



AN INVITATION TO A NEW EDEN

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 12:1-9

Second Message

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After an amazing week of ups and downs in our political process we still don't know whom we have elected as our next President. The nation is in a state of insecurity. We face the terrible prospect of the election results being given over to endless legal debate. The thought of our country being paralyzed by lack of leadership may be even more troubling than the question of who will lead. How can we be certain of where we are going or plan for the future without a clear mandate from an elected leader?

Today we will look back in time and examine the most important election in human history. When God elects an individual for his purposes, there are no questions or debate about who that person is and what that election will accomplish in history. Our text, Genesis 12:1-9, a mere nine verses, gives us an understanding of Abraham's destiny, as well as that of all the patriarchs. But the story is much larger than that. This text will drive Israel's history, and eventually, the history of the whole world. Here we discover with absolute certainty where history is headed. This is a text that you can hang your life on.

Our story opens in the aftermath of the disastrous building venture of the tower of Babel. It has two parts, Abram's *call* (12:1-3), followed by his response and *journey* to the land of promise (12:4-9).

I. The Call of Abram (12:1-3)

Now the LORD said to Abram,
 "Go forth from your country,
 And from your relatives
 And from your father's house,
 To the land which I will show you..." (NASB)

A. The Invitation by God's word

The kingdom of God breaks into history at God's initiative. Through the spoken word, the Lord invites Abram to be part of a new Eden that he is creating. It will be a new land, with a new seed, and will take on such large dimensions that it will affect the whole world and drive the rest of human history. This is what the builders of the last chapter longed for in the construction of their tower, but they never got to see it. The great hallmark of spirituality is that rather than trying to build our own Eden and make a name for ourselves, God invites us to play a significant role in what he is building.

B. The Necessity for Separation and Trust

God's invitation to Abram necessitates a separation. The opening Hebrew command, *lek leka*, is "crisp and stark in its formulation."¹ It means, "go for yourself," or better, "by yourself." Examining all the texts where this phrase is used, Casuto concludes that it refers "to someone who goes alone (or only with those who are specially connected with him) and breaks away from the community or group in whose midst he was till that moment."² Thus, before Abram can receive a life of blessing, he must be willing to endure a severe separation, one that extends from the broadest family circles of country

and relatives, to the most intimate family relations, his aged father's house. He must leave all that is secure and familiar, all that for the past seventy-five years has shaped and defined him. What makes it even more difficult is that his journey is left undefined. Abram is to set out for a land that "*I will show you.*" Thus every step of his journey will require constant trust. He is asked to go to a place he has never seen, trusting the character of the one who has called him. God doesn't spell out the destination, let alone the details of the itinerary. He merely says, "Trust me." This creates a very dynamic relationship between Abram and God, and keeps God from being impersonal or uninvolved.

This painful act of obedience is required for all to enter the life of faith. We cannot know true devotion to God without a prior willingness to leave all our old relationships and countries behind. And lest we become complacent and think that this is something we have to endure only once, let us remember that Abram hears this same command again (*lek leka*) when he is old. The second time it provokes even more emotion than the first, for God commands him to "*Go by yourself* to the land of Moriah" (Gen 22:2). There he will be asked to perform the supreme act of devotion — sacrificing his own son — which he will painfully have to carry out alone. So the way of faith and election can be a costly, lonely road. Abram must separate himself and go it alone if he is to find blessing.

We discover the same principle at work when Jesus issues the invitation to his first disciples, who were fishermen. Mark says that they "immediately *left* the nets and followed," and "they *left* their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him" (Mark 1:18, 20). These early disciples left secure jobs and familiar homes, risking everything to follow the itinerant rabbi.

But the text declares that the cost of obedience is nothing compared to its rewards.

C. Into a Life of Promise – A new land and a new seed 12:2-3

**"And I will make you a great nation,
 And I will *bless* you,
 And make your name great;
 And so you shall be a *blessing*;
 And I will *bless* those who *bless* you,
 And the one who curses you I will curse.
 And in you all the families of the earth shall be *blessed*."**

God spells out to Abram everything that will be given to him for his faithfulness. This is made up of seven gifts (seven is the number of perfection) built around the Hebrew word *barak*³ (*to bless*), which is reiterated five times in a myriad of verbal forms. What "to be blessed" means can best be understood by observing the context of when God first blessed mankind. After man and woman were made in God's image, the narrator says,

God *blessed* them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish..." (Gen 1:28)

Here we find two basic notions encompassed in the term “blessed.” The first has the notion of fertility: there will be an abundance of life coming forth from the man and the woman. Thus the Old Testament lists long life, wealth, good harvests and many children and grandchildren as evidence of God’s blessing (Gen 24:35-36; Lev 26:4-13; Deut 28:3-14). The second notion is the command to conquer hostile forces (seen in the verb *subdue*). So to be blessed by God is to be endowed with life that is not only abundant, but one that is victorious over evil, too.⁴ God’s emphatic use of the verb here is a clue that he is making out of Abram’s seed a new Adam, a new humanity that will be extremely prosperous.

This reveals that it is God’s unwavering grace that drives history. No matter how rebellious man becomes, no matter how vile the acts that he flaunts in the face of God, no matter the wreckage he leaves in his wake of his perversions, God remains resolute and fixed that man be blessed. He is determined that man know and experience the full range of dignity of what it means to be gloriously human. So in the wake of the tower of Babel, and the result that many nations were dispersed over the face of the earth, confined to distrust and darkness, God will create one nation to be a light to all the nations. It will be a new Eden, larger and more comprehensive than the original (see Deut 8:7-10).

These seven blessings can be grouped around four promises. First, God tells Abram that he will make him to be “a *great nation*.” A nation requires a large population, a significant land and a common constitution that binds a people together. A great nation needs a renowned history and a spiritual character that commands worldwide respect. The initial fulfillment of this promise will take some six centuries to bring about.

Second, God tells Abram that he will make his name “*great*.” This is the very thing the builders of the tower of Babel sought for themselves. But again we learn that greatness is not something we can grant to ourselves through our own achievements. Rather, “greatness” is being invited to play a significant role in what God is building. That kind of greatness is achieved by sheer gift. As Abram’s reputation spreads, God says that he will be a blessing to others (or it can be translated as “*Be a blessing*”).⁵ The point is that Abram will be so blessed by God that others cannot help but recognize the source of his blessing and will use his name as a blessing for themselves: “*May God make me as blessed as Abram*.” Later, in a very moving moment, a pagan king and his chief of police come to Abram’s home and tell him that it is obvious to all that “God is with you in all that you do” (Gen 21:22; cf. 26:28). The apostle Paul declares that this is the impact that Christians will have in their communities (2 Cor 2:15-16).

The third aspect of the blessing is *divine protection*. The manner in which people respond to Abram will determine their destiny. The Hebrew is slightly different than most English translations. It reads,

“I will bless those (plural) who bless you, but the one (singular) who despises (*qalal*) you, I will curse (*‘arar*).”

The Lord says he will personally intervene with regard to the reactions that people will have to Abram. In so doing he will preserve Abram’s reputation. Those who recognize God as the source of Abram’s blessing and give Abram honor will find themselves blessed. Those who “disdain” Abram (“*to treat as a light-weight*,” the opposite of giving social weight and honor) will find themselves “cursed” by God — the opposite of being “blessed.” Instead of possessing an abundance of life, they will experience sterility and the absence of life.

The fact that the first line is in the plural and the second in the singular may suggest that those who disdain Abram will be in the minority compared to those who acknowledge his blessing. And the different tenses of the verbs may also indicate a reluctance of God to “curse,” as compared to his keen eagerness and resolve to “bless.”⁶

The fourth aspect of the blessing takes Abram’s influence to an international level, not only for his time, but for all time: “*In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed* (or, “bless themselves”).” This final promise

brings the passage to a triumphant and universal conclusion...There is thus a progressive buildup in the good that will result from obeying God’s command:

1. Abram alone is blessed →
2. Abram’s name used as a blessing →
3. Abram’s blessers are blessed →
4. All families find blessing in Abram.⁷

So now every family group on the face of the earth will find their blessings from this one man. It would not be incorrect to say that all spiritual blessings have come from the Jews. Thus we find the purpose of election (i.e. to call “*one*” out from the “*many*”) is not arbitrary fatalism for the purpose of excluding others, but divine compassion to shape history, so that ultimately all might have the opportunity to be blessed. Thus the blessing is given to Abram, then to Isaac and Jacob. Finally, at the end of the Genesis account, “a curtain on the future is drawn back and a glimpse of the future seed of Abraham is briefly allowed (49:8-12). This one ‘seed’ who is to come, to whom the right of kingship belongs, will be the ‘lion of the tribe of Judah’ and ‘to him will be the obedience of the nations.’”⁸ That seed is Christ. Those who have faith in that seed are, as Paul says, “full heirs according to promise.”

D. The Blessing of Seed in the New Testament

So what does Abram’s blessing mean to believers today? Does it mean that everyone who has faith in Abram’s seed will be blessed with many children, wealth and welfare? This is an important question that I have heard from many women who are barren. The prophet Isaiah, writing to the exiles, picks up this theme and says a remarkable thing. In Isaiah 53, he depicts a suffering servant, one who will bear our iniquities. Yet after this one has been crushed to death, the prophet says, amazingly, “*He will see His seed*” (53:10). In the verses that follow the prophet utters a shout of joy:

**“Shout for joy, O barren one, you who have borne no child;
Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have not travailed;
For the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous
Than the sons of the married woman” (Isaiah 54:1)**

Now the seed of Abram is born spiritually, each one as miraculous as the birth of Isaac. And in the new age, the fertility of the spiritual seed far exceeds that of the physical seed. The New Testament says that the “desolate one” was Christ (as does Isaiah 52:14). And though he never married, he gives birth to many more than the married woman. In John 4, a Samaritan woman who had an encounter with Jesus at a well gives birth to a whole city in a day. Peter delivers one sermon on the day of Pentecost and three thousand spiritual children are born. So everyone who is in Christ is endowed with a rich heritage of blessings. As Paul writes, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every *spiritual* blessing in the *heavenly places* in Christ...” (Eph 1:3; note how *spiritual* replaces *physical*, and *heavenly places* replac-

es land).

Next, the narrator records Abram's response to such a call.

II. Abram's Journey into the Land (12:4-9)

A. Abraham's Obedience of Faith (12:4-5)

So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan.

Abram's obedience comes with lightening speed. The narrator records no verbal response, no debate, no questions, no doubts, just quick, decisive obedience to the call of God. The double mention of Lot accompanying Abram may suggest how close the two had become, perhaps after Lot was adopted into the larger family of Terah following the death of his father. But Lot's *going* is contrasted with Abram's. His is not necessarily in response to God's command, but to be with Abram. This subtle but powerful contrast sets up the later stories of their strife and eventual separation. Abram gathers up all he has acquired in Haran (a foreshadowing of future blessings in foreign lands), his property and slaves along with his wife, Sarai, and nephew, Lot, and leaves for parts unknown. Not bad for a man of seventy-five years!⁹

Verses 6 through 9 document Abram's journey through the land.

B. Abram's Journey of Faith (12:6-9)

And Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite was then in the land. And the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. And Abram journeyed on, continuing toward the Negev.

Notice three significant things about this journey. First, the *itinerary*; second, the mention of the *inhabitants* of the land; and third, the significance of Abram's *worship*. First, the narrator says that Abram walked the whole length of the land from north to south, in three stages. "The most likely route for Abram to have followed would have taken him south through Damascus, along the shore of the Sea of Galilee then on the Shechem" (just east of modern Nablus).¹⁰ From Shechem he heads south and camps on a mountain just east of Bethel, between Bethel and Ai. Shechem and Bethel were strategic outposts in the land, since both served as a crossroads for highways east and west, as well as north and south. And finally, he journeys on to the most southern border of the land, in the dry Negev. Abram is like a man who has just acquired a piece of property and paces it out step by step, end to end to inspect it as the new owner (Cassuto). *Walking*, therefore, takes on great significance, for "step by step" he is claiming this land by faith for the God who promised it to him. It is therefore the picture of the "ideal conquest" of the land and its sanctification to the LORD.

Second, when Abram arrives in Shechem, the narrator notes that the location was beside the oak of Moreh — a thriving center of idolatry. So Abram's land of promise is already well inhabited — by the Canaanites, of all peoples! The Ca-

naanites were the most morally depraved people on the earth, and now Abram was standing by one of their high places. ("Moreh" probably means "teaching," a reference to the many oracles the priests used to deliver there.) This indicates that possessing the land will not be without obstacles. To possess the land, Abram's seed must first dispossess an enemy. Yet it is God's plan to invade the darkest place on the face of the earth and plant his kingdom there.

It is there by the oak of Moreh (*moreh*) that God appears to Abram and he hears that confirming voice, "To your seed I will give *this* land." Upon hearing the oracle, Abram immediately sanctifies that spot as holy ground by building an altar to the LORD "who *appeared* (*nireh*) to him." Then he breaks camp and moves his tent further south. He builds another altar midway between Bethel and Ai, and "*calls upon the name of the Lord.*" That expression in the Torah is an expression of proclamation (see Exod 33:19; 34:5). So Abram not only honors the Lord in symbol, but now in speech he proclaims his faith to the inhabitants around him. In Abram we find what it means to be truly human. God's man follows God's call to a place he doesn't know (symbolized by the *tent*), then God's man sanctifies it by faith into what is holy through worship (the *altar*) and evangelism (*calling on the name of the Lord*).

This journey, which occupies a mere five verses, shapes the rest of the story of the patriarchs. Cassuto points out that what Abram does is mirrored by his grandson Jacob, and even later by Joshua.¹¹ When Jacob returns to the Land from the east, he too goes through Shechem, and there erects an altar to God. There at that spot he deals with the long history of idolatry in his household and commands them to put away foreign gods, which they place under an oak tree. Then he journeys south to Bethel, where he worships God, and finally continues to Hebron in the Negev. When Joshua invades the land, the first city the Israelites conquer by themselves is Ai (Josh 7:2; 8:9), and then Joshua builds an altar at Mount Ebal next to Shechem. From there the campaign goes both north of Shechem (Josh 11) and south of Bethel and Ai (Josh 10). The point is "*the deeds of the fathers* in former times prefigure those of their descendents in the present."¹² It also shows that Joshua's conquest confirms what the fathers did by faith, expressed in the building of altars and buying property.

C. Conquering the Land in the New Testament

How does Abram's journey shape the New Testament idea of land? We find that after Israel is exiled from her land, the prophet Isaiah not only affirms and reiterates God's promise of land to his people, but expands and transcends it. To the exiles returning back to their land from Babylon he writes:

**"Enlarge the place of your tent;
Stretch out the curtains of your dwellings, spare not;
Lengthen your cords,
And strengthen your pegs.
For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left.
And your seed will possess nations,
And they will resettle the desolate cities."** (Isa 54:2-3)

In those amazing words, "tent" and "spread abroad to the right and to the left," we hear echoes of Abram's story (Gen 13:9), and the promises are reaffirmed. But then, after the verb "*possess*," we don't hear the word "*land*," which we would expect, but the term "*nations*." If we can but grasp it, God was looking ahead to a day when Abram's seed would possess the whole earth, a time when there would not be one holy nation among many, but the whole earth would be holy. The holy land would know no boundaries!

In the New Testament, the only two clear references to the promise of "land" (Matt 5:5; Rom 4:13) are not limited to Is-

rael; they now encompass the whole earth. And as it was in Abram's day, so in the first century the apostles had a clear understanding that God could make himself manifest in the darkest places on earth. Jesus had trained them (even if it was with reluctance and great difficulty!) that they need not hide from the world, cloistered in holy huddles, or drag a reluctant gentile world to Jerusalem to be holy (Acts 10). Rather, God gave them the vision granted by the prophets that he would transform pagan lands into holy turf. His New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, could descend anywhere, even in a desert (Acts 8:26). So they headed straight into the great centers of the world, places that were dominated by licentiousness (Corinth), greed (Ephesus), academia (Athens), and perversion (Rome). And to their amazement, God transformed places as diverse as homes, law courts, meat markets and prisons in the most amazing places of worship. These men responded like Abram. Step by step they began to claim a world that God had already promised them. May we follow in Abram's footsteps.

One of the greatest gifts my parents gave me, and for which I will forever be in their debt, was the privilege of studying in a foreign land. When I was nineteen, I joined eighty of my peers for six months of study and travel. The experience of studying at the center of the Renaissance, a place where the very air breathes art and expresso, was a dream. But beyond the art and culture, the experience also shaped me spiritually. As a young Christian, disconnected from family, friends and everything familiar, I felt lonely and afraid. Yet in that environment I learned to connect with God in new ways. I discovered what it was like to be led by God in a foreign land. During all of my travels in seven countries, God miraculously led me into the homes of believers where I discovered the joy of fellowship in worldwide family of God. I learned the freedom of traveling with little or no itinerary. I learned to pray and then show up and see what surprises God had in store. My passions for evangelism and missions were ignited there and have never left me. And it was on the island of Mykonos, on the shores of the Aegean, under the fullness of the moon, that God appeared to me and surrounded the air around me with such a love that it burst my breast (my *Bethel*).

Because of those experiences that I had overseas, I always encourage students and young people to take every opportunity to travel to foreign lands. If their parents object, I tell them they are just following in the footsteps of their father Abraham.

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1. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word, 1987), 274.
2. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II, From Noah to Abraham* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964), 310. Cassuto, *Genesis*, 311, lists the example from Song of Songs 4:6, where it means, "I will go alone, and I will leave behind every other thought, and every other companion."
3. Wenham, *Genesis*, 275, explains "The root *brk* occurs more frequently in Genesis than in any other part of the OT: 88 times in Genesis as against 310 times elsewhere."
4. I am indebted to Dr. Bruce Waltke for this insight.
5. Wenham, *Genesis*, 276, notes that this construction "occurs in only two other places, Isa 19:24 and Zech 8:13... 'As you have been a byword for cursing among the nations...so will I save you and you shall be a blessing.' In other words, people will say, 'May God make me as blessed as Abram.'"
6. Thanks to Dr. Bruce Waltke for this observation.
7. Wenham, *Genesis*, 278.
8. John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 140.
9. Cassuto, *Genesis*, 318, notes that Abram's life shows an interesting symmetry: 75 years with his father, 25 years with no father and no son, and 75 years with his son.
10. Wenham, *Genesis*, 279.
11. Cassuto, *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (8 vols.; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1955-1956), 1:65-66.
12. Cassuto.