

The Man Abram



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 11:27–15:21.*

Memory Text: “He believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness” (*Genesis 15:6*).

We ended last week on a sour note: the Tower of Babel and all that it represented about fallen humanity's seeming inability to learn from the past.

This week we begin on a more hopeful one: the descendants of Shem, the family line from which sprung the patriarch Abram, who, according to Paul, is “the father of us all” (*Rom. 4:16*). That is, he is the father of all who believe in Christ, through whom the promises made to Abraham are realized; for through Christ we are now Abraham's seed, “and heirs according to the promise” (*Gal. 3:29*); the promise of a heavenly Canaan where no more evil, sin, and death exist, much less rule.

In other words, after the Fall, the Flood, Noah's drunkenness, and the Tower of Babel fiasco, the Lord now introduces, in the clearest manner yet, hope for the human race. And it begins with Abram, who—although living amid a family and a culture steeped in idolatry—was a follower of the true God and who, for his faithfulness, was given promises not only for himself and for his family but for the whole human race.

This week we begin looking at the life of Abram, his initial calling, his response, his humanity, and, most important of all, his relationship to God—the great exemplar of what it means for a fallen human being to live by faith, to be justified by faith, and to reveal that faith through works.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 18.*

Abram's Background

Read Genesis 11:10-32. (See also Joshua 24:2 and Acts 7:2.) **What story immediately precedes these texts? Why might these accounts have been placed next to each other? What details are found here regarding the background and family of Abram?**

Even though chronological considerations suggest that Abram was the youngest of Terah's sons, he appears to be mentioned first in Genesis 11:26, 27 because of his importance as the ancestor of the chosen family. Although archaeology has revealed much concerning the times in which Abram lived, the great empires of the day form merely part of the background. The spotlight is on certain patriarchs and their families who attempted to keep alive the truth and knowledge about God. This is the great focus of Genesis: The stories, however sordid at times, center on those whom God entrusted with preserving the knowledge of Him in a world filled with idolatry, paganism, and all forms of superstition.

In how many stages did the call of Abram take place, according to Acts 7:2-4? Compare Gen. 12:1 with Acts 7:4. Why do you think he went through these stages rather than going immediately to Canaan?

Stephen states that God first appeared to Abram in Ur of the Chaldees and called him to go to the land He would show him. But he didn't go right away. Instead, there was the stopping point in Haran, where he lived until his father, Terah, died. It was after his father's death that he finally left for the Promised Land.

Abram's family was involved in false worship and idolatry; yet, for quite a while he remained with them. What might we learn from this story about how we should relate to members of our own family who are not walking with the Lord?

Key Text: *Genesis 12:1-7*

Teachers Aims:

1. To explain the Lord's call to Abram and his willingness to obey.
2. To expound on the weaknesses of humanity, in spite of the promises of God.
3. To show that Abram was faithful even in the absence of any physical evidence of God's promise.

Lesson Outline:

I. The Lord Calls Abram (*Gen. 12:1*)

- A. After Babel, the people were divided into nations and began to disperse on the earth.
- B. Abram lived in the land of Ur of the Chaldeans.
- C. Abram, obeying the word of the Lord, leaves his homeland and takes his family to Canaan.

II. The Promises of God Amid Human Frailty (*Gen. 12:10-13*)

- A. The Lord promises to make Abram's descendants a great nation.
- B. When faced with a famine, Abram journeys to Egypt.
- C. Overcome by fear for his life, Abram hides the truth that Sarai is his wife.

III. Driven by Faith (*Gen. 13:8-18*)

- A. Because of the greatness of their possessions, Abram and Lot must move in different directions.
- B. Abram displays unselfishness and nobility of character in allowing Lot to choose his land first.
- C. Abram trusts and believes in God's promise to make his descendants as numberless as the dust of the earth, even though he does not yet have an heir.

Summary: God calls Abram to leave his homeland and go to a land that He promises to give to Abram and his descendants. Abram obeys the Lord and remains faithful, even in the absence of an heir.

COMMENTARY

What does it take to leave behind all you know and strike out into the unknown? People often move to a new home when they marry or relocate to a new city, or even abroad for a new job. Yet, how many would leave the comforts of everything familiar just on the promise alone of a better future, without the immediate fulfillment of that promise? That's exactly what Abram does. We'll look at three facets of Abram's world—the customs, the politics, and warfare—to enrich our understanding of how radical his decision was.

The Call

What reason did God give for calling Abram to leave Haran? *Gen. 12:1-3, Heb. 11:8-10.*

Notice a great irony here: Among the things that God says He will do for Abram when he leaves is to “make thy name great” (*Gen. 12:2*). Compare this with the Tower of Babel story, in which one of the reasons they worked on the tower was in order to “make us a name” (*Gen. 11:4*). From a human perspective, it seems more likely that those who would create their monumental human achievement would have a better chance of having “a name” than someone who—leaving behind family, race, culture, and fertile land—would travel to a place “not knowing whither he went” (*Heb. 11:8*).

Yet, today no one knows the name of any one of those who worked on the tower; in contrast, almost all the world knows the name of Abram.

What powerful lesson should there be in this contrast for us, who in our own way might seek to “make us a name”?

Besides the call, again, to go to Canaan (*compare Acts 7:2 to Gen. 12:1*), Abram was given this amazing promise that God would make of him a great nation. This obviously implied children, something else that he would have to take on faith, considering that up to this point his wife had been childless (*Gen. 11:30*). Despite all this, verse 4 seems to imply no hesitation on his part. God called him to go, God made promises to him, and Abram went ahead (*see Rom. 4:13*) by faith.

Abram, sure that God had called him, moved out by faith on what—from a human perspective—seemed very foolish. What does this say to us about having to move and live by faith, even to the point of “foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:25, 2:14)? At the same time, how must we be careful not to step out by “faith” under the assumption that God is leading when He might not be? How can we know the difference?

I. “Leave All Your Human Security Behind!”

Life in the ancient world was precarious. Infant mortality was extremely high. Disease and accident could strike at any time, and the limited medical knowledge and resources were almost defenseless against disease and injury. Most communities survived on locally grown food and were only one harvest away from starvation. Drought, hail, and other extreme weather; insect invasion; plant and animal diseases; and warfare could wipe out crops, herds, and workers instantly. If anything happened to them, it almost would be impossible to import food from areas that might have surpluses, as modern countries do today.

The only way that people could survive was by being part of large extended families. The children could work the fields in a time without the large-scale machinery on modern farms and provide the labor for crafts and other production. Also, children were the only guarantee that the family line, tribe, or nation would not die out. The larger and wealthier the family, the more resources it had to cope with emergencies. Marriage ties with other extended families would provide additional resources. In a time without any kind of pensions or social services, families took care of the elderly and disabled. It was impossible for a single person or even a couple to survive alone.

Abram belonged to a well-to-do family. He knew that he could depend on his extended family in Ur and later in Haran to care for him in old age.

Then God called him to abandon all that meant security and to emigrate to a land in which he would be an alien without ties to any social and economic support system. Although he took many servants and other retainers with him, they left behind their land, the only source of wealth and capital in the ancient world. But God said, Take a journey of faith with Me, and I will make a great nation of you.

II. ”Brother” and “Sister”

In order to be a great nation, Abram needed an heir, and Sarai was barren. God tested Abram’s faithfulness and character in this way, revealing to him those areas of weakness and deceitfulness in his character that needed rooting out.

Deceit and trickery seem to be a powerful trait in Abraham’s lineage, as the biblical record shows when he seeks to protect himself from Pharaoh. It will resurface several times in his life, including a parallel situation with Abimelech, a local ruler in Gerar (*Genesis 20*). His son Isaac will follow his father’s pattern with another ruler with the same name (*Genesis 26*). And, of course, deceit and trickery will blossom most fully in the life of Abram’s grandson, Jacob.

In the conflict between Abram and Pharaoh over Sarai, Abram is worried that the Egyptian ruler may kill him to gain Sarai. Pharaoh does not want her just to add to his harem. From Pharaoh’s perspec-

The Faith of Abram

Read all of Genesis 12. Write out what message it has for you about faith, about trials, about character, whatever impresses you. What can you take away from this story that could help you in your daily walk with the Lord?

We might expect that, because he was following the call of God, Abram would have had his paths smoothed by Providence. The Bible gives no evidence that as long as we remain faithful to Him, no trials will come. On the contrary.

Indeed, not long after he had entered Canaan, a severe famine caused him to depart for Egypt, which was watered by the flooding waters of the Nile. The Sacred Record teaches us that even those who follow God's commands may have to endure trials of faith. Think about what a great strain that famine could have put on his faith: called to go into this land, and look what happens! A famine? This famine, which drove him out of Canaan, could help explain his lack of faith regarding Sarai and Pharaoh. Hunger and fear reduced the hero of faith to a person with frailties that most of us can identify with readily. Faith succumbed to fear and fear to deviousness as Abram used one half truth to conceal the other half.

“The Lord in His providence had brought this trial upon Abraham to teach him lessons of submission, patience, and faith—lessons that were to be placed on record for the benefit of all who should afterward be called to endure affliction. God leads His children by a way that they know not, but He does not forget or cast off those who put their trust in Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 129.

When was the last time you failed a test of faith? What lesson did you learn from that failure that can help you next time not to fail?

tive it seemed a good idea to establish an alliance with such an impressive personage as Abram, who appeared to be a powerful tribal chieftain with his attendants and his flocks. One of the major ways Egyptian kings did that was through marriage. But Abram outsmarts himself. When he says that Sarai is his sister, it makes her seem available. Technically, she was indeed Abram's half sister (*Gen. 20:12*), but he uses a truth to create a lie.

The biblical account treats the Egyptian ruler with great dignity, portraying him as more ethical than Abram in this sad situation. Still, God does not forsake Abram when he falls, nor does He renege on His

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Genesis 12:10-13, 18:1, Proverbs 24:16, Galatians 3:6-9, Hebrews 6:13-20*

- 1 The biblical account of Abram, later Abraham, does not furnish a great deal of detail about his family, his status, and so forth, although later Jewish, Christian, and Muslim commentators were happy to fill in the gaps. What do we know about Abram and his background that might help us to understand why God chose him and his family?
- 2 Shortly after Abram left his homeland for a place about which he knew nothing, he encountered frustrating and disturbing trials and difficulties. Do you think he ever doubted his mission or that he had heard what he thought he had heard? Does the Bible give us any evidence?
- 3 What message about Abram's—and by extension our own—character do we see in the fact that he could show the most abject cowardice in his dealings with the Pharaoh in Egypt yet the purest unselfishness in his dealings with Lot? How can God help us so that our best moments outnumber our worst moments?
- 4 Melchizedek, to whom Abram gave his tithe of the spoils of war against invaders, is a mysterious figure. He has not been mentioned before, and he is not mentioned again in Genesis. Yet, somehow Abram knew and recognized him as a spiritual authority. Was Melchizedek Christ himself, as some commentators claim? Why, or why not?
- 5 Abraham is most often cited as an exemplar of faith. Was it easier for him to have faith than for us because of his extremely intimate, face-to-face relationship with God? How has God provided for us to have a deep and abiding communion with Him?

Abram and Lot

Read Genesis 13:1-13. What does this tell us about the character of Abram? How does this help us understand the kind of man he was and why he was an example of what it means to live by faith? What Bible texts can you find that admonish us to show the same kind of spirit? See, for instance, *Phil. 2:4*.

Returning from Egypt, Abram called on the Lord at the second altar he had built in Canaan (*Gen. 13:3, 4*). Fortified by this renewal of his relationship with God, he was able to face another test. Once more the promise of land seemed to elude Abram (*vss. 5, 6*), and a decision had to be made.

Abram's failure in Egypt seems counterbalanced by the nobility of character that he demonstrated in his dealings with Lot. From the heights of Bethel Lot saw the Jordan Valley, well watered and fertile like the Garden of Eden and the plains of Mesopotamia. Lot chose that which appealed to his sense of immediate gain. Little did Lot realize what his choice would cost him. The decision was between "faith" and "sight," and the results demonstrate the wisdom of making the right choice. Abram's close relationship with the Lord and his determination to walk by faith enabled him to look beyond the immediate temporal advantages to eternal gain.

Read Genesis 13:14-18. What promise does the Lord give to Abram? Why do you think the Lord waited until this time before giving it (*see vs. 14*) to Abram? Again, why did it require a lot of faith on Abram's part to believe in these promises?

Think of the last time you saw someone reveal the kind of graciousness and selflessness displayed here by Abram. What do you think is the secret of having such a character, especially for beings who are, at their core, selfish sinners? What needs to happen in your own life in order for you to develop more of this kind of character? Imagine, too, what your local church would be like were everyone to display such an attitude.

covenant promise. This offers us assurance of God’s faithfulness.

III. Raiders From the North

God’s promise to make Abram a great nation often overshadows other aspects of Abram’s character: his role as mediator and his role of warrior, as is seen in the story in which Lot is taken captive during the raid on Sodom and Gommorrah.

The confederation of armies that attacks Sodom, Gomorrah, and others cities around the Dead Sea seems to have been more on a campaign of plunder rather than conquest. They were raiders seeking booty rather than actually trying to control the region. The forces captured some of the people either to hold for ransom or to use as slaves, among them Abram’s nephew. Warfare was the main source of slaves in the ancient world.

Some older scholars once scoffed at the idea that Abram would attempt to rescue Lot and his family with just 318 fighting men. Yet, it was actually a good-sized force for the period. Ancient records indicate

Witnessing

This week’s lesson points out two important acts of faith that we, as Christians, must be prepared to do for ourselves and for others.

First, we must be prepared to witness, regularly and faithfully, to those who know us most intimately, whether they share our faith and beliefs or not. That’s not always an easy thing to do. Often we face ridicule, snubbing, or out-and-out hostility when we witness.

However, we have studied in our lesson this week that it is not only possible but required of us to witness and remain faithful to God, even when those around us ridicule or resist to our faith sharing. While we would like to see those closest to us (family, friends, co-workers, and others) turn their lives over to the care and love of our heavenly Father, we may not always have the opportunity to do so. It is, however, required of us to faithfully model our behavior after our heavenly Father’s—He will take care of the rest.

Next, we learn that we must always answer God’s call, no matter how unknown the journey seems to us. This travel through the unknown may manifest itself in unlimited ways: perhaps coming face to face with a major health crisis—one with life and death consequences. Or losing a beloved spouse or child. Perhaps it’s the loss of a needed job or divorce after many years of marriage. Whatever the issue, facing a wrenching situation does not mean the outcome is unknown. God knows the outcome; He is in control; He will guide us through our trials. He asks us to remember that “if God leads us to it, He will lead us through it”—as the saying goes. This is the comfort we can hold close to our hearts, the comfort we will share with others who are faced with an unknown journey. Wherever He leads, we will follow.

Melchizedek and Abram

Genesis 14:1-16 recounts the story of the plunder of Sodom and Gomorrah and Abram's liberation of the people, including Lot, from the invaders. Thus, though a man of faith and a worshiper of the true God, Abram could also be a man of war.

What light does the Melchizedek episode cast upon the spiritual stature of Abram? How again do we see his faith revealed in his works? *Vss. 17-24.*

Melchizedek (meaning "my king is righteous") was king of Salem (a name for Jerusalem; *see Ps. 76:2*) and priest of the Most High God. Abram worshiped the same God. In deference to Melchizedek, who welcomed and blessed the patriarch upon his return from the battle, Abram gave the king-priest a tithe of all (*vs. 20*), indicating that the institution of tithing was practiced long before Moses and the Jews.

After this great victory the Lord appears to Abram and gives him a wonderful promise. "I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward" (*Gen. 15:1*). Ellen White indicated that Abram needed that encouragement, considering the ire his recent victories aroused in some of his neighbors.

Read Abram's response (*vss. 2, 3*). **What's so human, so understandable, about why he would say what he did? Why, from all rational and logical standpoints, did this request make so much sense?**

God (*vss. 4-6*) then repeated His earlier promise that Abram's descendants would be innumerable in multitude (*Gen. 12:2, 13:16*). Even though the advancing age of Abram and Sarai seemed to make the promise of descendants increasingly more impossible, Abram took God at His word and trusted the divine power. This is seen in Genesis 15:6, which Paul later quoted (*Rom. 4:3*).

Abram believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. How does it help us understand what it means to be accepted by God? What things in the story so far about Abram give you hope; what things show you the need to make some changes in your life?

that armies usually consisted of only a few hundred or, at most, a few thousand men. The fact that Abram could muster so many indicates that he was more a tribal chieftain than just head of a little family.

Abram's rescue of Lot from captivity reflects Christ's ransoming of us from the bondage of sin. Abram not only reflects God's saving work toward us but mirrors the walk of faith that all must have who are called by God to be in the world and not of it, knowing their home is in a better place.

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Take a moment to think about your family history. Share what you remember about your ancestry and your country of origin. God gives us a glimpse into Abram's heritage in Genesis 11:27-32. Why are there no hints of Abram's future significance in this account? What changed his life and caused him to have such impact in his world and on us? Read Genesis 12:1-9, substituting your own name for Abram's. How is God asking you to bless your world, either where you live or in a distant land?

Thought Questions:

① “‘You will be a blessing’” (*Gen 12:2b, NIV*). The span of time from Abram's call to service in the first part of Genesis 12 to his recorded failure in verses 11-19 seems rather short. Discuss this part of Abram's life. What lessons can we learn from his story that might prevent us from making similar mistakes? Ask God to strengthen your faith so that you will remain steadfast, no matter what circumstances you face.

② Which of your relatives spends the most time interacting with you? How does your relationship result in personal growth for both of you? If it doesn't, what issues cause challenges? As you read Genesis 13 and 14, what can you learn from the interaction between Abram and Lot that might help you reach an unbelieving relative for Jesus? Ask God to guide you this week in taking the first step in drawing this person to Jesus.

Application Question:

As you read the story of God's encounter with Abram recorded in Genesis 15:1-21, what do you learn? What rituals do we perform in Christianity that are designed to impress us with the concrete reality of God's desire to bless and to change our lives? Consider the ordinances of baptism and of Communion. This week, choose a clear night and a quiet place to “‘look up at the heavens and count the stars’” (*Gen. 15:5, NIV*). Ask God to impress your heart with new assurances of His covenant of salvation with you.

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 125–136; *The SDA Bible Commentary*, comments on Genesis 11:26 to 15:21.

After God promised Abram again that his seed would become a great nation, Abram sought a sign, an affirmation of the promise (*Gen. 15:7, 8*). “The Lord condescended to enter into a covenant with His servant, employing such forms as were customary among men for the ratification of a solemn engagement. By divine direction, Abraham sacrificed a heifer, a she-goat, and a ram, each three years old, dividing the bodies and laying the pieces a little distance apart. To these he added a turtledove and a young pigeon, which, however, were not divided. This being done, he reverently passed between the parts of the sacrifice, making a solemn vow to God of perpetual obedience. Watchful and steadfast, he remained beside the carcasses till the going down of the sun, to guard them from being defiled or devoured by birds of prey. About sunset he sank into a deep sleep; and, ‘lo, a horror of great darkness fell upon him.’ And the voice of God was heard, bidding him not to expect immediate possession of the Promised Land, and pointing forward to the sufferings of his posterity before their establishment in Canaan. The plan of redemption was here opened to him, in the death of Christ, the great sacrifice, and His coming in glory. Abraham saw also the earth restored to its Eden beauty, to be given him for an everlasting possession, as the final and complete fulfillment of the promise.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 137.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, discuss your answers to the question at the end of Thursday’s lesson. How do we today, New Testament Christians, understand what it means to be accounted righteous before God?
- 2 Do you know someone right now who believes that he or she is being called to go, like Abram, not knowing “whither he went”? What could you as a class do to help this person through whatever struggles his or her journey is presenting?