite a bit about him. However, in conversations, it was like a joke without a punch line when they talked about Abram. I always felt like there was something missing in their understanding or in the conversation.

It is like that telephone game where I tell you a story and you share the story. Little-by-little the details get lost. When much of the world thinks of Abram, they do not have the rest of the story that we have here in Scripture. Why do we have this story of Abram? What is God saying to us? It is a privilege for us to have the original source of the story. As we open this series on Abram, we are going to learn what God is teaching us and what He was doing through him. I am thankful David invited me to do this with you.

Let me pray for us and for myself and ask for God's help.

Lord, we thank You that You have called us here. Thank You that Your Word speaks to us. You have power to change our lives. I pray that You would usher Your Spirit upon us and give us insight into this really important moment in history that was a turning point. We pray that in Jesus' name. Amen.

It has been a few months since we were in Genesis. Most of you probably know that Abram is the same person as Abraham. Abram means, "exalted father." Abraham means "father of a multitude." The name change is really a trajectory of what God was going to do with Abram. God made him a father of a multitude.

Remember when God created Adam and Eve back in Genesis 1? He created them in His own image and blessed them. He said, “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth.” Those promises to Adam are now played out in the life of Abram. How will God bring about this multiplication of the people? That multiplication had not happened by Genesis 11. From chapters three to 11, we just saw a downward spiral of sin and evil, resulting in God’s judgment. There was a flood and then a confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel. God did all that to prevent the downward spiral. However, that was not the end game. God’s story does not end with judgment.

As we begin chapter 12, the first questions we should be asking are, “How are we going to get out of this mess? How in the world will this spiral stop? Where is the remedy going to come in?” Judgment did not provide a remedy; it just stopped the spiral for a season.

Notice how Genesis 12 it begins: “*Now the Lord said to Abram...*” The Lord spoke. When the Lord spoke in Genesis 1, things came into existence. Life occurred. There was light and darkness. That is what God does here as well. He does a new work, a new creation.

God Himself will rescue a rebellious and sin-broken people through His redemptive purposes—through one man. Think about it. Through one man He will bring salvation to the earth. That is the promise that Abram was given.

How will that be? God is creating through this one man a new people, a new nation, an alternative society that will exist within a fallen humanity. We are going to track the story of Abram with three points:

- What is required of Abram’s call?
- What does the call offer?
- What does the call expect?

What Does Abram’s Call Require?

It would be helpful as we begin to think about Abram’s background. The end of Genesis 11 lists Shem’s descendants, clear down Abram’s father, Terah, who had three sons. So Abram lives with his father in Ur of the Chaldeans in Mesopotamia—near modern-day Iraq. His father, Terah, took his family and planned to go to Canaan. However, they did not quite make it. Instead, they went to a town named Haran.

If you can picture this, they went from south of Baghdad, Iraq, all the way up north of the land of Canaan. They got that far and then Terah died. Genesis 12 opens with: “*Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’*”

First, there is a mystery here. I thought his father was going to the land of Canaan, but he's gone and now the call comes to Abram. In Acts 7:2, Stephen said, "*The God of glory appeared to our father Abram when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran...*" So God would have called Abram; Abram would have talked his father into going; then his father would have moved his family. But then they were stopped halfway. We don't know why. Was it someone's unwillingness to go there? Were they incapable of going? We don't know what happened. But then came a second call in Genesis 12:1, where the Lord said, "*Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.*"

It is interesting that, in Stephen's speech in Acts 7, he only records the first two of those. Apparently, the first call was, "Go from your country and your kindred." But now the second call comes: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house." Whatever the situation was, it became very clear to Abram. "Leave! Even if you're the only one who will go, I want you to go." That is what God said to him. That was the call.

What does the call require? Faith. You have to believe that the call is from God. It takes faith to leave. It is belief that leads you to obey. Not everyone is going to physically move to a different country like Abram did. However, there is still a principle from this call: you will need to leave the cultural idols of your country and your kindred. To follow Yahweh, the Living God, you need to leave things behind. . You must follow as the new man God has created.

Think about the principle of this call. God said, "Go from your country." Think about what our idols are in our country. What would it mean to leave the U.S.? Here we are in this cosmopolitan world. There is consumerism. We feel very economically stable at times. Right? What does it mean when God says, "Leave your country"? It means to put your trust in the Lord—that He will provide for you and be your stability. You are no longer looking to your country or government for that. If you are fleeing for your life from your country, you want to be called elsewhere.

However, we are not fleeing. What are our temptations? What can we miss? What does "Go from your kindred" involve? These are your people. They are the ones who accept you for who you are. This is where you were birthed. What are the idols related to that? It may be that when God calls you, you have to leave your identity. If you are born in a Muslim family and God calls you, you don't want to upset your aunts and uncles; you love them. So what does it mean to follow Yahweh? God is going to provide a greater faith in the Lord. Leave your family. Go from your father's house.

I doubt that you are being kicked out of the house by your father, right? You have a sofa and the TV with remote. This is your comfort zone. You are not going anywhere. But God says,

“Leave your comfort zone.” Think about the principle and what God is calling you to do. You are called to reach out—to leave your securities—and find everything in Him. That is what we see in the life of Abram. Anything we rely on for economics, security and comfort in this world must now ultimately be found in the Lord.

Abram would say, “I’m still a Mesopotamian, but I’m first a Christian.” We should say, “I’m an American, but I’m first a follower of Jesus.” It becomes your ultimate identity. Being a child of God becomes the one overarching purpose in your life. That does a unique thing in you and your world, because you are now detached. You are now a free agent. You can now love all sorts of people. You are not judgmental anymore about other cultures. You have a healthier approach to the world when you are willing to follow Yahweh. Your purposes become huge. It catapults you into the world in a greater way. You may have one foot in Mesopotamia, but you also have another foot that can identify with God so you can leave those things you normally cling to here.

To change your allegiance can be risky though. Not every country or family encourages you to follow the one true God, Yahweh. Some families prevent that. Some countries prevent that. To be a follower of Christ is risky. It can be life threatening. You can lose your job. You can be persecuted. I’m afraid this is our present reality and it is getting worse in some ways.

However, Abram was not alone. At first, he went with his family. It was his father who led the trip to Haran. When he left Haran, verse four says he went as the Lord told him. He brought Sarah, Lot and their possessions, plus many other people. So you are not necessarily called to follow God alone. It doesn’t mean you will be by yourself.

In Morocco, I had a friend who had dreams and visions. He felt God was trying to wake him up and call him to something else. We were talking about it and reading the Gospels together on day and things started to click. It hit me: “We need to apply this. We need to tell your family. Have you talked to your dad? Have you talked to your mom or siblings?” The idea is that the whole house can believe. “I don’t need to extract you from your family. You become a Christian, they don’t have to ostracize and disown you. Let’s think about this together.” That is a great insight. That is what Abram did. His calling did not separate him from his family

What do you learn about God from this call? How did God come to Abram? First, God came to him personally. God came to him and sought him out. This call was unique for Abram. God came to him and sought him out.

Second, think about how persistent this call was. He called Abram once in Mesopotamia and then again when he was in Haran. In verse seven, we read that the Lord appeared to Abram

in Canaan: *“Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.”*

God personally and persistently pursued Abram. God also personally and persistently pursues us.

We like to go to the library when we get back in this country. We recently took all the kids and walked around the library and I decided to walk through the religious section. I was just curious to see what was in there. I found this book on the left side: Why I’m Not a Christian. I flipped through it, thinking, “Surely, somebody responded to this.” So I turned around and continued looking. I saw John Stott’s Why I Am a Christian on my right side. Sure enough, he responded to the other book. By God’s providence, they were facing each other in the same aisle. I found that very interesting!

John Stott explains that many people think they are Christians because they were born in a Christian country. Or, maybe they are Christians because they were born into a Christian family. He says that these are significant, but they are not ultimately why people are Christians. Some may say, “I am a Christian because I was at a Bible camp (or some other event), and I professed faith in Jesus there.” That may be true, and it could have been the exact point when God opened their eyes. However, that is not ultimately why they are Christians.

John Stott says:

Why I am a Christian is due ultimately neither to the influence of my parents and teachers, nor to my own personal decision for Christ, but to the Hound of Heaven. That is, it is due to Jesus Christ Himself, Who pursued me relentlessly, even when I was running away from Him in order to get my own way. If it were not for the gracious pursuit of the Hound of Heaven, I would today be on the scrapheap of wasted and discarded lives.

(Stott’s reference to the “Hound of Heaven” comes from a poem that was written about Francis Thompson’s testimony. Thompson referred to God pursuing him like a Hound of Heaven.)

This is our testimony, too. This is what Abram-turned-Abram claimed. It was the same for Saul, who became Paul. This is how his testimony reads: “God came after me.” It was the same with Cephas, who became Peter: “The Lord came to me.” Anyone who has a testimony of being called is because God had been pursuing him.

Even here today, God is pursuing us now through His Word. He is after us. Psalm 23:6 says, “Goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life.” Here is another version: “Goodness and mercy have hunted me, haunted me and dogged my steps all the days of my life.”

God was after us this whole time, persistently looking for us. It is a pursuit that is patient, purposeful, affectionate and relentless. That is Who God is for us.

What does the call require? To respond in faith.

What Does Abram's Call Offer?

Faith also has an object which is this call and this call offers God's promises. Listen closely to the end of verse one through verses two and three. Listen to what is being emphasized here:

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 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. 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."

Did you feel the weight of God saying, "I will"? He mentions blessings five times. One commentator pointed out that there were five curses in Genesis 1-11. So here God is reversing everything in this short, compact passage. He is bringing blessing. This is God's commitment to us. This is His covenant love for us. The future of the world is not on Abram's shoulders, nor on our shoulders. God says, "This promise is what I will do. This promise is in my covenant. I'll carry this through."

We could break this promise into three areas:

a land, a people and the nations. As we study Genesis, these themes come up all the time. God's promises track through the whole story. How will God fulfill that? How is He going to do all these great promises?

At one level, Abram was completely unable to do these things. Remember who he was and who his family was. Genesis 11:30 says, "*Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.*" She was unable to have children. Then 12:4 says Abram was 75-years-old. That's old even for the Old Testament. And in both Canaan and Egypt the locals were hostile.

So you have people, land and blessing the nations. Every one of them has competition to faith. "My wife is barren. I'm impotent. There are hostile people in the land. How will we be a blessing to them? And where are we going again, Lord?" He didn't even know where he was going. So here is Abram at this time: this promise was off the charts. He could not relate to it at all. Only the Lord could do this. How do we even relate to these promises?

But here's the point: the message of Christianity is not, "Try hard to live well and I'll bless you." The message is not, "Make all the effort you can to save yourself." Paul said in Galatians

3:8 that the gospel was preached beforehand to Abram in this promise. Saving faith is not, “Bless me because I’m working so hard.” Saving faith says, “All the things that charm me most are rubbish. I put them aside. I put all my hope in You, Lord.” That is saving, rescuing faith; that is the faith to which Abram was called. That is what the Christian message is about. It is not built around us.

In fact, the best metaphor for humanity in this chapter is the word “barren.” Sarah was a metaphor for all of humanity. Barrenness. Deadness. We have hit a dead end. Humanity will not bring salvation to the earth. Through one man who was unable to do it, God did the miraculous and rescued the world.

I love the simplicity of the travel narrative starting in verse four. They left and he didn’t know where he was going. He’s like, “Okay, what do I do? I’m going to obey the Lord.” So he packed up everything—Sarah (his wife), Lot (his brother’s son), plus all their possessions and the people they acquired in Haran—and they went to the land of Canaan. Just picture this entourage!

When we moved to Morocco in February 2006, airlines still allowed two bags at 70 pounds each. We took advantage of that, but it dawned on me later that we had little kids. So here we were with over 14 bags weighing 70 pounds each, plus carry-ons, and my daughter had her arms full of books. I’m surprised we made it. At least we knew where we were going.

Abram had no idea where he was going. He went through Shechem to the oak of Moreh and the Lord met him there. Verse seven says, “*Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’*” Then he went and traveled to Bethel. Between Bethel and Ai, he built an altar. The Lord met him there.

Maybe there are places of meaning for you—places you have traveled to where God has met you, even when you were not sure where you were going, what He was doing or how it would all work out.

God met Abram there at that altar and spoke to him. What did that say to the Canaanites? What did it say when he built an altar to Yahweh? It is like he was putting a stake down. “I want everyone to know this is God’s country. This is the Lord’s territory. This is private land now. This is Yahweh’s property.”

That is true all over the earth. Wars between nations—what are they fighting for? It’s not even their land. Paul said in Acts 17:24-26:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he

made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place...

When you think about Abram living in the land of Canaan, he was announcing, “This is Yahweh’s country. Everywhere is Yahweh’s country.” Remember, God is making a new nation, a new society. There are really two allegiances that we will discover as we read the Bible because there are two people. You are either in Adam, or you are in the Second Adam—Jesus Christ.

The real key is Galatians 3:16: “*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.*” This is where the hinge of history is centered. In the fullness of time, Someone would leave His country and become a descendant of Abram. That Person would leave country, kindred and His Father’s household and come to us here. He would set up a place of worship, signified by an altar. So this descendant of Abram—Who is Jesus Christ—came and became that altar, that place of sacrifice for us that exists in a land where we are in between the promise and the reality. This is where the story is going and where it ends up.

Just as Abram had a special relationship with God, we are also given that relationship. Those who have fled from being in Adam to being in Christ are given a special relationship with God our Father. We are brought into a new society—a new community, in fact. Notice it even says a great nation. God’s people are forming His community according to His plan.

What Does Abram’s Call Expect?

This call requires faith and offers you Jesus as the object of your faith. What does the call expect? It expects that you will be a blessing in a troubled world.

In the Genesis narrative, right after these mountaintop experiences, verse ten says, “*Now there was a famine in the land.*” Abram was just given the land! He just arrived and there is already a severe famine? It is at this point that we don’t see Abram building any more altars, implying that he doubted the Lord’s promise. So he went to Egypt and when he got there he must have been overwhelmed. Right? Like Dorothy said in The Wizard of Oz, “*Toto, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore. Egypt? They have princes and Pharaohs here. The Pyramid of Giza is the tallest structure I’ve ever seen in my life. This thing is like 480 feet high and 780 feet wide.*” Abram was a Bedouin, a tent dweller and a herdsman. He walked into Egypt and panicked. “I’m a dead man.” He told his wife, “Pretend to be my sister and you’ll protect me from Pharaoh.” Great idea, right? No! He panicked.

How do you respond when you are in hard circumstances? Think about the times you feel overwhelmed in your culture. It may be your first year of college. You think, “Oh, wow, this is going to throw me off.” I remember a philosophy professor I had at Arizona State University, which was not a mecca of Christian values. I was a new believer and this professor had it out for Christians. He found it enjoyable to show syllogisms that didn’t work in Christianity. I remember all semester sitting in the back row, thinking, “Oh, I’m getting killed here. I don’t even know what to say.” Finally, I had the courage to go to his office. with a question about the class, so I asked about the syllabus. I said, “By the way, I actually believe in the Christ you keep making fun of.” It made me feel better just to get that off my chest.

Leland Ryken, who is a professor of literature at Wheaton College, said this about the story: “The conflict of Abram is a conflict of faith and expediency.” Abram goes and worships the Lord. He lived faithfully there with God. But expediency is when he said, “I need to take this into my own hands. There is a famine in the land, and I need to take charge of this. God, give me those reins again. I’m going to do this.” It was a struggle for him, and it’s a struggle for us. It’s a conflict of faith and expediency.

Remember, you are living in the gap of what was promised and the reality of that promise. You are living in this in-between time of what was spoken and the new heavens and new earth. You are like Abram. You’re a tent dweller and a pilgrim. You are a wanderer and sojourner. You are in exile. This is not your homeland. You are following the Lord now, so you are called out of your comfort zone. You can have these same experiences, saying, “I’ll be expedient in this. I’ll just take this into my own hands.”

We struggle with a similar thing. This is what we are learning here. The Bible is just brutally honest with the failure of its leaders. No punches are pulled on anyone. It’s not so much that we need Abram as our example to follow, but we need to see that God’s sovereign grace rescued Abram because I need rescued, too, when I make mistakes.

There is still a warning for us here so we don’t want to treat this lightly. Think about what happened to Pharaoh. Remember, the promise was that Abram would bless the nations. “Hey, here’s your chance, Abram! You’re in Egypt, right? What do you bring to them? Oh, instead of blessing you have harmed the entire household of Pharaoh. Great! You haven’t brought blessing; you’ve brought a curse!” I don’t even know how Pharaoh knew the curse was because of Abram.

Pharaoh called Abram and said in verse 18, “*What is this you have done to me?*” Have you seen that question before? In Genesis 3, when God came to Eve, He said, “What have you done?” Then in Genesis 4, God appeared to Cain, who killed Abel, and asked, “What have you

done?” Pharaoh is really the mouth of God to Abram at this point. “What have you done to me? I could have committed adultery with your wife. You just cursed my entire household. I have given you all these gifts and what have you done?”

Think about this quote, which should challenge us:

How do we live as God’s people in a foreign land? This story is poignant and very modern. As God’s people, we bear God’s promises. Yet, we also bear Adam’s nature. Our resistance to God’s purposes—our trust in ourselves and pursuit of our own interests—are often catastrophic. Our failures to live up to who we are in Christ are paraded before us in the world in a variety of ways. How often do we hear the name of Christ maligned because of the failure of His people? Far too often the words of Pharaoh are the words of the world: “What have you done to us?” The prophet Zechariah prophesied that the people of the world would come to the people of God and say, “Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.” This is God’s intention. But all too often the world just wants to get rid of us. God’s name is defiled and profaned among the nations because of us.

One of the things I got used to in Morocco was their attitude that Americans are the bad guys. , I felt I needed to apologize for some things they heard about that were allegedly done in the name of Christ and Christianity.

Sometimes we do need to apologize. Maybe we have neglected our neighbors. Maybe we have ignored people in our schools. “I have seen you open that door every day and I’ve never said ‘thank you.’ Will you forgive me?” By word and deed we need to testify to the world that we are different and that God has rescued us. This is a challenge for us as we think about the problems Abram’s lack of faith caused. Likewise, we struggle with moments of doubt. The good news is what we have been reading about here. It is that Christ has come and He dwelt here among us. . He is actively in our lives. Sometimes He can even use our failures to grow our faith and awaken other people to Who He is. Let’s think about the courage we need to be God’s people in God’s world.

He has called us to be His followers so that we might go to the world. We become His vehicles of blessing to the nations. Think about how the Lord might call you to bless someone this week. Even if it is an intimidating situation, like an Egypt experience, you can remind yourself, “God promised me that I will be a blessing. It’s not on my shoulders. It’s on Jesus’ shoulders. He was a blessing to the nations; all I have to give now is His good news.” Knowing that you can be a blessing will encourage you in intimidating situations.

Father, we pray that we would claim these promises through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Thank You, Father, for rescuing us. Thanks for the sovereign grace to rescue us when we weren't even seeking You. Thank You for rescuing us when we mess up—when we are in Egypt and fail to follow You. When our doubts lead to catastrophic events, Lord, thank You that You can even rescue us there. God, thank You so much for pursuing us and not ending there. “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Lord, thank You that we are headed to Your destination—to Your reality in the new heavens and new earth. Thanks for letting us be part of Your promises and may we be encouraged in Christ's name. Amen.

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