

Abram Genesis 12

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon explores God's call to Abram as a foundational principle of faith and obedience, emphasizing the importance of separation from worldly ties.

Scripture: Genesis 12:1

Topics: "Faith and Obedience", "God's Calling"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the significance of God's call to Abram in Genesis 12, illustrating how it marks a pivotal moment in God's dispensations. He explains that this calling is rooted in grace and is a demonstration of God's sovereign purpose, contrasting it with the previous dispensations of creation and government. The sermon highlights the necessity of obedience to God's call, which requires separation from worldly ties and a trust in God's promises, even when circumstances seem dire. Darby also reflects on Abram's subsequent actions in Egypt, showcasing the consequences of unbelief and the importance of maintaining faith in God's guidance. Ultimately, the message encourages believers to recognize their calling and the need for faithfulness in their walk with God.

Transcript

The contents of this chapter are peculiarly important, as unfolding the dispensations of God. In other parts of scripture may be more fully seen what the means were by which the purposes of God should be accomplished, and the great object in which those purposes found their result; but the principles on which the dealings of God hinge are nowhere more clearly produced. It is, in fact, their first exhibition, and therefore (however succinctly) they are definitely and very completely produced and stated; - not in theoretic principles philosophically declared, but in the statement of that on which they all depended, and in the exhibition of which, therefore, they could alone be fitly taught; - that is, in the sovereign acting of God upon the principles in which we were thereby to be instructed.

Thus it is that the scripture continually teaches by realities, for in them God is introduced. No theory can reach God - the human mind is incapable of it - but God acting is always the adequate exhibition of Himself; and thus the object of faith is exhibited in the way in which He is revealed; while at the same time those with whom the history may be conversant present all the characters of man, as subject to God, or in the exercise of that will which requires to be corrected, as being alienated from Him and opposed to Him.

The great point of the chapter is the call of God, and the principles on which it proceeds. The calling of God is a cardinal point in His dispensations. It is identified with grace, and in it there is no repentance; God

does not swerve from it. It expressed His purpose, as it is written, "The gifts and calling of God are unrepented of," Rom. 11:29. Of this there had been heretofore no mention; individuals may have been called (as assuredly every saint had been from Abel downwards), but until this chapter it does not form the subject of the revelation of God.

It is important to consider what subjects the scripture previously presents; they were substantially two - Adam and Noah; creation, and creation secured by government. That Adam was placed at the head of natural creation will be called in question by none. That Noah stood as the representative head of government I learn from the committal of the sword to him, or at least from the revelation of the principle to him, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed." There might be repentance in these things, though in gift and calling of God there could be none. He was not declared as the God of Adam, or as the God of Noah; but He was the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; "this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations," Ex. 3:15. Creation, in point of fact (as to its existing estate), was repented of - "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually; and it repented the Lord that he had made man upon the earth, and it grieved him at his heart; and the Lord said, I will destroy"; and He did destroy, sparing favoured Noah; as it is written, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them," Gen. 6:5-7. But God's calling is His purpose, and He hath sworn in His holiness, and He will not repent.

123 The natural good of creation in the hands of the first man had not only proved fallible and corruptible, but it had failed, and become corrupted; and destructive judgment had been executed upon it by the hand of God, few, that is eight souls, being spared, together with what was with them in the ark, out of all in whose nostrils was the breath of life. To Noah (as I have before said) the principle of government was communicated, in order to restrain evil in its effects; that violence might no more cover the earth, but that in detailed instances the wrath of God might be vindicated against it - life belonging unto Him. Sin, however, in its principle, still remains at work, exhibiting itself in the failing of Noah the saint, and in the recklessness of the disrespectful father of Canaan.

As regards this part of the history previous to Abram (that is, the earth under government), we have the fact recorded of the division of the earth amongst its various nations and families; this we find in Genesis 10, where the fact is stated, the origin of which we find explained only in chapter 11. But first let us consider the fact - the earth was divided (a new and not a necessary circumstance for it as placed under government) into distinct nations, separated by place, language, and (as to the various lower branches), we may add, more immediate origin. Thus, whatever may have been the particular changes since, the earth under government assumed the form which it now bears. Various indeed, in particular parts, might be the interchange, division, or growth of power; but the characteristic state of things continued to be the same, and in fact its great features were indelibly impressed. Indeed not only is this the case, but it is interesting to observe, that if we take the list of nations spoken of as gathered together under the wilful king in the latter day, and under Gog in Ezekiel, we shall find ourselves brought back to the same nations, and tongues, and families, which are presented to our view at the outset, as the immediate consequence of the establishment of this principle of government in the hands of Noah, and as formed into actual condition by the sin of Babel. The rest of the intermediate scripture is the history of calling and grace.

124 To the sin of Babel I would now turn. In the history of Babel we have shewn the sin of man, under the circumstances in which the one family of man was then placed; even in assuming the earth to themselves;

in seeking to make a name, lest they should be scattered; a city, which they purposed should be an abiding monument and centre of power, but on which God writes Babel. Until they were scattered abroad, they had one speech, and one tongue, and thus they were practically one family, having a common bond of association. But the lust of ambitious selfishness was at work, and this union was broken to pieces. Hence they were separated and (the earth subsequently being formally divided among them, Genesis 10:25; 11:18), they became, to every intent and purpose, distinct nations. Although its origin was sin, and its character confusion, the reaching out of grace was shewn in the testimony of the day of Pentecost, as extended toward the world, and as contrasted with anything towards the Jews merely; this I remark in passing, but it is not on this that I would now dwell.

But although circumstances were thus altered, the principle of government remained untouched; however it might be exercised, righteously or unrighteously, it was placed in the hand of man "not bearing the sword in vain," "the minister of God to execute wrath." It might be exercised according to its institution, in repressing evil, although merely by power; but even this in the sin of man was not the case; the result is described in Psalm 82.

125 "God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; He judgeth among the gods.

"How long will ye judge unjustly, and accept the persons of the wicked?"

"Defend the poor and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and needy.

"Deliver the poor and needy; rid them out of the hand of the wicked.

"They know not, neither will they understand; they walk on in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are out of course.

"I have said, Ye are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High.

"But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes.

"Arise, O God, judge the earth, for thou shalt inherit all nations."

The judges of the earth had all gone incorrigibly wrong - they neither heard, nor yet understood. God was obliged, therefore, to take the matter into His own hands; He was obliged to arise and to judge the earth. Thus is shewn the failure of power in the hands of man from another part of scripture, as is also shewn in Daniel 7, etc.

We have thus brought before us in Genesis, up to chapter 12, creation, and then its failure and its judgment; next we have government of the renewed earth introduced for its peace, in consequence of evil having been proved in man. Man's pride, rebellion, and self-sufficiency, are shewn: together with a judgment, which did not alter the principle of the dispensation (for had it been otherwise, evil would have been without check), which was to continue until God should take it into His own hands, but which exhibited how man failed under it, in its common form; how under the consequent judgment it assumed the form of distinct nationality; and how the lust of personal ambition and power, or of obtaining a great name, was associated with the divinely sanctioned principle of government, and thus came into existence the beginning of kingdoms; however unrighteously this principle was exercised, it still continued to be unalterably recognized of God. Here were all the principles drawn out, and the scene was closed.

The circumstances might vary, but there was no change in the principle till God takes the matter into His own hands. Countries and kindreds were now formed; and inasmuch as they were separated one from another by the spirit of intelligible association, so much the more were they united in stronger personal and local interests; selfishness became national, and adverse interests became (not simply personal) but those of countries, and peoples, and tongues.

126 But into the midst of all this there was a new principle introduced. The calling of God - a principle and a power which, while leaving these untouched, acted paramount to them all - to natural relationship, and to formed associations.

"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." Here is distinctly shewn the calling of the "father of the faithful." Country and kindred were recognized as existing; how they were formed in creation, and under government (as established in Noah), and the subsequent circumstances, we have already seen.

They were now left just as they were. They were not meddled with. In fact, in their own place (though corrupted), and as having instamped upon them that they had been God's ordinances, they were both distinctly maintained. There is not to this day any abrogation of them, nor indeed ever will be in principle, though they will be transferred to Christ, and under Christ they will be unto righteousness and blessing. "A king shall reign in righteousness," and although the queen and Jewish partner of His glory shall be taught to forget her father's house (being called through grace, not descent), yet the offspring of the remnant shall be blessed with them; instead of the fathers shall be the children. However, therefore, evil may have overrun them, both government and relationship, home, etc., are principles in no way rejected, nor could they be abstractedly. But the calling of God acts paramountly to them, or else there could be no other principle, and the prevailing of man's evil in them would be left unremedied.

But in the wisdom of God, the corrupted state of things was no longer judged or acted upon, but the witness of better things was introduced; had they been judged, then must have been the end in utter destruction, or the premature assumption of all into the hands of Supreme power. Yet even that by which evil was to be suppressed, that is, government, being corrupted, was now become the instrument of evil. Hence entirely new hopes could alone be introduced, and not merely a present amendment, for that must have come to the same end; but new principles, not destroying the sanctioned and appointed instruments of God, for such destruction would have proved, not so much the evil of man, the creature, but the evil and foolishness of the Creator's appointment. This appointment was left just where it was, to be judged in due time upon the maintainers of it. But in grace another principle was introduced - the leaving in self-sacrifice all these things for better hopes. The existing ties of country and kindred are recognized, but in THE CALL OF GOD there is set up a paramount claim: - "The Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house."

127 We have then, in the calling of God, the assertion of a paramount claim on God's part upon an individual in grace, leaving everything out of which he was called without further change; only calling him out of it. This is one very strong, distinct, and new principle, not previously revealed, consequent upon, and acting in, an especial and paramount way, in reference to the existing relationships, which had arisen out of what was previously ordered and appointed. No declaration of blessings or principles to men where they were, but the calling of them out thence, and thus a personal calling is what we find. The principle further established in it mere personal obedience, upon the ground of this call, to individual responsible action. "God had said to Abraham, Get thee out." Here on the word of God the individual responsibility of

obedience attached. It necessarily and avowedly involved the breaking of subsisting relationships in person, as to his own interest in them, but without affecting them, as they stood in themselves, in the least. He was to leave his country, and his kindred, and his father's house. They might still continue just what they were before (they might, or they might not): this was a question of Providence; obedience to the words and calling of God was the only point in grace to Abram, the only point to be considered by him. The word of God led the way in the direction which was given, and gave the promise to him as that which should encourage him in acting. "Into a land that I will shew thee"; this was the certain hope of certain faith, by which a man is made entirely a stranger where he was before at home. It was indeed merely a promise, but it was a promise which involved not only the certainty of God, but also the guidance of God unto the thing promised - "to a land that I will shew thee."

128 Let us turn more to the detail of this calling of God; we have seen already that its grand distinguishing feature was separation from the world. "The Lord had said to Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house." This was the substance of the present character of the calling, as acting upon a nationalized world; and thus was brought forward the specific character of the church.

There was involved then in it the immediate favour of God, not in present comfort, but in personal calling. The personal revelation of Himself to Abram, as it were, identified him with Himself and with His purpose, and with the blessing of an appointed inheritance. This calling, however special and personal, however distinguishing in favour, necessarily involved obedience. The call of blessing to Abraham was a call to get out of his country unto a land which God would shew to him, and thus it necessarily involved obedience. Whatever the power which acted on his mind might be, obedience was the result; for in the very terms of the call it was manifest - no obedience, no blessing. He was (to use the words of scripture) "sanctified unto obedience," for there was nothing else now given but the command, "Go out" - "the Lord had said." It was not to gratify the present selfishness of Abram's nature, saying, "this is thy country," but it was "Get thee out of thy country" - to go where? "to a land that I will shew thee." It implied, therefore, implicit confidence in God for faithfulness, power, and love. Taking Him for the security and the portion (as the scriptures reveal it), he went out, not knowing whither he went. It is on this that the Spirit of God so specially tests as characteristic of his approved faith. By separation from the world, on the ground of implicit confidence in God, he lost everything, and got nothing but the word of God, scaled of course to his soul (for his faith rested in it) by the power of the Spirit of God. The God of glory had appeared to him in the matter, and God would shew to him the land. So Abram departed.

Here then is the pattern and character of the church, and also of the individual believer; they are called of God in faith out of all that into which the world and nature have been formed (and while not meddling with these things, or disowning them in their place, but recognizing in them God's ordering hand, and moreover the sin of man): trusting in a promise not at once fulfilled, but taking God, and God alone, as the security, the warrant, and the guide; it is faithfulness, as being assured of the present loss of all things, and the present gain of nothing; it is a walking by faith, and not by sight, not only as regards present things relinquished, but also as to things hoped for - things to come - "for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?" But they are sufficiently assured of God; and in Him, and knowing Him, or rather being known of Him, they are ready to give up all for His word. Thus it was not the reward that was taken as the portion, but God, the promiser of the reward, and therefore it was faith. The object was as simple as the security. "They went forth to go to the land of Canaan"; the result was as certain as He who called was sure; "they went forth to go into the land of Canaan, and into the land of Canaan they came." Such is the history and the character of the church of God in its calling. Called out by God into separation from the world, which it

leaves just where it was to go into a land of promise - a land which God will shew it - it walks by faith, and not by sight, going forth to go thither, and thither surely coming, according to the calling and power of God.

129 A darker picture now remains - the actual practical conduct and condition. There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down into Egypt. This was not confidence in God, who had brought him thither, nor was the land of Egypt the land of Canaan, as was afterwards well proved.

And here I would remark, what will, I believe, simplify the use of many types, and be found (at least I have so found it) that men who are types represent the energy of faith, the spiritual energy of the church, under the circumstances in which the type represents it, or perhaps its failure therein; and that females who are presented to us as types represent the state and condition of the church.

Abram may act in faith in going out, and he may act in want of faith in denying his wife; Sarah is the New Covenant, Hagar the Old, a free-woman and a bondwoman: one, more or less, presenting the acting of the Spirit of Christ, the Gibbor, the bridegroom; the other, the estate or condition in the dispensation, whether clothed with the sun or in the wilderness, in bondage or in freedom. And thus it is that they may vary; thus David, or Ahaz, or Manasseh, would be very differently presented as a type of any individual: but respecting the church or Jewish economy typified by a woman, it was all one (as being the possessor of the throne of David), because the economy, or condition of the church in which they so acted, was all one. I state this merely to illustrate what I mean; the woman is the state in which the dispensation is; the man is the conduct of faith in it.

130 Here then we have Abram and Sarai introduced; and afterwards the actual conduct of the church, and not the calling, is the thing brought before us.

Present circumstances were distressing in that land into which the promise of God had called him. It was still a land of promise; the Canaanite was then in the land. Abram felt the famine to be grievous, but we find no reference to God, no recurrence to Him, no directions from Him, no exercise of faith; there was no previous direction for this. The fact is all we have - Abram went down into Egypt. Alas! too true. But was the God of Abram near? He had not inquired this, but was acting on his own prudence and reasoning. Fear of the Egyptians came upon him as he drew near their land. If there was not famine for the saint, there was the denial of the blessing and indissoluble bond which subsisted between the church and its bridegroom, represented in faith by those who stood in that relation before God. He came into the regions of the prince of this world for his own comfort to satisfy his present need, not of faith in God. The consequence was, the immediate denial of the holy separation from the world and union with Christ which belonged to the church: she was his sister, not his wife; true, perhaps, in one sense, but deadly in its actual character as to the faith of God's elect. She was very fair to look upon, for indeed God had set His beauty upon her as His daughter, the object of His love, as of Himself, as well as being the spouse of Christ the Son; she was commended in the world. The faith of the church had denied and disowned its unalterable affiance to Christ. The church was taken into the world's house, the house of the prince of this world; and the prince of this world entreated Abram well for her sake.

He who had denied the bond, and given up that which was essential in their connection, obtained thereby plenty and ease at the hand of the prince of this world; "he had sheep, and oxen, and he-asses, and men-servants, and maid-servants, and she-asses, and camels." But was this comfort to him? Was it satisfaction (if he had any truth of heart) for the circumstances in which he was placed? And if we turn from the mere beggarly circumstances of the type to the blessed and indissoluble union between our

blessed Lord Christ and the church, how does it picture the shamefulness, the baseness, the want of faithfulness, in unbelieving believers, in surrendering this charge of God, this deposit of faith! How must every camel, every servant, every ox, as it passed before his eyes, with the stamp of Pharaoh's kindness upon it, have smitten Abram's heart with the thought, "But where is my wife, I have sold my wife for this!" Did he not know that she was so? Had his feeble falsehood to others dimmed his own thoughts and feelings? Had he forgotten in his love of sheep' and oxen, etc., that the wife given him of the Lord was sold for their sake? Could he persuade himself that she was his sister, and might be Pharaoh's wife, and not his?

131 Where was his trust in God? where the integrity of his way? Bitter was that time to Abram, or sad the forgetfulness of an unrighteous heart. The he must have lain heavy on his heart, but he must receive his sheet) and the oxen; cutting as it might be, he had involved himself in the circumstances, he stood upon his own declaration that she was his sister. Had Abram intended this? No! it was an unlooked-for circumstance; it was unbelief, which continually produces in judgment the evil which it seeks to avoid. The sons of men would build a tower lest they should be scattered abroad, and the Lord scattered them because they built it. Abram, fearing lest Pharaoh should take his wife, says she is his sister (as if God would not preserve him), and therefore Pharaoh takes her into his house. But it was the first step that was wrong - Abram went down into Egypt. He went down without God out of the land of faith and promise, and he could not expect (for God could not bless unbelief, though He might judge sin that acted in it unrighteously) to meet God there; his heart knew Him not in power there; and as he must act on something, he acts on his own resources prudently; but as he had departed from faith in God, so was faithfulness in the position of his wife with her true husband departed from: and he was blessed in the world (yea, and by the prince of this world) for his unfaithfulness.

132 If Satan gets the church, in its state and condition, into his own house (however mercifully God may preserve it), he will bless the faithless instruments of the betrayal with the things of the world. Such, then, is the history (not of the calling, but) of the practical conduct of the church: not of the calling of God, which we saw in its sure infallibility before, together with Sarai and all he had, but of the acting of men in the place to which they are called - in their departure from it, not acting in faith; and such are the results. The end is not that Abram is honoured, but that the Lord vindicates Himself in plaguing Pharaoh and his house with great plagues, because of Sarai Abram's wife. He asserts and maintains the title, and Judges and will judge the world for thus taking another man's wife. The church is the King's daughter, and is taken in the lust of its own dominion by the world. And this the Lord would, and was entitled to, visit. But still the sin was Abram's, his blessings all this while were curses. And it is worthy of remark, that it was an Egyptian handmaid that typified the fleshly covenant of bondage: the world always genders unto bondage, for it is ever opposed to the Spirit of God; and whenever, therefore, the world comes in, it merely produces, and in result is identified with, bondage (where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty). For the world in its results is developed by bringing an expectation and an endeavour to procure the inheritance by a covenant of works. Such has been the actual fact in the church, and will be, because the Spirit is opposed to the world; and, that being grieved and absent, the other takes its place, with the indulgence of lusts, resting on works, and union with the world. But while this was an ultimate result, I would now rest merely upon the picture which is actually presented to us in this chapter, of the cause, character, and consequence of the working of the spirit of unbelief in the church, called out indeed, but looked at as in the hands of man. In the early part of the chapter we have its calling of God, and its results as well as character. The latter part shews its conduct in man, the shame, worldly comfort, unbelief, and sorrow; but also the merciful interposition of that God, who, when we have wearied Him with our sins, acts and delivers for His own

name's sake, and vindicates., in righteous dealing toward the world, what the unrighteousness of man had plunged unfaithfully into its power.

133 I feel that I have very feebly drawn out what is here presented to our view; but if I have drawn the attention of the children of God to the application of the plain typical principles here set before us (as applied to the history of the church of God in this brief account, as that of the world had previously been given), so as to lead them by the Spirit to judge from the Lord, and not from anything else, whether the world or expediency, I shall be content; and I pray the Lord to bless it.

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