

Genesis 12:1-20

by John Calvin

God calls Abram to leave his country and promises to make him a great nation and bless him, and Abram's faith and obedience are tested as he follows God's command.

Scripture: Genesis 12:17

Topics: "Faith And Obedience", "Gods Providence"

Description

John Calvin preaches about Abram's journey of faith, highlighting his obedience to God's command to leave his country, the protection of his wife Sarai, and the divine intervention to preserve her chastity. Despite Abram's faults and fears, God's providence is evident in guiding him through various trials and temptations, demonstrating the importance of trusting in God's promises and seeking His guidance in all circumstances.

Transcript

1. Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee:
1. Dixerat autem Jehova ad Abram, Abi e terra tua, et e cognatione tua, et e domo patris tui, ad terram quam ostendam tibi.
2. And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing:
2. Et faciam te in gentem magnam, et benedicam tibi, et magnificabo nomen tuum, et eris benedictio.
3. And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.
3. Et benedicam benedicientibus tibi: et maledicentibus tibi maledicam: et benedicentur in te omnes familiae terrae.
4. So Abram departed, as the LORD had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran.

4. Abiit ergo Abram quemadmodum loquutus fuerat ad eum Jehova: et perrexit cum eo Lot: Abram autem erat filius quinque annorum et septuaginta annorum, quando egressus est de Charan

5. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came.

5. Et cepit Abram Sarai uxorem suam, et Lot filium fratris sui, et omnem substantiam quam acquisierant, et animas quas fecerant in Charan, et egressi sunt ut pergerent in terram Chenaar, et venerunt ad terram Chenaar.

6. And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land.

6. Et transivit Abram in terram usque ad locum Sechem, usque ad quercum Moreh: Chenaar, autem tunc erat in terra.

7. And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him.

7. Et visus est Jehova Abrae, et dixit, Semini tuo dabo terram hanc: et aedificavit ibi altare Jehovae qui apparuerat sibi.

8. And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, having Bethel on the west, and Hai on the east: and there he builded an altar unto the LORD, and called upon the name of the LORD.

8. Et transtulit se inde ad montem ab Oriente ipsi Bethel, tetenditque tabernaculum suum: Bethel erat ab Occidente, et Hai ab Oriente: et aedificavit ibi altare Jehova, et invocavit nomen Jehovae.

9. And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south.

9. Profectus est et Abram eundo et proficiscendo ad Meridiem.

10. And there was a famine in the land: and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was grievous in the land.

10. Et fuit fames in terra, et descendit Abram in Aegyptum ut peregrinaretur ibi: quia gravis fames erat in terra.

11. And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon:

11. Et fuit, quando appropinquavit ut ingrederetur Aegyptum, dixit ad Sarai uxorem suam, Ecce, nunc novi quod mulier pulchra aspectu sis:

12. Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife: and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive.

12. Erit itaque, quum viderint to Aegyptii, dicent, Uxor ejus est: et occident me, et to servabunt vivam.

13. Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee.

13. Dic nunc quod soror mea sis, ut bene sit mihi propter te, et vivat anima mea propter te.

14. And it came to pass, that, when Abram was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair.

14. Et fuit quum ingredere tur Abram Aegyptum, viderunt Aegyptii mulierem quod pulchra esset valde.

15. The princes also of Pharaoh saw her, and commended her before Pharaoh: and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house.

15. Quum igitur vidissent eam principes Pharaonis, laudaverunt eam Pharaoni: et sublata est mulier in domum Pharaonis.

16. And he entreated Abram well for her sake: and he had sheep, and oxen, and he asses, and menservants, and maidservants, and she asses, and camels.

16. Et ipsi Abram benefecit propter eam: fueruntque ei pecudes, et boves, et asini, et servi, et ancillae, et asinae, et cameli.

17. And the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai Abram's wife.

17. Percussit autem Jehova Pharaonem percussionibus magnis et domum ejus, causa Sarai uxoris Abram.

18. And Pharaoh called Abram, and said, What is this that thou hast done unto me? why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife?

18. Vocavitque Pharaon Abram, et dixit, Cur hoc, fecisti mihi? utquid non indicasti mihi quod uxor tua esset?

19. Why saidst thou, She is my sister? so I might have taken her to me to wife: now therefore behold thy wife, take her, and go thy way.

19. Utquid dixisti, Soror mea est? et tuli eam mihi in uxorem: et nunc ecce uxor tua, cape et vade.

20. And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him: and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had.

20. Et praecepit super eum Pharaon viris, et demiserunt eum et uxorem ejus, et omnia quae erant ei.

1. Now the Lord had said unto Abram . That an absurd division of these chapters may not trouble the readers, let them connect this sentence with the last two verses of the previous chapter. Moses had before said, that Terah and Abram had departed from their country to dwell in the land of Canaan. He now explains that they had not been impelled by levity as rash and fickle men are wont to be; nor had been drawn to other regions by disgust with their own country, as morose persons frequently are; nor were fugitives on account of crime; nor were led away by any foolish hope, or by any allurements, as many are hurried hither and thither by their own desires; but that Abram had been divinely commanded to go forth and had not moved a foot but as he was guided by the word of God.

They who explain the passage to mean, that God spoke to Abram after the death of his father, are easily refuted by the very words of Moses: for if Abram was already without a country, and was sojourning as a stranger elsewhere, the command of God would have been superfluous, 'Depart from thy land, from thy country, and from thy father's house.' The authority of Stephen is also added, who certainly deserves to be accounted a suitable interpreter of this passage: now he plainly testifies, that God appeared to Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran; he then recites this oracle which we are now explaining; and at length concludes, that, for this reason, Abraham migrated from Chaldea.

Nor is that to be overlooked which God afterwards repeats, (Ge 15:7,) 'I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees;' for we thence infer, that the Divine Hand was not for the first time stretched out to him after he had dwelt in Charran, but while he yet remained at home in Chaldea. 339 Truly this command of Gods respecting which doubts are foolishly entertained, ought to be deemed by us sufficient to disprove the contrary error. For God could not have spoken thus, except to a man who had been, up to that time, settled in his nest, having his affairs underanged, and living quietly and tranquilly among his relatives, without any change in his mode of life; otherwise, the answer would have been readily given 'I have left my country, I am far removed from my kindred.'

In short, Moses records this oracle, in order that we may know that this long journey was undertaken by Abram, and his father Terah, at the command of God. Whence it also appears, that Terah was not so far deluded by superstitions as to be destitute of the fear of God. It was difficult for the old man, already broken and failing in health, to tear himself away from his own country. Some true religion, therefore, although smothered, still remained in his mind. Therefore, when he knew that the place, from which his son was commanded to depart, was accursed, it was his wish not to perish there; but he joined himself as an associate with him whom the Lord was about to deliver.

What a witness, I demand, will he prove, in the last day, to condemn our indolence! Easy and plausible was the excuse which he might have alleged; namely that he would remain quietly at home, because he had received no command. But he, though blind in the darkness of unbelief, yet opened his eyes to the beam of light which shot across his path; while we remain unmoved when the Divine vocation directly shines upon us. Moreover, this calling of Abram is a signal instance of the gratuitous mercy of God.

Had Abram been beforehand with God by any merit of works? Had Abram come to him, or conciliated his favor? Nay, we must ever recall to mind, (what I have before adduced from the passage in Joshua,) that he was plunged in the filth of idolatry; and now God freely stretches forth his hand to bring back the wanderer. He deigns to open his sacred mouth, that he may show to one, deceived by Satan's wiles, the way of salvation. And it is wonderful, that a man, miserable and lost, should have the preference given him, over so many holy worshippers of God; that the covenant of life should be placed in his possession; that the Church should be revived in him, and he himself constituted the father of all the faithful.

But this is done designedly, in order that the manifestation of the grace of God might become the more conspicuous in his person. For he is an example of the vocation of us all; for in him we perceive, that, by the mere mercy of God, those things which are not are raised from nothing, in order that they may begin to be something.

Get thee out of thy country . This accumulation of words may seem to be superfluous. To which also may be added, that Moses, in other places so concise, here expresses a plain and easy matter in three different forms of speech. But the case is quite otherwise. For since exile is in itself sorrowful, and the

sweetness of their native soil holds nearly all men bound to itself, God strenuously persists in his command to leave the country, for the purpose of thoroughly penetrating the mind of Abram. If he had said in a single word, Leave thy country, this indeed would not lightly have pained his mind; but Abram is still more deeply affected, when he hears that he must renounce his kindred and his father's house. Yet it is not to be supposed, that God takes a cruel pleasure in the trouble of his servants; but he thus tries all their affections, that he may not leave any lurking-places undiscovered in their hearts. We see many persons zealous for a short time, who afterwards become frozen; whence is this, but because they build without a foundation? Therefore God determined, thoroughly to rouse all the senses of Abram, that he might undertake nothing rashly or inconsiderately; lest, repenting soon afterwards, he should veer with the wind, and return. Wherefore, if we desire to follow God with constancy, it behoves us carefully to meditate on all the inconveniences, all the difficulties, all the dangers which await us; that not only a hasty zeal may produce fading flowers, but that from a deep and well-fixed root of piety, we may bring forth fruit in our whole life.

Unto a land that I will show thee . This is another test to prove the faith of Abram. For why does not God immediately point out the land, except for the purpose of keeping his servant in suspense, that he may the better try the truth of his attachment to the word of God? As if he would say, 'I command thee to go forth with closed eyes, and forbid thee to inquire whither I am about to lead thee, until, having renounced thy country, thou shalt have given thyself wholly to me.'

And this is the true proof of our obedience, when we are not wise in our own eyes, but commit ourselves entirely unto the Lord. Whensoever, therefore, he requires anything of us, we must not be so solicitous about success, as to allow fear and anxiety to retard our course. For it is better, with closed eyes, to follow God as our guide, than, by relying on our own prudence, to wander through those circuitous paths which it devises for us. Should any one object, that this statement is at variance with the former sentence, in which Moses declared that Terah and Abram departed from their own country, that they might come into the land of Canaan: the solution is easy, if we admit a prolepsis 340 (that is, an anticipation on something still future) in the expression of Moses; such as follows in this very chapter, in the use of the name Bethel; and such as frequently occurs in the Scriptures.

They knew not whither they were going; but because they had resolved to go whithersoever God might call them, Moses, speaking in his own person, mentions the land, which, though hitherto unknown to them both, was afterwards revealed to Abram alone. It is therefore true, that they departed with the design of coming to the land of Canaan; because, having received the promise concerning a land which was to be shown them, they suffered themselves to be governed by God, until he should actually bestow what he had promised.

Nevertheless it may be, that God, having proved the devotedness of Abram, soon afterwards removed all doubt from his mind. For we do not know at what precise moment of time, God would intimate to him what it was his will to conceal only for a season. It is enough that Abram declared himself to be truly obedient to God, when, having cast all his care on God's providence, and having discharged, as it were, into His bosom, whatever might have impeded him, he did not hesitate to leave his own country, uncertain where, at length, he might plant his foot; for, by this method, the wisdom of the flesh was reduced to order, and all his affections, at the same time, were subdued.

Yet it may be asked, why God sent his servant into the land of Canaan rather than into the East, where he could have lived with some other of the holy fathers? Some (in order that the change may not seem to

have been made for the worse) will have it, that he was led thither, for the purpose of dwelling with his ancestor Shem, whom they imagine to have been Melchizedek. But if such were the counsel of God, it is strange that Abram bent his steps in a different direction; nay, we do not read that he met with Melchizedek, till he was returning from the battle in the plain of Sodom.

But, in its proper place, we shall see how frivolous is the imagination, that Melchizedek was Shem. As it concerns the subject now in hand, we infer, from the result which at length followed, that God's design was very different from what these men suppose. The nations of Canaan, on account of their deplorable wickedness, were devoted to destruction. God required his servant to sojourn among them for a time, that, by faith, he might perceive himself to be the heir of that land, the actual possession of which was reserved for his posterity to a long period after his own death.

Wherefore he was commanded to cross over into that country, for this sole reason, that it was to be evacuated by its inhabitants, for the purpose of being given to his seed for a possession. And it was of great importance, that Abram, Isaac, and Jacob, should be strangers in that land, and should by faith embrace the dominion over it, which had been divinely promised them, in order that their posterity might, with the greater courage, gird themselves to take possession of it.

2. And I will make of thee a great nation . Hitherto Moses has related what Abram had been commanded to do; now he annexes the promise of God to the command; and that for no light cause. For as we are slothful to obey, the Lord would command in vain, unless we are animated by a superadded confidence in his grace and benediction. Although I have before alluded to this, in the history of Noah, it will not be useless to inculcate it again, for the passage itself requires something to be said; and the repetition of a doctrine of such great moment ought not to seem superfluous. For it is certain that faith cannot stand, unless it be founded on the promises of God. But faith alone produces obedience. Therefore in order that our minds may be disposed to follow God, it is not sufficient for him simply to command what he pleases, unless he also promises his blessing. We must mark the promise, that Abram, whose wife was still barren, should become a great nation. This promise might have been very efficacious, if God, by the actual state of things, had afforded ground of hope respecting its fulfillment; but now, seeing that the barrenness of his wife threatened him with perpetual privation of offspring, the bare promise itself would have been cold, if Abram had not wholly depended upon the word of God; wherefore, though he perceives the sterility of his wife, he yet apprehends, by hope, that great nation which is promised by the word of God. And Isaiah greatly extols this act of favor, that God, by his blessing, increased his servant Abram whom he found alone and solitary to so great a nation (Isa 2:2.) The noun גוי (goi ,) "my nation," (Ge 12:4,) though detestable to the Jews, 341 is in this place, and in many others, taken as a term of honor. And it is here used emphatically, to show that he should not only have posterity from his own seed in great number, but a peculiar people, separated from others, who should be called by his own name.

I will bless thee . This is partly added, to explain the preceding sentence. For, lest Abram should despair, God offers his own blessing, which was able to effect more in the way of miracle, than is seen to be effected, in other cases, by natural means. The benediction, however, here pronounced, extends farther than to offspring; and implies, that he should have a prosperous and joyous issue of all his affairs; as appears from the succeeding context, "And will make thy name great, and thou shalt be a blessing." For such happiness is promised him, as shall fill all men everywhere with admiration, so that they shall introduce the name of Abram, as an example, into their formularies of pronouncing benediction. Others use the term in the sense of augmentation, 'Thou shalt be a blessing,' that is, 'All shall bless thee.' But the former sense is the more suitable. Some also expound it actively, as if it had been said, 'My grace shall

not reside in thee, so that thou alone mayest enjoy it, but it shall flow far unto all nations. I therefore now so deposit it with thee, that it may overflow into all the world.' But God does not yet proceed to that communication, as I shall show presently.

3. And I will bless them that bless thee . Here the extraordinary kindness of God manifests itself, in that he familiarly makes a covenant with Abram, as men are wont to do with their companions and equals. For this is the accustomed form of covenants between kings and others, that they mutually promise to have the same enemies and the same friends. This certainly is an inestimable pledge of special love, that God should so greatly condescend for our sake. For although he here addresses one man only, he elsewhere declares the same affection towards his faithful people. We may therefore infer this general doctrine, that God so embraced us with his favor, that he will bless our friends, and take vengeance on our enemies. We are, moreover, warned by this passage, that however desirous the sons of God may be of peace, they will never want enemies. Certainly, of all persons who ever conducted themselves so peaceably among men as to deserve the esteem of all, Abram might be reckoned among the chief, yet even he was not without enemies; because he had the devil for his adversary, who holds the wicked in his hand, whom he incessantly impels to molest the good. There is then, no reason why the ingratitude of the world should dishearten us, even though many hate us without cause, and, when provoked by no injury, study to do us harm; but let us be content with this single consolation, that God engages on our side in the war. Besides, God exhorts his people to cultivate fidelity and humanity with all good men, and, further, to abstain from all injury. For this is no common inducement to excite us to assist the faithful, that if we discharge any duty towards them, God will repay it; nor ought it less to alarm us, that he denounces war against us, if we hurt any one belonging to him.

In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed . Should any one choose to understand this passage in a restricted sense, as if, by a proverbial mode of speech, they who shall bless their children or their friends, shall be called after the name of Abram, let him enjoy his opinion; for the Hebrew phrase will bear the interpretation, that Abram shall be called a signal example of happiness. But I extend the meaning further; because I suppose the same thing to be promised in this place, which God afterwards repeats more clearly, (Ge 22:18.) And the authority of Paul brings me to this point; who says, that the promise to the seed of Abraham, that is, to Christ, was given four hundred and thirty years before the law, (Ga 3:17.) But the computation of years requires us to understand, that the blessing was promised him in Christ, when he was coming into the land of Canaan. Therefore God (in my judgment) pronounces that all nations should be blessed in his servant Abram because Christ was included in his loins. In this manner, he not only intimates that Abram would be an example , but a cause of blessing; so that there should be an understood antithesis between Adam and Christ. For whereas, from the time of the first man's alienation from God, we are all born accursed, here a new remedy is offered unto us. Nor is there any thing contrary to this in the assertion, that we must by no means seek a blessing in Abram himself, inasmuch as the expression is used in reference to Christ. Here the Jews petulantly object, and heap together many testimonies of Scripture, from which it appears that to bless or curse in any one , is nothing else than to wish good or evil to another, according to him as a pattern. But their cavil may be set aside without difficulty. I acknowledge, that what they say is often, but not always true. For when it is said, that the tribe of Levi shall bless in the name of God, in De 10:8 Isa 65:16, and in similar passages, it is sufficiently evident, that God is declared to be the fountain of all good, in order that Israel may not seek any portion of good elsewhere Seeing, therefore, that the language is ambiguous, let them grant the necessity of choosing this, or the other sense, as may be most suitable to the subject and the occasion. Now Paul assumes it as an axiom which is received among all the pious, and which ought to be taken for granted,

that the whole human race is obnoxious to a curse, and therefore that the holy people are blessed only through the grace of the Mediator. Whence he concludes, that the covenant of salvation which God made with Abram, is neither stable nor firm except in Christ. I therefore thus interpret the present place; that God promises to his servant Abram that blessing which shall afterwards flow down to all people. But because this subject will be more amply explained else where, I now only briefly touch upon it.

4. So Abram departed . They who suppose that God was now speaking to Abram in Charran, lay hold of these words in support of their error. But the cavil is easily refuted; for after Moses has mentioned the cause of their departure, namely, that Abram had been constrained by the command of God to leave his native soil, he now returns to the thread of the history. Why Abram for a time should have remained in Charran, we do not know, except that God laid his hand upon him, to prevent him from immediately obtaining a sight of the land, which, although yet unknown, he had nevertheless preferred to his own country.

He is now said to have departed from Charran, that he might complete the journey he had begun; which also the next verse confirms, where it is said, that he took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew with him. As under the conduct and auspices of his father Terah, they had departed from Chaldea; so now when Abram is become the head of the family, he pursues and completes what his father had begun. Still it is possible, that the Lord again exhorted him to proceed, the death of his father having intervened, and that he confirmed his former call by a second oracle.

It is however certain, that in this place the obedience of faith is commended, and not as one act simply, but as a constant and perpetual course of life. For I do not doubt, but Moses intended to say, that Abram remained in Charran, not because he repented, as if he was inclined to swerve from the straight course of his vocation, but as having the command of God always fixed in his mind. And therefore I would rather refer the clause, "As the Lord had spoken to him" to the first oracle; so that Moses should say, 'he stood firmly in his purpose, and his desire to obey God was not broken by the death of his father.'

Moreover, we have here in one word, a rule prescribed to us, for the regulation of our whole life, which is to attempt nothing but by Divine authority. For, however men may dispute concerning virtues and duties, no work is worthy of praise, or deserves to be reckoned among virtues, except what is pleasing to God. And he himself testifies, that he makes greater account of obedience than of sacrifice, (1Sa 15:22.) Wherefore, our life will then be rightly constituted, when we depend upon the word of God, and undertake nothing except at his command.

And it is to be observed, that the question is not here concerning some one particular work, but concerning the general principle of living piously and uprightly. For the subject treated of, is the vocation of Abram which is a common pattern of the life of all the faithful. We are not indeed all indiscriminately commanded to desert our country; this point, I grant, is special in the case of Abram; but generally, it is God's will that all should be in subjection to his word, and should seek the law, for the regulation of their life, at his mouth, lest they should be carried away by their own will, or by the maxims of men. Therefore by the example of Abram, entire self-renunciation is enjoined, that we may live and die to God alone.

5. The souls that they had gotten in Haran . Souls signify male and female servants. And this is the first mention of servitude; whence it appears, that not long after the deluge the wickedness of man caused liberty which by nature, was common to all, to perish with respect to a great part of mankind. Whence servitude originated is not easy to determine, unless according to the opinion which has commonly

prevailed it arose from wars; because the conquerors compelled those whom they took in battle to serve them; and hence the name of bondman 342 is derived. But whether they who were first slaves had been subjugated by the laws of war, or had been reduced to this state by want, it is indeed certain, that the order of nature was violently infringed; because men were created for the purpose of cultivating mutual society between each other. And although it is advantageous that some should preside over others, yet an equality, as among brethren ought to have been retained. However, although slavery is contrary to that right government which is most desirable, and in its commencement was not without fault; it does not, on this account, follow, that the use of it, which was afterwards received by custom, and excused by necessity, is unlawful. Abram therefore might possess both servants bought with money, and slaves born in his house. For that common saying, 'What has not prevailed from the beginning cannot be rendered valid by length of time,' admits (as is well known) of some exceptions; and we shall have an example in point in the forty-eighth chapter Ge 48:1

6. And Abram passed through the land . Here Moses shows that Abram did not immediately, on his entering into the land, find a habitation in which he might rest. For the expression passed through, and the position of the place (Sichem) to which he passed, show that the length of his journey had been great. Sichem is not far from Mount Gerizim, which is towards the desert of the Southern region. Wherefore, it is just as Moses had said, that the faith of Abram was again tried, when God suffered him as a wanderer to traverse the whole land, before he gave him any fixed abode. How hard would it seem when God had promised to be his Protector, that not even a little corner is assigned him on which he may set his foot? But he is compelled to wander in a circuitous route, in order that he may the better exercise self denial. The word ■■■■ (Elon) is by some translated an oak forest, by some a valley; 343 others take it for the proper name of a place. I do not doubt that Moreh is the proper name of the place; but I explain Elon to mean a plain, or an oak, not that it was a single tree, but the singular is put for the plural number; 344 and this latter interpretation I most approve.

And the Canaanite was then in the land . This clause concerning the Canaanite is not added without reason; because it was no slight temptation to be cast among that perfidious and wicked nation, destitute of all humanity. What could the holy man then think, but that he was betrayed into the hands of these most abandoned men, by whom he might soon be murdered; or else that he would have to spend a disturbed and miserable life amid continual injuries and troubles? But it was profitable for him to be accustomed, by such discipline, to cherish a better hope. For if he had been kindly and courteously received in the land of Canaan, he would have hoped for nothing better than to spend his life there as a guest. But now God raises his thoughts higher in order that he may conclude, that at some future time, the inhabitants being destroyed, he shall be the lord and heir of the land. Besides, he is admonished, by the continual want of repose, to look up towards heaven. For since the inheritance of the land was specially promised to himself, and would only belong to his descendants, for his sake; it follows, that the land, in which he was so ill and inhumanly treated, was not set before him as his ultimate aim, but that heaven itself was proposed to him as his final resting-place.

7. And the Lord appeared unto Abram . He now relates that Abram was not left entirely destitute, but that God stretched forth his hand to help him. We must, however, mark, with what kind of assistance God succours him in his temptations. He offers him his bare word, and in such a way, indeed, that Abram might deem himself exposed to ridicule. For God declares he will give the land to his seed: but where is the seed, or where the hope of seed; seeing that he is childless and old, and his wife is barren? This was therefore an insipid consolation to the flesh. But faith has a different taste; the property of which is, to hold

all the senses of the pious so bound by reverence to the word, that a single promise of God is quite sufficient. Meanwhile, although God truly alleviates and mitigates the evils which his servants endure, he does it only so far as is expedient for them, without indulging the desire of the flesh. Let us hence learn, that this single remedy ought to be sufficient for us in our sufferings: that God so speaks to us in his word, as to cause our minds to perceive him to be propitious; and let us not give the reins to the importunate desires of our flesh. God himself will not fail on his part; but will, by the manifestation of his favor, raise us when we are cast down.

And there builded he an altar . This altar was a token of gratitude. As soon as God appeared to him he raised an altar: to what end? That he might call upon the name of the Lord. We see, therefore, that he was intent upon giving of thanks; and that an altar was built by him in memory of kindness received. Should any one ask, whether he could not worship God without an altar? I answer, that the inward worship of the heart is not sufficient unless external profession before men be added. Religion has truly its appropriate seat in the heart; but from this root, public confession afterwards arises, as its fruit. For we are created to this end, that we may offer soul and body unto God. The Canaanites had their religion; they had also altars for sacrifices: but Abram, that he might not involve himself in their superstitions, erects a domestic altar, on which he may offer sacrifice; as if he had resolved to place a royal throne for God within his house. But because the worship of God is spiritual, and all ceremonies which have no right and lawful end, are not only vain and worthless in themselves, but also corrupt the true worship of God by their counterfeited and fallacious appearance; we must carefully observe what Moses says, that the altar was erected for the purpose of calling upon God. The altar then is the external form of divine worship; but invocation is its substance and truth. This mark easily distinguishes pure worshippers from hypocrites, who are far too liberal in outward pomp, but wish their religion to terminate in bare ceremonies. Thus all their religion is vague, being directed to no certain end. Their ultimate intention, indeed, is (as they confusedly speak) to worship God: but piety approaches nearer to God; and therefore does not trifle with external figures, but has respect to the truth and the substance of religion. On the whole, ceremonies are no otherwise acceptable to God, than as they have reference to the spiritual worship of God.

To invoke the name of God, or to invoke in his name, admits of a twofold exposition; namely, either to pray to God, or to celebrate his name with praises. But because prayer and thanksgiving are things conjoined, I willingly include both. We have before said, in the fourth chapter (Ge 4:1), that the whole worship of God was not improperly described, by the figure synecdoche, under this particular expression; because God esteems no duty of piety more highly, and accounts no sacrifice more acceptable, than the invocation of his name, as is declared in Ps 50:23, and Ps 51:19. As often, therefore, as the word altar occurs, let the sacrifices also come into our mind; for from the beginning, God would have mankind informed, that there could be no access to himself without sacrifice. Therefore Abram, from the general doctrine of religion, opened for himself a celestial sanctuary, by sacrifices, that he might rightly worship God. 345 But we know that God was never appeased by the blood of beasts. Wherefore it follows, that the faith of Abram was directed to the blood of Christ. 346

It may seem, however, absurd, that Abram built himself an altar, at his own pleasure, though he was neither a priest, nor had any express command from God. I answer, that Moses removes this scruple in the context: for Abram is not said to have made an altar simply to God, but to God who had appeared unto him. The altar therefore had its foundation in that revelation; and ought not to be separated from that of which it formed but a part and an appendage. Superstition fabricates for itself such a God as it pleases and then invents for him various kinds of worship; just as the Papists, at this days most proudly boast that

they worship God, when they are only trifling with their foolish pageantry. But the piety of Abram is commended, because, having erected an altar, he worshipped God who had been manifested to him. And although Moses declares the design with which Abram built the altar, when he relates that he there called upon God, he yet, at the same time, intimates, that such a service was pleasing to God: for this language implies the approval of the Holy Spirit, who thereby pronounces that he had rightly called upon God. Others, indeed confidently boasted that they worshipped God; but God, in praising Abram only, rejects all the rites of the heathen as a vile profanation of his name.

8. And he removed from thence . When we hear that Abram moved from the place where he had built an altar to God, we ought not to doubt that he was, by some necessity, compelled to do so. He there found the inhabitants unpropitious; and therefore transfers his tabernacle elsewhere. But if Abram bore his continual wanderings patiently, our fastidiousness is utterly inexcusable, when we murmur against God, if he does not grant us a quiet nest. Certainly, when Christ has opened heaven to us, and daily invites us thither to dwell with himself; we should not take it amiss, if he chooses that we should be strangers in the world. The sum of the passage is this, that Abram was without a settled residence: 347 which title Paul assigns to Christians, (1Co 4:11.) Moreover, there is a manifest prolepsis in the word Bethel; for Moses gives the place this name, to accommodate his discourse to the men of his own age.

And there he builded an altar . Moses commends in Abram his unwearied devotedness to piety: for by these words, he intimates, that whatever place he visited, he there exercised himself in the external worship of God; both that he might have no religious rites in common with the wicked, and that he might retain his family in sincere piety. And it is probable, that, from this cause, he would be the object of no little enmity; because there is nothing which more enrages the wicked, than religion different from their own, in which they conceive themselves to be not only despised, but altogether condemned as blind. And we know that the Canaanites were cruel and proud, and too ready to avenge insults. This was perhaps the reason of Abram's frequent removals: that his neighbors regarded the altars which he built, as a reproach to themselves. It ought indeed to be referred to the wonderful favor of God, that he was not often stoned. Nevertheless, since the holy man knows that he is justly required to bear testimony that he has a God peculiarly his own, whom he must not, by dissimulation, virtually deny, 348 he therefore does not hesitate to prefer the glory of God to his own life.

9. And Abram journeyed . This was the third removal of the holy man within a short period, after he seemed to have found some kind of abode. It is certain that he did not voluntarily, and for his own gratification, run hither and thither, (as light-minded persons are wont to do:) but there were certain necessities which drove him forth, in order to teach him, by continual habit, that he was not only a stranger, but a wretched wanderer in the land of which he was the lord. Yet no common fruit was the result of so many changes; because he endeavored, as much as in him lay, to dedicate to God, every part of the land to which he had access, and perfumed it with the odour of his faith.

10. And there was a famine in the land . A much more severe temptation is now recorded, by which the faith of Abram is tried to the quick. For he is not only led around through various windings of the country, but is driven into exile, from the land which God had given to him and to his posterity. It is to be observed, that Chaldea was exceedingly fertile; having been, from this cause, accustomed to opulence, he came to Charran, where, it is conjectured, he lived commodiously enough, since it is clear he had an increase of servants and of wealth.

But now being expelled by hunger from that land, where, in reliance on the word of God, he had promised himself a happy life, supplied with all abundance of good things, what must have been his thoughts, had he not been well fortified against the devices of Satan? His faith would have been overturned a hundred times. And we know, that whenever our expectation is frustrated, and things do not succeed according to our wishes, our flesh soon harps on this string, 'God has deceived thee.'

But Moses shows, in a few words, with what firmness Abram sustained this vehement assault. He does not indeed magnificently proclaim his constancy in verbose eulogies; but, by one little word, he sufficiently demonstrates, that it was great even to a miracle, when he says, that he "went down into Egypt to sojourn there." For he intimates, that Abram, nevertheless, retained in his mind possession of the land promised unto him; although, being ejected from it by hunger, he fled elsewhere, for the sake of obtaining food.

And let us be instructed by this example, that the servants of God must contend against many obstacles, that they may finish the course of their vocation. For we must always recall to memory, that Abram is not to be regarded as an individual member of the body of the faithful, but as the common father of them all; so that all should form themselves to the imitation of his example. Therefore, since the condition of the present life is unstable, and obnoxious to innumerable changes; let us remember, that, whithersoever we may be driven by famine, and by the rage of war, and by other vicissitudes which occasionally happen beyond our expectation, we must yet hold our right course; and that, though our bodies may be carried hither and thither, our faith ought to stand unshaken.

Moreover, it is not surprising, when the Canaanites sustained life with difficulty, that Abram should be compelled privately to consult for himself. For he had not a single acre of land; and he had to deal with a cruel and most wicked people, who would rather a hundred times have suffered him to perish with hunger, than they would have brought him assistance in his difficulty. Such circumstances amplify the praise of Abram's faith and fortitude: first, because, when destitute of food for the body. he feeds himself upon the sole promise of God; and then, because he is not to be torn away by any violence, except for a short time, from the place where he was commanded to dwell. In this respect he is very unlike many, who are hurried away, by every slight occasion, to desert their proper calling.

11. He said unto Sarai his wife . He now relates the counsel which Abram took for the preservation of his life when he was approaching Egypt. And since this place is like a rock, on which many strike; it is proper that we should soberly and reverently consider how far Abram was deserving of excuse, and how he was to be blamed. First, there seems to be something of falsehood, mixed with the dissimulations which he persuades his wife to practice. And although afterwards he makes the excuse, that he had not lied nor feigned anything that was untrue: in this certainly he was greatly culpable that it was not owing to his care that his wife was not prostituted.

For when he dissembles the fact, that she was his wife, he deprives her chastity of its legitimate defense. And hence certain perverse cavilers take occasion to object, 349 that the holy patriarch was a pander to his own wife; and that, for the purpose of craftily taking care of himself, he spared neither her modesty nor his own honor. But it is easy to refute this virulent abuse; because, it may indeed be inferred, that Abram had far higher ends in view, seeing that in other things, he was endued with a magnanimity so great.

Again, how did it happen, that he rather sought to go into Egypt than to Charran, or into his own country, unless that in his journeying, he had God before his eyes, and the divine promise firmly rooted in his mind? Since, therefore, he never allowed his senses to swerve from the word of God, we may even

thence gather the reason, why he so greatly feared for his own life, as to attempt the preservation of it from one danger, by incurring a still greater. Undoubtedly he would have chosen to die a hundred times, rather than thus to ruin the character of his wife, and to be deprived of the society of her whom alone he loved.

But while he reflected that the hope of salvation was centred in himself, that he was the fountain of the Church of Gods that unless he lived, the benediction promised to him, and to his seed, was vain; he did not estimate his own life according to the private affection of the flesh; but inasmuch as he did not wish the effect of the divine vocation to perish through his death, he was so affected with concern for the preservation of his own life, that he overlooked every thing besides.

So far, then, he deserves praise, that, having in view a lawful end of living, he was prepared to purchase life at any price. But in devising this indirect method, by which he subjected his wife to the peril of adultery, he seems to be by no means excusable. If he was solicitous about his own life, which he might justly be, yet he ought to have cast his care upon God. The providence of God, I grant, does not indeed preclude the faithful from caring for themselves; but let them do it in such a way, that they may not overstep their prescribed bounds.

Hence it follows, that Abram's end was right, but he erred in the way itself; for so it often happens to us, that even while we are tending towards God, yet, by our thoughtlessness in catching at unlawful means, we swerve from his word. And this, especially, is wont to take place in affairs of difficulty; because, while no way of escape appears, we are easily led astray into various circuitous paths. Therefore, although they are rash judges, who entirely condemn this deed of Abram, yet the special fault is not to be denied, namely, that he, trembling at the approach of death, did not commit the issue of the danger to God, instead of sinfully betraying the modesty of his wife.

Wherefore, by this example, we are admonished, that, in involved and doubtful matters, we must seek the spirit of counsel and of prudence from the Lord; and must also cultivate sobriety, that we may not attempt anything rashly without the authority of his word.

I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon 350 It is asked whence had Sarai this beauty, seeing she was an old woman? For though we grant that she previously had excelled in elegance of form, certainly years had detracted from her gracefulness; and we know how much the wrinkles of old age disfigure the best and most beautiful faces. In the first place, I answer, there is no doubt that there was then greater vivacity in the human race than there is now; we also know, that vigor sustains the personal appearance. Again, her sterility availed to preserve her beauty, and to keep her whole habit of body entire; for there is nothing which more debilitates females than frequent parturition. I do not however doubt, that the perfection of her form was the special gift of God; but why he would not suffer the beauty of the holy woman to be so soon worn down by age, we know not; unless it were, that the loveliness of that form was intended to be the cause of great and severe anxiety to her husband. Common experience also teaches us, that they who are not content with a regular and moderate degree of comeliness, find, to their great loss, at what a cost immoderate beauty is purchased.

12. Therefore it shall come to pass, that when the Egyptians shall see thee, etc. It may seem that Abram was unjust to the Egyptians, in suspecting evil of them, from whom he had yet received no injury. And, since charity truly is not suspicious; he may appear to deal unfairly, in not only charging them with lust, but also in suspecting them of murder. I answer, that the holy man did, not without reason, fear for himself

from that nation, concerning which he had heard many unfavourable reports. And already he had, in other places, experienced so much of the wickedness of men, that he might justly apprehend everything from the profane despisers of God. He does not however pronounce anything absolutely concerning the Egyptians; but, wishing to bring his wife to his own opinion, he gives her timely warning of what might happen. And God, while he commands us to abstain from malicious and sinister judgments, yet allows to be on our guard against unknown persons; and this may take place without any injury to the brethren. Yet I do not deny that this trepidation of Abram exceeded all bounds and that an unreasonable anxiety caused him to involve himself in another fault, as we have already stated.

15. And commended her before Pharaoh 351 Although Abram had sinned by fearing too much and too soon, yet the event teaches, that he had not feared without cause: for his wife was taken from him and brought to the king. At first Moses speaks generally of the Egyptians, afterwards he mentions the courtiers; by which course he intimates, that the rumor of Sara's beauty was everywhere spread abroad; but that it was more eagerly received by the courtiers who indulge themselves in greater license. Whereas he adds, that they told the king; we hence infer, how ancient is that corruption which now prevails immeasurably in the courts of kings. For as all things there are full of blandishments and flatteries, so the nobles principally apply their minds to introduce, from time to time, what may be gratifying to royalty. Therefore we see, that whosoever among them desires to rise high in favor, is addicted not only to servile batteries, but also to pandering for their master's lusts.

And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house . Since she was carried off, and dwelt for some time in the palace, many suppose that she was corrupted by the king. For it is not credible, that a lustful man, when he had her in his power, should have spared her modesty. This, truly, Abram had richly deserved, who had neither relied upon the grace of God, nor had committed the chastity of his wife to His faithfulness and care; but the plague which immediately followed, sufficiently proves that the Lord was mindful of her; and hence we may conclude, that she remained uninjured. And although, in this place, Moses says nothing expressly on the subject, yet, from a comparison with a similar subsequent history, we conjecture, that the guardianship of God was not wanting to Abram at this time also. When he was in similar danger, (Ge 20:1,) God did not suffer her to be violated by the king of Gerar; shall we then suppose that she was now exposed to Pharaoh's lust? Would God have thought more about subjecting her, who had been once dishonored, to a second disgrace, than about preserving her, who had hitherto lived uprightly and chastely? Further, if God showed himself so propitious to Abram, as to rescue his wife whom he exposed a second time to infamy; how is it possible that He should have failed to obviate the previous danger? Perhaps, also, greater integrity still flourished in that age; so that the lusts of kings were not so unrestrained as they afterwards became. Moreover, when Moses adds, that Abram was kindly treated for Sarai's sake; we hence conclude, that she was honorably entertained by Pharaoh, and was not dealt with as a harlot. When, therefore, Moses says, that she was brought into the king's palace; I do not understand this to have been for any other purpose, 352 than that the kings by a solemn rite, might take her as his wife.

17. And the Lord plagued Pharaoh . If Moses had simply related, that God had punished the king for having committed adultery, it would not so obviously appear that he had taken care of Sarai's chastity; but when he plainly declares that the house of the king was plagued because of Sarai, Abram's wife, all doubt is, in my judgment, removed; because God, on behalf of his servant, interposed his mighty hand in time, lest Sarai should be violated. And here we have a remarkable instance of the solicitude with which God protects his servants, by undertaking their cause against the most powerful monarchs; as this and similar

histories show, which are referred to in Ps 105:12-15: --

When they were but a few men in number; yea, very few, and strangers in it. When they went from one nation to another, from one kingdom to another people; he suffered no man to do them wrong; yea, he reproved kings for their sakes; saying, Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm.'

From which passage also a confirmation of the opinion just given may be derived. For if God reproved Pharaoh, that he should do Abram no harm; it follows, that he preserved Sarai's honor uninjured. Instructed by such examples, we may also learn, that however the world may hold us in contempt, on account of the smallness of our number, and our weakness; we are yet so precious in the sight of God, that he will, for our sake, declare himself an enemy to kings, and even to the whole world. Let us know, that we are covered by his protection, in order that the lust and violence of those who are more powerful, may not oppress us. But it is asked, whether Pharaoh was justly punished, seeing that he neither intended, by guile nor by force, to gain possession of another man's wife? I answer, that the actions of men are not always to be estimated according to our judgment, but are rather to be weighed in the balances of God; for it often happens, that the Lord will find in us what he may justly punish, while we seem to ourselves to be free from fault, and while we absolve ourselves from all guilt. Let kings rather learn, from this history, to bridle their own power, and moderately to use their authority; and, lastly, to impose a voluntary law of moderation upon themselves. For, although no fault openly appears in Pharaoh; yet, since he has no faithful monitor among men, who dares to repress his licentiousness, the Lord chastises him from heaven. As to his family, it was indeed innocent; but the Lord has always just causes, though hidden from us, why he should smite with his rod those who seem to merit no such rebuke. That he spared his servant Abram, ought to be ascribed to his paternal indulgence.

18. And Pharaoh called Abram . Pharaoh justly expostulates with Abram, who was chiefly in fault. No answer on the part of Abram is here recorded; and perhaps he assented to the just and true reprehension. It is, however, possible that the exculpation was omitted by Moses; whose design was to give an example of the Divine providence in preserving Abram, and vindicating his marriage relation. But, although Abram knew that he was suffering the due punishment of his folly, or of his unreasonable caution; He, nevertheless, relapsed, as we shall see in its proper place, a second time into the same fault.

20. And Pharaoh commanded his men . In giving commandment that Abram should have a safe-conduct out of the kingdom, Pharaoh might seem to have done it, for the sake of providing against danger; because Abram had stirred up the odium of the nation against himself, as against one who had brought thither the scourge of God along with him; but as this conjecture has little solidity, I give the more simple interpretation, that leave of departure was granted to Abram with the addition of a guard, lest he should be exposed to violence. For we know how proud and cruel the Egyptians were; and how obnoxious Abram was to envy, because having there become suddenly rich, he would seem to be carrying spoil away with him.

Footnotes

339

Many learned commentators, Dr A. Clarke among the number, suppose this to have been a second call from God, and to have taken place when he was at Charran. But the objections adduced by Calvin against such an interpretation are of great weight, and cannot be easily set aside. -- Ed.

340

Prolepsis is the figure which anticipates in the discourse something still future; as when the word Bethel is used to designate the place which at the time was called Luz, and which did not receive this name till it was given by Jacob. -- Ed.

341

The dislike which the Jews have to this word arises from the fact that they confine its application to heathens, barbarians, and Christians, in short, to all who are not of Israel according to the flesh. They are not, however, warranted by Scripture in so doing, as Calvin rightly argues. -- Ed.

342

"Mancipii...A manucapium, quod ab hostibus manu caperetur;" because taken by the hand by the enemy. -- Ed

343

By others a plain. Vide Poli Synopsis in loco. See our English version, "Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh." -- Ed.

344

That is, an oak is put for an oak grove, or forest. -- Ed.

345

The sentence seems obscure: "Ergo Abram ex generali pietatis doctrina, sacrificiis coeleste sibi sanctuarium aperuit, ut Deum rite coleret." The French translation throws little light upon it: 'Abram donc s'est fait ouverture au sanctuaire celeste par une doctrine generale de piete, afin de bien servir Dieu.' The word sacrifice is here entirely omitted. Nor does the Old English translator seem to have given himself much trouble to render it accurately: 'Abram, out of a general doctrine of godliness, prepared a heavenly was to himself to offer sacrifices, that he might worship God aright.' -- Ed.

346

And consequently that he regarded all his own sacrifices as typical of the great atoning sacrifice of the cross. -- Ed.

347

Ἀστὰς ὑμενος

348

"Ut testetur se peculiarem habere Deum." -- "Qu'il testife avoir un autre Dieu que celui qui estoit la adore:" to testify that he has another God than that which was there adored. -- French Tr

349

"Atque hinc latrandi materiam protervi quidam canes arripiunt."

350

" An aggravation of Abraham's alarm arose from the complexion of his wife, -- 'Thou art a fair woman.' Though the Egyptian ladies were not so dark as the Nubians and Ethiopians, they were of a browner tinge than the Syrians and Arabians: we also find on the monuments that ladies of high rank are usually represented in lighter tints than their attendants.... There is ample evidence, that a fair complexion was deemed a high recommendation in the age of the Pharaohs. This circumstance, so fully confirmed by the monuments, is recorded in no history but the book of Genesis; and it is a remarkable confirmation of the veracity of the Pentateuch." -- Gliddon's Ancient Egypt, quoted in Hengstenberg's Egypt and the Books of Moses, p.200. It may here be proper to remark, that much learned labor has been expended by the Anti-supernaturalist Divines on the Continent, in the fruitless attempt to prove that the Pentateuch could not be the work of Moses, nor of the age in which he lived; and, consequently, not an inspired production. This has led to a deeper investigation of Egyptian antiquities, the result of which has been to confirm, in every possible way, the authenticity of the Mosaic records. Monuments as ancient as the times of Moses, and bas-reliefs exhibiting different characters, and persons engaged in different occupations, all show, that no writer of comparatively modern times could have composed these books. We have here an additional proof to many which had been given before, that a slight acquaintance with facts may lead to scepticism; but that deep investigation of them invariably confirms the testimony of Scripture. -- See note at p. 316. -- Ed

351

" She must therefore have been unveiled. The monuments show, that, according to Egyptian customs, she could only so appear in public. 'We find from the monuments,' says Taylor, 'that the Egyptian women, in the reign of the Pharaohs, exposed their faces, and were permitted to enjoy as much liberty as the ladies of modern Europe. But this custom was changed after the conquest of the country by the Persians.' -- Hengstenberg's Egypt and the Books of Moses, p. 199.

352

"Non interpretor fuisse factum, ut statim cum rege dormiret, sed ut rex solemni ritu eam duceret uxorem."

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-calvin/genesis-121-20/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net