

Abraham Friend of God - the Call of Abraham

by J. Glyn Owen

The call of Abraham marked the beginning of a new work of God, and it was a call to faith and obedience.

Duration: 39:33

Scripture: Genesis 11:31

Topics: "Abraham"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of truly listening and meditating on the truth of God's word. He highlights how many people only partially open their ears and eyes to the message and fail to let it saturate their minds and souls. The preacher then discusses the revelation of God's glory in Jesus Christ and how seeing this glory can free individuals from their circumstances. The sermon concludes with a focus on the call of Abraham and the requirement to leave everything behind and follow God.

Transcript

Well now, we have felt constrained at this time to begin the series on the life of Abram. Abram who was called the friend of God in two or three places in scripture. Not only was he the friend of God, but he is also called the father of those who believe.

Whether we realize it or not, every Christian person here this morning is intimately related to Abram. Abram is our father in a sense in which no one else is. Abram is our spiritual father.

We meet with Abram in Christ. Abram's place in the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption is one of incalculable significance. With him, God began to do a new work.

Sin had disintegrated the whole of the cosmos. You've already had the judgment of the flood, but water was not able to exterminate the evil of sin from the universe. At the point immediately before the call of Abram, God seems, I say seems, and we must not read too much into this, we must not take it literally, but God seems to have turned his back upon the rest of mankind.

He seems in judgment to have done what Paul speaks of in Romans chapter 1, to have left men in their sin to go their way. Now you have to qualify that really, but it seems like that. And he himself turns aside and he calls a man from the heart of paganism who knew nothing at all about him, never heard of him.

But God appears to him and with this one man, he begins an entirely new thing that will eventually culminate in all things being made new. For the seed of Abram has said, behold, I make all things new. It's a very significant life, the life of Abram.

Now I would also like to stress this before coming to the point. I have been amazed, always have been in reading the book of Genesis, as to how relevant it is. Some people may say the exact opposite.

But the thing that strikes me is that when we walk the chapters of Genesis, we meet circumstances which are almost identical with the circumstances in which we find ourselves today. Now superficially, of course, things are so different. But in terms of principle, they're so very much the same.

And we are going to find that as we study the life of Abram, God's friend. We shall be amazed at the way in which we today, in this year, 1980, after Christ, are faced with the identical situations that challenged this man years and years the other side of the great divide, the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now then, we begin this morning with the call of Abraham, as that comes before us in the passage that was read by Blaine, Genesis 11:31, going right through to 12:9. Now this is going to be our subject in the morning service and the evening service.

It's a vast one, and it's one whole. You can't divide it. My suggestion would be that you should cancel your lunches and we stay here through the afternoon.

But I'm thinking you might not be prepared to do that. I suggest the second alternative, that we come back this evening and take up the threads where we lay them down this morning. God's call and Abram's initial response.

It's not quite correct as you have it in the calendar. We are going to deal with some measure of Abram's response even this morning. But it was a partial and an initial response, and something had to be done later to make it far more definite.

Looking at the passage as a whole, and it forms a unit as you will see, I detect within its summarized record a threefold picture of Abram. And if you keep these three pictures before you, I think you've got the whole in embryo. First of all, we see Abram trustfully moving out of his native land.

And the relevant words are moving out, moving out. Then we see Abraham temporarily settling down in Haran. And the relevant words are settling down.

But then the third picture is of Abram in the land, going from one end of the land to the other, on the go. And it's a remarkable picture that we have of it. Abram on the move.

Abram tenaciously moving forward in the will of God, in the land to which God originally called him, and where he has by this time arrived. It's a beautiful picture, but it is a picture in which we shall find so much means of grace, if we can look at it with confidence that it is the word of God to us. Now let's begin with the beginning.

Abram trustfully setting out. I want to read verses 31 and 32 of Genesis 11 again, and then two New Testament comments alongside. Genesis 11, 31.

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram. And together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans, and I'm sorry, to go to Canaan. But when

they came to Haran, they settled there.

Now alongside of that crisp historical statement from the book of Genesis, I have two comments from the inspired scriptures of the New Testament. One, a comment by the first Christian martyr Stephen, found in Acts chapter 7 verses 2 to 4. Stephen said, Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.

Leave your country and your people, God said, and go to the land that I will show you. So he left the land of the Chaldeans and he settled in Haran. The other comment is from the epistle to the Hebrews chapter 11 and verse 8. By faith Abram, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

Now the first thing that we must say a word about relates to the conditions in which Abram lived. We could deal with this for a very long time, and there are those in the congregation this morning far more able than I am really to deal with it, and I'm sure they will say when I'm over that I've not done any justice to it. Well, all right.

But we must say a word about it. Time was, of course, when in total ignorance of the real situation, folk thought of Abram as the product of a very backward community, who sought adventure in life in a supposedly more vigorous and promising civilization, very much as the prodigal son, fed up with home. It was too cribbed.

He was too cabined and confined at home. Everything grated upon him, and he wanted to get to the land yonder. So was Abram according to the old tale.

But when you come to know the truth, you will discover that that myth was exploded long ago by the archaeologists spade, if by no one else. And we are now in a far better position to assess the realities of the case, of the truth about Abram's background. Ur of the Chaldeans has now been clearly identified as the place currently known as Tell el-Muqayyar, nine miles west of Naziriyeh, which is on the river Euphrates in southern Iraq.

A contemporary writer describes what was the seaport of Ur, Ur of the Chaldeans, in these words. The ruins are not far from the confluence of the two great Mesopotamian rivers, and four millennia of river silt have built a plain which now separates Ur from the sea by many miles. Harbor works may be identified in the ruins of the town, and in ancient times it was obviously the gateway to the Middle East, and therefore to the caravan routes which wound up the Euphrates, curved around what is called the Fertile Crescent of Damascus, and down to the other river valley civilization of the day, namely that of Egypt on the Nile.

The same writer goes on, looking east, and we're still talking about Ur of the Chaldeans, looking east, Ur faced the sea lanes of the Persian Gulf, where men first learned to sail the high seas. Ur lay at the very center of this vast web of human activity. It was a stimulating place for a man of intellect.

Nowhere more than at this nodal point of the ancient world's communications could a man gain a greater and more detailed knowledge of the inhabited globe, and so we could go on. In other words, far from living in the backwoods of civilization, Abram lived at the heart of things. Abram lived at the place where civilization met with civilization.

Everybody went through Ur. All the lanes met and converged in Ur. Abram knew the cosmopolitan communities of the ancient world.

He knew something about their philosophies. He knew something about their religions, and he knew much else that I have no time to refer to. Ur was, however, as spiritually bleak as it was commercially blessed, and we are not surprised to learn from Joshua 24 and verse 2 that Abram's family served other gods.

The name of Abram's father, Terah, by the way, we shall have occasion to refer to this later on, but Terah's name is really a name that is associated with the name of a moon god that was worshipped in Ur. To quote the same author once again, summing it up, he puts it like this. The world of that day was lost in degrading views of God.

From the bull worship of Crete, to the animal deities of brilliant Egypt, from the worship of the sun god on the Phoenician coast, to the sadistic and sensual deities of which the sailors who traded in the Indus and the Malabar coast could tell. It was one wide story of burdensome corruption. And if you want me to add one other authority to that, Professor Donald J. Wiseman, whom I've had the privilege of knowing for years, he says religion in Babylonia at this time was polytheism of the grossest kind.

The texts mentioned the names of at least 3,000 Sumerian deities. Many, of course, titles of the same one god. But this shows, however, that more than 300 distinct gods were worshipped at that point in time.

Now, such spiritual poverty stood alongside the commercial plenty. Have you got the picture? We're right in North America. Commercial plenty.

Spiritual poverty. Idols galore. Cults galore.

And here they are. Though Abram may have known what was sheer luxury in his own particular day, he was reared as a devotee of idolatrous practices. He was spiritually starved.

He was fed on the ashes of idolatry. Those are some of the circumstances. Now the call which said Abram are going, you might well say to me, all right, if that's true about Abram, why on earth leave an opulent country such as that and a place where he has so many options as far as religious practices are concerned? Why leave a situation such as that and go a thousand miles along the Euphrates Valley, as it ultimately turned out, to a land he'd never seen before? Why, indeed, let's see.

Now, reading the last few verses of Genesis 11, one might easily conclude that this movement of the few family members from Ur to Haran was initiated by Terah. You will notice the statement that it was Terah took his son Abram, verse 31. Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, etc.

And you might well conclude that it was so, that somehow or other Terah was responsible for it. Stephen's words in Acts 7 correct that impression. That is one reason why I refer to Stephen at this point.

I think it is necessary for us to take everything that the inspired scriptures tell us in order to get a correct understanding of what really happened. Stephen's words in Acts 7 correct the impression and tell us that they actually went out of Ur in consequences of the God of glory appearing to the man Abram and calling him. Well, you say, why then does it say in Genesis that Terah took his sons and the rest of the family and went out? Well, John Calvin is probably right when he puts it like this.

In those days, it was the father that invariably took the initiative in everything. Nowadays, it's the children that rule the family, rule the parents. Sorry, I don't want to tread on anybody's corns, but you know, it does happen like that in the 20th century.

But a way back there, it was the parents that ruled. And it was what the father said that carried. Mother and the boys and the girls went with Pop.

Pop led the way. And so this is a natural way of saying it. But it is quite clear from what Stephen says that the vision came to one man, that was Abram, and the call came to Abram.

But somehow or other, and this is part of the wonder of God's grace, somehow or other, you see, Terah, his father, got mixed up in it. He couldn't deny the reality of it. He listened to Abram dreaming about going out, having seen a God of glory.

He knew not where he lived. He knew not where he came from. He had no idol to represent him, but the God of glory had appeared to Abram.

And Terah, the old man, conservative as he was, felt there's something in this. And even Terah took the lead as the head of the family, though in reality the whole momentum, the whole issue began because God appeared to Abram. Now let's just take cognizance of some of these points.

We look first of all then at the revelation of the glory of God that was instrumental in calling Abram. Acts 7, 2 again. Brothers and fathers, listen to me, says Stephen, the God of glory appeared to our father Abram while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.

Now here we encounter the first theophany since the fall of man. And if we were here at great leisure, I would love to deal with that. God for the first time appears in some such manner that human beings in their finitude and limitations can see his form or his representation, hear his voice if not touch him.

Our God is the almighty God of creation, and it is given him that at times he can appear in different ways. And so he appeared here, and this is what we refer to as a theophany, an appearance of God. We can't give you the details, the Bible doesn't, so we mustn't try.

But God so appeared that he was heard and he was seen. His glory was beheld. As sure as the disciples could say concerning Jesus of Nazareth, we beheld his glory.

The glory is of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. So could Abram say, I've seen his glory. A spectacle overwhelmed Abram.

Oh, that I had the words of a seraph this morning to bring this across. May the Spirit of God write it on our hearts. A boy reared upon the ashes of idolatry.

God comes to him and God reveals his glory to him so that a pagan idol becomes an obscenity in his eyes. What devotion can you give to a lifeless, motionless, speechless idol when once your eyes have seen the Lord of glory and your ears have heard him speak and command you, you, Abram, do this. And trust me, you see the spell of their attraction, these other deities, was broken by the splendid sublimity of a God who had objective reality and who speaks of himself in introducing himself to Moses as I am that I am.

Moreover, the God of glory which robbed those petty deities of their previous attraction also devalued the luxury and the pomp of the ancient society. I have no doubt that Abram was very much like myself and like you and like all of us. He would have liked to hold on to his luxuries.

He would have liked to hold on to the opulence of earth. He would have loved to be there at the center of trade and try to make a few pounds or dollars. I wonder what the currency was.

Of course he would, but you see he'd seen the Lord of glory. And when you see the Lord of glory, the craze for gold gradually wilts. Not only the objective pagan idols, but the idol spirit in my heart that would worship Mammon there.

The spell is broken. The revelation of the God of glory. My good friend, do you know anything about this? You see, the possibility is unless you have seen the image of the glory of God, you'll never get out of where you are.

You're stuck forever in your circumstances. Nothing can ever take you away. But, but, but, but, but, glorious but, if only you see the glory of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ, you'll be able to leave this and shed that and get away from this and away from that.

And if the Son shall make you free, you will be free indeed. Now come to the next thing. You've got a few minutes more.

In the wake of what revelation, that revelation of the glory of God who was calling Abram, we next note the requirements which God addressed to him. What did God say to him? Well, he said quite crisply to him, probably this is shorthand, I don't know, but at any rate, this is how it goes in Genesis, leave your country, in Acts, I'm sorry, leave your country and your people and go to the land that I will show you. So you see, the Lord of glory is able to communicate with people.

And he's commanding, he assumes the sovereign role. He says, Abram, leave your country, your kith, your kin, your kind, leave them and go to the land that I will show you. And such obedience was as nothing, was, was, was nothing short of self-mortification.

I wonder how can we get this across? I believe that here God demanded of Abram the most costly thing he could ask him to do. When he asked Abram to come away from his native soil to an unspecified destination without any relationship whatsoever between that land, that unseen land, and Abram's history and ancestry. In ancient times, banishment from one's native land was often the equal of death.

It was a lingering death to be torn away from my physical human roots. And to be thrown into a land or onto an island, I knew not where I was. I'm severed from my physical roots and my ancestry.

This was death. And there are philosophers of history who will enlarge upon that theme. This is virtual death.

Such was the death that was required of Abram. Look around your family for the last time and leave them and go out to the land that I will show you. Please note that if our understanding of the biblical record is correct, this took place in Ur of the Chaldees.

And it is quite distinct from what is recorded in the beginning of chapter 12. I think that is a reiteration, with a little bit of enlargement, a reiteration of what happened in principle back in Ur of the Chaldees. I'll come to that later on sometime.

That means that when Abram set out in obedience to God's initial call, he knew nothing at all about the promise of a great nation springing from him, nor of such divine blessing as would make his name great,

nor of God's promise to bless those who blessed him and curse those who cursed him, nor of the benefits that would accrue to all the families of the earth on account of him. He knew nothing about that. That was given him, I say, in Haran.

Now, I guess I ought to explain why I'm saying this. In your King James Version, and even in your NIV, you have one word which should never be there. God had said.

That little word, had, makes it a pluperfect. There is no such thing as a pluperfect in Hebrew. That is an interpretation of the Hebrew text and not a translation, with apologies to the folk responsible for the NIV.

In the RSV, you have it correctly. It says simply, God said, not had said in the past, but at that point in time, in Haran he said it. In other words, in Haran, God repeated what he had said back in her with additions.

And so verses 2, 3, and 4 of chapter 12 were spoken in Haran, when Abram had settled down there for a little while. But Abram didn't know all about that when he was back in her. When he was originally called, he was only told, go to the land and I will show you where it is.

I'll take you there. In other words, I have a place for you. Trust me, follow me, do what I command.

That was the original call. Why then did Abram go out? Why did he obey? What was there to allure him? My friends, just one thing, just one thing. The God of glory appeared to him.

Nothing else. The promises of the God of glory only come in at Haran. I believe that's what the Hebrew requires of us.

The promises about, there are seven of them there, there's a seven jeweled promise. We shall come back to that tonight. But that only comes, that only comes at Haran.

There were no promises other than the promises of guidance originally in her, in her. The God of glory says, Abram, go. And seeing the God of glory and hearing the God of glory, there was no more argument in Abram's heart.

He went. Now that's faith, you see. That's obedience.

And we're told in the epistle to the Hebrews, at what put him among the Westminster Abbey art gallery, Hebrews 11, is this. By faith, Abram went out. Not knowing whether he went.

He didn't know where he was going, but there was one thing he was sure of. Before you say he was a fool, listen to this. The God that had appeared to him was a living God.

He was the God of glory. There was nothing like him. There was no one like him.

He stood apart. He stood alone. He stood above.

He was the Lord of glory. And that was enough. Now, my friends, I have to conclude this morning with this.

You may well ask me, you may say, well, at the beginning you said that this was relevant to us and that there are certain, certain respects in which the circumstances of Abram are fairly similar to ours. Indeed, they are. Let me end with just this.

You see, whether you and I realize it or not, we are living in days when the same God of glory has revealed himself, not only partly, as was the case with Abram, however great it was, but he has revealed himself in all his undimmed and undiminishing glory in the person of his co-equal son, Jesus, the seed of Abram. So that Jesus Christ could say to the men and the women of his day, listen, he says, they that have seen me, have seen the Father. And the Apostle Paul can say, in him, that is in the Lord Jesus Christ, there dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead as in a body, in one corpus, in one whole entity, indivisible.

God in flesh, that is what we see in the babe of Bethlehem. The immortal, the invisible, the God, only wise, comes down and is contracted to a span in the virgin's womb and is born as man, takes our humanity to his deity, and there he dwells in all his glory, albeit veiled in such meanly circumstances. Have you scrutinized the babe of Bethlehem long enough to see the glory of God in him? Now this is the point.

We, unfortunately, shut our ears to the truth that is proclaimed to us, or only partly open them, or we shut our eyes to the truths that are written for our prophet, and we only partly read. And even what we read, we do not ponder, we do not meditate upon them, we do not let the truth of God saturate our minds and our souls, that they master us. So many of the things we have read and we say we believe, they're only in the outer vestibule of our thought region.

God, my friend, has appeared in his co-equal Son, Jesus Christ, and the message of it is this. Come, follow me. Leave your kith and your kindred.

Leave your gods and your idolatry. Leave your false ways of sinning. Leave your opulence and all its false promises.

Let everything go. Let everything loose. Follow me, and I will make you to become what I want you to become.

I'll take you into the land where I want you to be. I'll lift you onto a plain where I want you to live. That's the message.

It's exactly the same in principle. Blessed is he who can say with all honesty, in the words of one of my favorite hymn writers, Jesus, I my cross have taken, have taken, all to leave and follow thee. Destitute, despised, forsaken, thou from hence my all shalt be.

Perish every fond ambition, all I've sought and hoped and known. Yet how rich is my condition. God and heaven are all my own.

Have you stepped out because you've seen and heard the Lord of glory? My friend, if you haven't taken that first step, dare I come back to our word to the children. I want you to see this morning service. I want you to see it in this beautiful, simple way.

God is here with his motherly arms outstretched, and he's saying to some of you, come on, sonny. Come on, lassie. I want you to take the first step into my arms, and I'll teach you to walk.

Just trust in me. And I'll take you to the land that I've meant you to live in, and I'll make of you what I have in mind for you from all eternity. Take the first step.

Is there anyone here this morning who's not done that? Now that's not the end of the story. Tonight we shall have to take up the strain with Abram temporarily settling down short of the goal that God had in mind, that is, in Haran. There's a possible tragedy even after this initial decision, but nevertheless that doesn't cancel the necessity of making a firm break with things and in answer to the call of God going out by faith with faithful Abram and the men and women of faith who have adorned the ages of history.

If we can be of help to anyone to make that initial decision, please come to us at the end of the service or at any other time. This is our business here, and it's a great privilege. We shall not badger anyone.

I want to assure visitors of that, but brothers and sisters, this is our prime business. We would love to know that you are following in the footmarks of the Lord of glory into the ever-enlarging vistas of his will. Let us pray.

Oh Lord, please let your voice be heard above the feeble voices of men. Out of this word which you have caused to be written, speak the word that you will yet cause to be heard. That will enable us to leave the slough and the despond, the mire and the clay, the prison house, wherever it is and whatever its nature, and to walk in the way of obedience and faith.

God of glory, hear our prayer and hear our cry. In Jesus name, Amen.

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