

Genesis Chapter 12

Verses 12:1-10: Genesis 12:1-9 records the call of Abram and his obedience. The first three verses recorded the call and the promises; the rest of the section describes the obedience of Abram. The passage is constructed on two imperatives. The first is the basic call for Abram to leave the land in verse 1:

Verses 12:1-3, 7: When God established a covenant with Abraham; it was another dramatic turning point in human history. Abraham and his heirs (the nation of Israel) received an unconditional promise.

Under this covenant, God promised to make Israel a great nation, to bless the seed of Abraham, to give him a great name, to make him a blessing, to bless those who blessed him and curse those who cursed him, to give him the Promised Land, and through his descendants to bless all the families of the earth with a Redeemer.

Israel's failure in this dispensation was illustrated by their leaving the land to settle in Egypt, and resulted in bondage there. Israel's final testing under this dispensation occurred when God attempted to draw them back to the land. But they refused Him in unbelief at Kadesh-barnea (Exodus 19:5).

Genesis 12:1 "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:"

"The Lord ... unto Abram": This passage is the promise whose fulfillment extends all through Scripture (either in fact or in expectation), to Rev. 20. The actual Abrahamic Covenant is introduced (in 12:1-3), actually made (in 15:18-21), reaffirmed (in 17:1-21), then renewed also with Isaac (26:2-5), and Jacob (28:10-17). It is an everlasting covenant (17:7-8; 1 Chron. 16:17; Psalm 105:7-12; Isa. 24:5), which contains 4 elements:

- (1) Seed (17:2-7; Gal. 3:8, 16; where it referred to Christ);
- (2) Land (15:18-21; 17:8);
- (3) A nation (12:2; 17:4); plus
- (4) Divine blessing and protection (12:3).

"Get thee out": These elements to Abram are mentioned:

- (1) Out of his "country";
- (2) Away from his "kindred"; and
- (3) Away from his "father's house".

Joshua 24:2 states that his family practiced idolatry. He is not told where he is to go, on "unto a land that I will show thee," which requires faith on his part.

This covenant is unconditional in the sense of its ultimate fulfillment of a kingdom and salvation for Israel (see notes on Rom. 11:1-27), but conditional in terms of immediate fulfillment (17:4). Its national importance to Israel is magnified by its repeated references and point of appeal throughout the Old Testament (2 Kings 13:23; 1 Chron. 16:15-22; Neh. 9:7-8).

Its importance spiritually to all believers is expounded by Paul (see notes on Gal. 3-4; Stephen quoted in Acts 7:3).

When God established a covenant with Abraham, it was another dramatic turning point in human history. Abraham and his heirs (the nation of Israel) received an unconditional promise.

“Into a land”: Abram was still in Haran (11:31), when the call was repeated (Acts 7:2), to go to Canaan.

In this first line here we see that this was something that God had said in the past to Abram. God had chosen Abram. He first send him away from the sin ridden city of Ur of the Chaldees. He is telling Abram not to be held back by his family. He told Abram to leave this big, fine, beautiful home in Ur of the Chaldees and go into a strange land.

His father and the family went as far as Haran with him. Many of the people in the ministry face this same thing. They were uprooted from family and friends, and sent away from the security of homes. God will not let any of us look back with longing at things as they were. We must ever be looking for the land to which God has sent us.

Genesis 12:2 "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:"

If he leaves, there are three promises that Yahweh makes to him. They might even be translated in each case as a cohortative, “Let me”:

- (1) “Let me “make of thee a great nation”, and
- (2) “Let me “bless thee,” and
- (3) “Let me make thy name great.”

The last promise certainly contains some irony. The quest for a name had been the driving ambition of the “sons of God (in Genesis 6:1-4), and of the architects of the Tower of Babel (in 11:1-9).

“Name great”: Abram’s magnificent reputation and legacy was fulfilled materially (13:2; 24:35), spiritually (21:22), and socially (23:6).

Now God will do for Abram what others had so selfishly sought but failed to attain. The last words in verse 2 may be translated so that you shall “be a blessing.” Abraham is to be a great nation, be personally blessed, and receive a great name, so that he may be a blessing. Certainly, this is true for us today (Gal. 3:29).

Genesis 12:3 "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."

“Curse him that curseth thee”: Those who “curse” Abram and his descendants are those who treat him lightly, despise him, or treat him with contempt. God’s curse for such lack of respect and disdain was to involve the harshest of divine judgments. The opposite was to be true for those who bless him and his people.

“In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed”: Paul identified these words as “the gospel beforehand to Abraham” (Gal. 3:8).

To whom and how he was to be a blessing are both answered (in verse 3). It may be translated “and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that cursed thee” in order that in you “all families of the earth be blessed”.

The promises of blessings were for Abram, if he left family and home, and went where God sent him. The blessing was not just for Abram, but for all the families of the earth who are faithful like Abram (Christians). God promised Abram that he would be a great nation, and his name would be made great, and through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

There is an offering of blessing to those who bless Abram. The other side of the coin is a curse, if we curse Abram. Abram is really the father of the Israelites and the believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. He truly is a great nation.

Genesis 12:4 "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."

Abram’s first act of obedience is recorded in verse 4 as he “departed out of Haran”.

“Haran” (see note on 11:31). They must have been there for some time because they accumulated a group of people (probably servants).

Genesis 12:5 "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."

“The land of Canaan they came” (ca. 2090 B.C).

The second is (in verses 5 and 8), as they came “into the land of Canaan “and “builded an altar unto the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord” (4:26):

The Book of Genesis is divided into two main sections. The first 11 chapters deal with the history of the human race, and the last 39 with the family of Abraham. Thus, in the twelfth chapter, God turns our attention from a rebellious humanity recently scattered by the judgment of Babel, to this one family through which the Savior of the world would ultimately come.

You see, Abram left Ur with his father, but his father Terah died and was buried in Haran. Abram continued on to the land of Canaan, as God had instructed him to do. Abram and Sarai had no children, but carried a large company of servants and relatives with them.

Lot was the nearest thing to a son that Abram had, and Abram took Lot with him. Abram was 75 years old when they left Haran.

Genesis 12:6 "And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite [was] then in the land."

“Sichem”: A Canaanite town located in the valley between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim (Deut. 27:4, 12). West of the Jordan about 15 miles and North of Jerusalem about 30 miles. Moreh was most likely a resident of the area for whom the tree was named.

“The Canaanite was then in the land”: Moses was writing approximately 700 years after Abram entered the land (ca. 1405 B.C.). The Canaanites, of whom he wrote, were soon to be the opponents of Israel as they entered Canaan.

These were wicked people, and (in Genesis 15:16 and Deuteronomy 7:1-5), they were later to be destroyed because of the abominations they practiced. Right in the locality of God’s call for Abram were wicked sinners! It would be hard for him to live for God and be pure.

Sichem was Shechem in other places in the Bible, and was just another spelling of the same word. We will find this city mentioned in the time of Jesus. Jesus fled from the Jews and went to this city. This city was, probably, located on a mountain, since that is what the word means. Some other names for the same place were Sychar and Sychem.

This was located in Palestine. These Canaanites, you remember, were worshipping false gods. God would overthrow them and give this land to Abram's descendants. So many times, promises that God makes are not for the immediate time, but for the future. They will be fulfilled nonetheless. God is true, He keeps His promises.

Genesis 12:7 "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."

“I will give this land” (13:15; 15:18; 17:7-8; Gal. 3:16). God was dealing with Abram, not in a private promise, but with a view toward high and sacred interests long into the future, i.e., the land which his posterity was to inhabit as a peculiar people.

The seeds of divine truth were to be sown there for the benefit of all mankind. It was chosen as the most appropriate land for the coming of divine revelation and salvation for the world.

“Altar ... unto the Lord”: By this act, Abram made an open confession of his religion, established worship of the true God, and declared his faith in God’s promise. This was the first true place of worship ever erected in the Promised Land. Isaac would later build an altar also to

commemorate the Lord's appearance to him 26:24-25), and Jacob also built one in Shechem (33:18-20).

Not many people have had the Lord to appear to them. When He does, they will build an altar, as well. God promised the land of Canaan to Abram's descendants. Abram did not question how, or when, God would do this, Abram showed his belief, and sincerity, and humbleness by building an altar and worshipping.

Genesis 12:8 "And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Beth-el, and pitched his tent, [having] Beth-el 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."

"Beth-el ... Hai": Beth-el, 7 miles North of Jerusalem, was named later by Abraham (28:19). Hai (also known as Ai), was 2 miles East of Beth-el, where Joshua later fought (Joshua chapters 7 and 8).

The word "Beth-el" means house of God. "Hai" was another name for Ai, which means ruins; we will read about this area a number of times in this study.

Everywhere that Abram went, his first action was to build an altar to the Lord, and this was no exception. He prayed to God here (called upon the name of the Lord). Abram knew that he had to depend on God entirely.

Genesis 12:9 "And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south."

"Toward the south": Abram moved toward the Negev into a less desirable area for raising crops but better for his vocation as a herdsman, perhaps engaging also in merchant activity.

Genesis 12:10 "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."

"And there was a famine in the land": Famine was not an unusual phenomenon in Canaan; two other major food shortages also occurred during the patriarchal period (26:1; 41:56). The severity and timing of this one forced Abram, soon after his arrival and travel in the Promised Land (verses 5-9), to immigrate to Egypt, where food was usually in abundant supply.

Still holding to God's promise, he did not return to Ur, though matters were extremely difficult (Heb. 11:15).

In addition to the wicked Canaanites, now he was tested by a famine (James 1:2-8 and those in Gen. 26:1; and 41:56).

"Egypt" is the great civilization of northeastern Africa which, when united, included both the upper (southern) and lower (northern) kingdoms. It is identified as Mizraim in Hebrew.

By the time Abraham arrived in Egypt during the First Intermediate Period, the great pyramids of the Old Kingdom Period (2700-2200 B.C.) had already been standing for some five hundred years! The subsequent rise of the Middle Kingdom Period (2040-1786 B.C.) parallels the arrival of Jacob and Joseph.

Extensive archaeological excavations at various sites throughout Egypt reveal an advanced culture expressed in architecture, agriculture, literature, music, military prowess, and religion. The Pharaoh was considered to be a god incarnate whose word was law.

This probably accounts for the complete absence of any law codes in ancient Egypt and supports the uniqueness of the Mosaic Law. Egypt continued to be an important factor to Israel throughout the Old Testament record.

Abram, as many who would follow him, found refuge in Egypt. Later on Joseph (coat of many colors) would find refuge there. Even Jesus, when Herod sought to kill him, was carried to refuge there by Joseph and Mary. Famines often drive people to a strange area to find food. God will use whatever it takes to get His people where He would have them go at a given time.

Genesis 12:11 "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:"

“Sarah” was the wife of Abraham and was also his half-sister. She was originally called Sarai and came with Abraham from Ur. Her inability to produce an heir was the major factor in her convincing Abraham to have a child by Hagar, her handmaid. At age 90 Sarah conceived and bore Isaac. Later, at her insistence, Hagar and Ishmael were expelled by Abraham.

“Fair woman”: At 65, Sarai was still young and exceptionally attractive, being only half the age she was to be when she died (127). The patriarchs lived long; Abram was 175 when he died.

Sarah lived to be 127 years old. She died at Kirjath-arba (Hebron) and was buried in the cave of Machpelah (23:1-20). The New Testament refers to Sarah as the mother of the children of promise (Rom. 9:9). She is included in the list of the faithful (Heb. 11:11) and is cited as an example of obedience to her husband (1 Pet. 3:6; Gen. 11:29; 17:15-19).

Genesis 12:12-13 "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." "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."

Abram’s fear of Sarai’s being taken to Pharaoh’s harem and his being killed led him to disguise his true relationship to her (20:13). Abram sought on his own initiative to take care of his future, thinking to assist God in fulfilling His promises.

“Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake”: According to 20:13, Abram lied about Sarai everywhere he went to save his life, even after he had been saved and called by God. But God’s sovereignty overcame Abram’s sin.

“Sister”: This was a lying half-truth, since Sarai was Abram’s half-sister (20:12).

It seemed that Sarai was very beautiful, Abram was afraid that someone would want her for his wife enough, that he would kill Abram to get her. Fear will cause us to do some very foolish things. Abram was so afraid for his life, that he was willing to pass his wife off as his sister. He even asked Sarai to help him with his deception.

Genesis 12:14 "And it came to pass, that, when Abram was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she [was] very fair."

The inadequacy of Abram's expedient appears in the issue, which is different from what he expected. Sarai is admired for her beauty, and, being professedly single, is selected as a wife for Pharaoh; while Abram, as her brother, is munificently entertained and rewarded.

Genesis 12:15 "The princes also of Pharaoh saw her, and commended her before Pharaoh: and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house."

“Taken into Pharaoh’s house”: Egyptian officials did take notice of Sarai and informed their monarch of her beauty. The result was not unexpected; she ended up in Pharaoh’s harem!

Genesis 12:16 "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."

Abram had now become involved in perplexities, from which he had neither the wisdom nor the power to extricate himself. With what bitterness of spirit he must have kept silence, received these accessions to his wealth which he dared not to refuse, and allowed Sarai to be removed from his temporary abode!

His cunning device had saved his own person for the time; but his beautiful and beloved wife is torn from his bosom.

There is no state on earth free from trials, nor any character free from blemishes. There was famine in Canaan, the glory of all lands, and unbelief, with the evils it ever brings, in Abram the father of the faithful. Perfect happiness and perfect purity dwell only in heaven.

Nothing was too good for Abram (if he was brother to Sarai). Pharaoh showered him with gifts for her sake. She was taken into the home of Pharaoh. God did not like this kind of carrying on. We will see in the next verse, just how displeased He was.

Genesis 12:17 "And the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai Abram's wife."

“Plagued Pharaoh and his house”: The separation of Abram and Sarai was critical enough to evoke the Lord’s personal and dramatic intervention. Abram engineered the ruse to protect himself (verse 13, “that I may live”) apparently without too much thought being given to Sarai; but God’s reaction focused upon the protection of Sarai (“because of Sarai”).

Abram was rebuked by Pharaoh. Sarai was his half-sister (20:12), but his statement was a lie. There Abram dissembled his relation to Sarai, equivocated, and taught his wife and his attendants to do so too. He concealed a truth, so as in effect to deny it, and exposed thereby both his wife and the Egyptians to sin.

God did not tolerate this type of behavior then, and will not tolerate it even today. These plagues descended when Sarai moved in. Pharaoh quickly realized the problem. Truly he laid the problem where it belonged, at Abram's feet. He realized she was Abram's wife, and God was displeased.

Some of the plagues in our society today, I believe, are because of God's displeasure at the sex sins of all kinds present in our land.

Genesis 12:18-19 "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?" "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."

Pharaoh's reproof of Abram was very just: What is this that thou hast done? How unbecoming a wise and good man! If those who profess religion do that which is unfair and deceptive, especially if they say that which borders upon a lie, they must expect to hear of it; and they have reason to thank those who will tell them of it. The sending away was kind.

Somehow, and it remains unexplained, the plagues uncovered the deceit of Abram for Pharaoh. The monarch of Egypt humiliated Abram with his questions, showing more character than Abram gave him credit for and sending Abram out of his country.

Pharaoh asked Abram "why did you lie to me? You got me into trouble. Hurry up and get out of here, so God will stop this plague."

Genesis 12:20 "And Pharaoh commanded [his] men concerning him: and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had."

“Sent him away”: Abram’s lie brought him and his extended family to a disgraceful exit from Egypt, one which the servants must have talked about among themselves, with some loss to Abram’s integrity and reputation in their eyes (see note on 13:9).

Pharaoh was so far from any design to kill Abram, as he feared, that he took particular care of him. We often perplex ourselves with fears which are altogether groundless. Many a time we fear where no fear is. Pharaoh charged his men not to hurt Abram in anything.

It is not enough for those in authority, that they do not hurt themselves; they must keep their servants and those about them from doing hurt.

Pharaoh realized this man was protected by God, so he did not punish him. He was in such a hurry for him to leave, that Pharaoh sent his men to make sure he left. Pharaoh did not take the gifts back. He sent them with Abram.

Our lesson to be learned in all of this is two-fold.

- (1) We should not lie to protect ourselves; and
- (2) God will be with us to help us out of whatever mess we get ourselves into, if we are His.

Genesis Chapter 12 Questions

1. Where was the first city God sent Abram out from?
2. What was the city's name where God told Abram to leave his kindred?
3. What three promises did God make to Abram?
4. The promises were not just for Abram, but for whom?
5. What was the name of Abram's nephew who went with him?
6. How old was Abram, when he departed from Haran?
7. Where were they going?
8. Where did Abram go near the plain of Moreh?
9. Who inhabited the land there?
10. Sichem was located in what land?
11. What was the first thing that Abram did?
12. When he left the plain of Moreh, where did he go?
13. What does the city's name mean?
14. This city was 12 miles from?
15. Hai means what?
16. Why did Abram go to Egypt?
17. What was Egypt a land of?
18. Why did Abram tell Sarai to tell them she was his sister?

19. What drives us to do things we would not ordinarily do?
20. What were some of the gifts Pharaoh gave Abram?
21. What did God do to straighten out this mess?
22. Where should the blame be placed?
23. Did Pharaoh take her to wife?
24. What did Pharaoh do to make it right?
25. What two things should we learn in all this?