

Abraham and the Life of Faith

“Where are You From?”

“Now Sarai was barren; she had no children.”
Genesis 11:30

Sunday, April 19
Major Gerald (Gary) Reilly
The Salvation Army
Mississippi-Rideau Lakes Corps

200419 - Where are You From?

Genesis 11:27-32

Premise: The life of faith begins in the most unlikely of places

Introduction

When we meet someone for the first time, its inevitable that someone will ask the question, “Where are you from?” Knowing the answer to that question fills in some of the background of a new friends, co-worker or neighbor. It is a window into their past and may help us in understanding them just a little better. Today we meet Abram, and we will seek to answer that question as we explore his entrance into Scripture, beginning a new series exploring faith through the experiences of the father of Christians and Jews. Hopefully, as we journey with Abram over the next several weeks, we will learn some important lessons about how the experiences of Abram speak to our faith. The beauty of the Abrahamic stories is that they do not sugar-coat or gloss over his character flaws. We see a man struggle with trusting God, and yet all through those struggles, the faithfulness of God to Abram, and to His promises. In Abram we will witness moments of great faith and moments of total failure. One Bible scholar notes of Abram:

“...we see the man of faith going forth, trusting in the Divine guidance, believing the Divine promises, receiving Divine assurances, inheriting the Divine blessing, undergoing sharp testings, and—despite occasional failures—being “accounted righteous” through faith, and being called “the friend of God.”¹

That is, we pray, where our journey will end. As we begin this series though, I’m going to ask you to do something difficult. I want us all to put aside all that we know about Abram, all the familiar stories from his life, so as to hear them afresh. His story begins some 2000 years before Christ – a world vastly different from our own, and yet a world in which man is still struggling as fallen creatures to exist in a fallen world. There was a viral video on Youtube in December of 2018², and in the video a father recorded his two teenage sons attempting to use a rotary phone. For any of us who have used such a primitive device, it was comical. Stupid kids. Yet, I found myself on one occasion sitting on the couch as my 6 year old grandson gave me instructions on what button to press to jump and slash with Links sword—“No grandpa, the “Y” button!”.

As we enter the world of Abram we enter a world that knows nothing of Scripture, a world were God has spoken very little—that is, when you measure His speech across the epoch of time covered in Genesis 3-11. It is a world without churches, without Television evangelists, without Facebook or podcasts. News travelled by word of mouth – and according to historians, it was a world that had just begun to domestic horses. When Abraham enters into history, the masons are putting the final touches on Stonehenge; the Minoans are beginning to build their palaces;

| Years after the Flood: | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Arphaxad | 2 |
| Shelah | 35 |
| Eber | 30 |
| Peleg | 34 |
| Reu | 30 |
| Serug | 32 |
| Nahor | 30 |
| Terah | <u>70</u> |
| | 292 |

man has just arrived in Mexico.³ Moses and the Ten Commandments are hundreds of years in the future and our Judeo-Christian values, the bedrock of the western world, are beyond the distant future.

Background

You know those genealogical lists we often skim over while reading the Bible? They become important here in understanding the background of Abrams story. Through them we see that Abram (yeah, his original name) is a descendent of the line of Shem. This line is blessed by Noah in Gen 9:26, where the ark builder noted that Jehovah was “the God of Shem.” However, somewhere along the way, the Shemites (or Semites), in whose tents the Japhethites (Gentiles) were to live^a, found itself living among the cursed line of Canaan.^b Chapter 9 ends with the clans of the sons of Noah spreading out over the earth as God had commanded.

In doing so, the family of Abram ended up in Ur, which at that time was one of the premier cities on earth. Located, at that time, on the coast of the Persian Gulf where the Euphrates River emptied itself into the sea. It was the Beijing, the New York, the London of the ancient world. Goods and commerce flowed in abundance, and the fertile soil lent itself to a booming agriculture industry. There was untold wealth to be made in Ur, and by the standards of the day, a life of abundance. Perhaps it was this that drew the family to Ur. However, Ur was a city of Canaan. Archeology has dug up a world dominated by worship of the moon. It was prevalent not only in Ur, but also in Haran which lay some 700 miles north. The clear dark eastern skies lent themselves to the study of the stars, giving rise to all manner of superstition and pagan practice.

Walter Bruggeman points to two ideologies present in Chapter Eleven of Genesis that can be gleaned from the rise of the Tower of Babel, and the barrenness in the fall of a family. One is that of pride and one that of despair. Pride sees the world being fashioned by man with its future wholly dependant upon his strength, ability and desire—the world will be what man wills it to be. However, alongside this, almost a product of it, is despair. Not everyone can dwell in the penthouse apartment; not everyone will derive benefit from the affluence around them. Life still happens, and sometimes life can be a cruel distributor of opportunity and outcome. The experience of those in despair is that things will never change, or they will go only from bad to worse. Despair finds everything meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

So, let us look at these two ideologies, beginning with that of pride:

^a “Here we have an early promise to bring the Gentile nations into the church.” ((Michael Horton, *We Believe* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 69).

^b Genesis 9:25 – the first recorded words from the mouth of Noah are a curse.

Pride

¹Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ²As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. ³They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."
Genesis 11:1-4

In building this tower man is only ascending in arrogance. God had expressed His will on two occasions that mankind "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it^c...be fruitful and multiply; spread out over the earth and multiply on it."^d As man moved east however, they found a place to settle, and they refused to go any farther. In an affront to the Divine will, they planted themselves and declared that they would make a name for themselves. Man declared, "We will build a society as we see fit, and we will ascend in our own manner into the heavens."

John Lennon would have us imagine a world with no religion, but what he really wants us to imagine is a world with no God. John's utopian dream sees us all becoming one and living in peace because there are no possessions and therefore no greed or hunger. Ironically, to sing "imagine there is no possessions" you would have needed to pay royalties to John because John and Oko owned it.^e Imagine that. The height of human arrogance though is best found in the poem *Invictus*, which declares:

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.^f

The poet Henley takes direct aim at the plea of Jesus: "*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*"^g

There is prideful man attempting to make a name for himself, building not with God-made material, but material of his own making. The outcome of this pride was not unity, but division. According to the text God came down^h and scattered them by confusing their language, so that they could not understand one another.

^c Gen 1:28

^d Gen 9:7

^e <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/john-lennon/imagine>

^f Will Earnest Henley, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51642/invictus>

^g Matthew 7:13-14

^h This is Biblical humor, for there is man thinking himself something because in his minds he has built a tower into the heavens, but God still has to come down to see it.

Perhaps Mary alludes to this in her song, *“He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.”*ⁱ

Man is very little different today. We have this fallacious idea, born in the enlightenment, that education will be our savior; or the right kind of governance will be our saviour; that science will be our saviour. We are still trying to make a name for ourselves apart from God, and in direct opposition to God. When you think about it, do we not once again see the old confusion of speech arising amid our pride today? We have people living from paycheck to paycheck to afford the most basic elements of what someone else (who likely has plenty) has determined is necessary. There are others who speak in terms of millions of dollars as if it were pocket change. Some of us may remember how outlandish it was when Bobby Hull was promised one million dollars to play for the Winnipeg Jets of the WHL. Today there are athletes who would be insulted at such a measly amount. The rich almost speak a different language than the poor.

You can bet that as the Tower of Babel began to rise there was a segment of man patting himself on the back for this outstanding accomplishment, while standing on the backs of other men laboring to feed the pride of another. It is the way of pride to exalt oneself over another; to think oneself better than another; to create a confusion between the haves and the have nots. The ideology of pride does not build a better world, it builds a bitter world. Pride leads to despair.

Despair

Common in the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 is the phrase “had other sons and daughters”. As we read through the line of Shem, eight times we hear that each succeeding descendant ‘had other sons and daughters’. Then things begin to change. Terah is said to have been the father of three sons, and unlike his immediate ancestors who had children in their thirties, Terah would be childless until he was seventy. And then suddenly Genesis 11:30 announces the stark news:

“Now Sarai was barren; she had no children.” (Gen 11:30)^j

God had blessed mankind in the beginning, and part of the blessing was that they be fruitful and multiply. But Sarai was barren. Only those, I think, who long for children, can understand the struggle and burden of barrenness. In the New Testament it was Elizabeth’s disgrace^k, and even for the modern ‘would be’ mother, there is the sting of wanting and yet not having a child. The psalmist

ⁱ Luke 1:51

^j It is not mentioned here, but Gen 22:20 hints that barrenness was also experienced for a period of time in the house of Nahor, whose wife had offspring ‘some time later’ after the near sacrifice of Isaac

^k Luke 1:25

boasts, *“Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of [sons].”* (Psalm 127:5), and what man is not filled with joy over a son or daughter. Indirectly, it would seem we are being told that this family was not blessed. And what despair can come of such a thought if you are a member of this family?

Not only was there no offspring, but there was also the heartache of premature death. Haran, likely the eldest of Terah’s sons, “died in Ur of the Chaldeans.” Some traditions say he died while trying to rescue the family’s household gods from a fire.¹ How often have you heard people lament at what a great tragedy it is for a parent to bury a child? The family of Terah knew that pain. Ur was not a land of plenty for the Terah family.

On top of this, the family had succumbed to the culture around them. The Lord may have been the God of Shem^m, but He was not the God of Terah. Joshua, centuries later could say, *“Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods.”* (Joshua 24:2) Someone has written, “This godly line, including Abram’s father, had now become so apostate that it had adopted the pagan worship of the moon.”⁴

Might it have been despair over the loss of a son that drove Terah to turn his back on the fertile land of Ur and set out for Canaan? Even then, the immigration to another land was never completed, and they stopped and settled in Haran – yet another centre of moon worship. And it was there that the life of Terah ended – yes, there may have been some moments of joy, but definitely there was a great deal of tragedy, and with that, despair. If we didn’t know the rest of the story we might surmise that the city of Haran would be the end of the line for the line of Shem.

Scripture presents only two ideologies here – pride and despair. This is the lot for those who live life apart from God, who chase after gods that are no gods. And make no mistake, you are either chasing after the God of the Bible, or you are chasing after a god of nothing. Someone once quipped: What a tragedy to spend one’s life striving to climb the ladder of success to discover at the top the ladder has been leaning on the wrong building the whole time. As Isaiah would scold:

¹⁸ They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand.

¹⁹ No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, “Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?” ²⁰ He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads

¹ Another tradition claims it was a fire set by Abram in an effort to destroy the household gods

^m Genesis 9:26

him; he cannot save himself, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"
Isaiah 44:18-20

And there we have it. Two ideologies; one of pride and one of despair. Where one man grasps life by the neck and tries to make it in his own strength, will and mind, another man is driven to his knees by the weight of life. Between 11:32 and 12:1 though, we have an important dividing line. Where Genesis 11 ends in barrenness and despair/ Genesis 12 begins by God once again calling something into existence – a new man, a new family, a new nation – a nation that will bring blessing to the earth. A nation whose destiny is to introduce the world to a new way of living.

Faith

Walter Brueggemann notes the Abraham narrative "affirms that the world has not been entrusted to humanity"⁵, so that even the failings and struggles of mankind's faith does not and cannot thwart the faithfulness of God. Thank the Lord for Genesis 12.

Genesis 12 tells us that even in the midst of despair, even against the pride of man, God speaks. We will look more closely at Abrams call next week, but I have seen it many times, as others have, and more have experienced, that it is when we come to that place of despair, of coming to the end of the line, that we are ready to hear the voice of God. It is no accident that the first Beatitude is, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven",ⁿ The Message translates this, "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule."

Faith begins in the most unlikely of places. I'm not saying that only a person who has undergone tragedy or who has come to the end of their ropes can come to faith, just that it appears to be so much easier. After all, Jesus didn't say it was impossible for the rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven, only that it was hard.^o

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, didn't come to faith whilst succeeding in academia, it was while languishing in the gulag, there lead to faith by the testimony of a Jewish doctor who in turn had come to faith while treating a dying prisoner.⁶ Charles Colson didn't come to faith while in the Whitehouse, no, it came about when broken of his pride, and was driven to despair, finding himself in the big house.

Conclusion – Where are you from?

ⁿ Matthew 5:3 (see also James 4:6)

^o Matthew 19:23

Where are you today? Are you in that place of pride, thinking you've got it all together, that you are the captain of your soul? Or are you in that place of despair, you've come to the end of yourself and there is nowhere to turn. I find it morbidly amusing that there is more and more speculation on the source of the virus that is currently dominating our lives. It appears as if the pride of the Chinese government and scientists, in proving their skills in virology were just as competent (if not moreso) than western virologists, lead to the release and propagation of COVID-19. Man's pride. And what does it produce? Despair.

One only needs to go into a grocery store; or view a traffic cam over the 401; or the stories coming out of Seniors homes and hospitals to know that there is a lot of despair in our own towns, cities, provinces. You can see it on peoples faces, hear it in their voices. Abrams story of faith begins in the sand of despair. Where does your story begin? The first lesson we see in the life of Abram is despair is the fertile bed of faith. That it is there, when we have come to the end of ourselves; when we have come to the end of the rope; when we've reached the top of the ladder only to find it all meaningless; that we are ready to hear the call of God.

We should never forget that Jesus called tax collectors, prostitutes, men and women of low regard to be his followers. In Jesus time there were those 'religious' folk that thought it a disgrace, or that He was wasting His time. Even in more modern times some of those who have gone on to make the biggest kingdom impacts were those thought ill suited to the task – I think of a Gladys Aylward, who paid her own way to China because no Missionary Service would take her on. The story of Abraham reminds us that He is a God who excels at calling the unqualified.

Prayer

Next week we will reflect on the call of Abram, being reminded that just as God had a plan for the life of Abram – He has a plan for you.

Please follow us on Facebook or visit our website, where you will find a full text of todays and previous Sunday messages, along with study notes.

We'd love to hear from you or have the opportunity to answer any questions you may have. Just drop us an email.

Messages are also available as podcasts.

Thanks again for joining us this morning, and we look forward to meeting with you again next week. Wash your hands, practice safe distancing, and we'll see you next week. God bless.

Study Notes:

- Account begins 2 years after the flood
- After Shem each of the descendants had their first child @ ages 29-35, except Terah – he waited 70 years
- In general, lives are becoming shorter
- Family experiences a tragedy, the loss of a son and father, Harran (who may have been the eldest)
- Lot remains of that family line
- Barrenness appears
- Journey to Canaan appears to have been interrupted in Harran
- Terah = means “delay”
- New section of Scripture beginning, Gen 11:27 – “This is the account of Terah.” The dominant character though until Gen 25:11 will be Abraham, giving way to the account of Ishmael and then in 25:19, the account of Isaac

Edersheim⁷

- Abram the youngest of Terah’s sons
- Site of Ur located 6 miles from the Euphrates River, some 125 miles from the Persian Gulf coast. At one time had been a thriving port city.
- No coincidence that astronomy and moon worship became so predominant, as the clear night skies would have provided a canopy of stars
- Brick have been found that bear the name of Hur – Hurki, the ancient moon god
- It was a culture steeped in paganism (Josh 24:2, 14-15)
- The first call of God came long before the death of Terah (Acts 7:2)
- Gen 24:10 (27:43) indicate that Nahor too settled in Haran
- Perhaps it was his arrival that spurred Abram to continue the journey to Canaan
- [pattern of our faith – not continuous and steady, but rather in fits and starts]
- Archaeology indicates that Haran was a pagan culture centre

F.B. Meyer⁸

- Sons of Ham grossly idolatrous
- 4 centuries since the flood
- Abe from line of Shem, drawn to the opulence of Ur and the opportunities it presented (Josh 24:15; Gen 31:19-35)
- “...there must have been a long previous period of severe trial and testing” (13) that produced a character who would obey the call to leave his fathers house
- “If we live up to our light, we shall have more light.” (13) If we are steadfast in Chaldea, we may be called out to play a great part in the history of the world
- See pg14 – quote on God moving even when we are unaware

Bruggeman⁹

- Three big themes explored in the life of Abraham: the promise of land, the promise of an heir, a threat to the promise (sacrifice of Isaac)
- “Abrahams faith does not occur in a vacuum. He must live in history. And so he is not

always sure...these texts guard against any inclination to interpret Abraham's faith as having been easy or without anguish." (111)

- On Matthew 3:9 – “the news of the Gospel and the reality of new life depend only upon the will of God.” (112)
- Ideology of pride = the world completely entrusted to man and its future is solely dependant upon us
- Ideology of despair = that our world of inequality and oppression is all there will ever be, and there is nothing that can change it
- Abraham narrative “affirms that the world has not been entrusted to humanity” (113) [so that even the failings and struggles of mankind's faith does not and cannot thwart the faithfulness of God]
- “...this God speaks His powerful word directly into a situation of barrenness.” (117)

Hamilton¹⁰

- Terah seems to derive from a Hebrew word for “moon”, and Sarai from the Sumerian name for the female partner of the moon god Sin. (363)
- Laban (who enters the story later) means ‘white’, with ‘the white one’ being a “poetic term for the full moon” (363)
- “...it is probable that the theological milieu in which Abram lived for a good bit of his life was one in which the cult focused its adoration on moon worship” (363)
- Favors a northern Ur (365)

Swindoll¹¹

- Abram from end of Early Bronze Age (2000BC)
- Abram – “exalted father” – likely a reference to the deity worshiped by his family (3)

Endnotes

¹ J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), 68.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OADXNGnJok>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/20th_century_BC

⁴ Michael Horton, *We Believe* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 69.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 113.

⁶ Charles W. Colson, *Loving God* (p. 45). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Alfred Eidersheim, *Bible History: Old Testament*, one volume edition (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995).

⁸ F.B. Meyer, *Abraham: The Obedience of Faith* (Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1960).

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982).

¹⁰ Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990).

¹¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Abraham* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2014).