

Genesis 11:27-12:9

Introduction

What does it look like when God takes hold of your life?

We heard, just a moment ago, from Maya. She described what it looks like for her. And this passage that we've just had read for us describes what it looked like for a man called Abram, who lived about 4,000 years ago.

We're just starting a new sermon series. We're going to be reading about the life of this man called Abram, who is such a big figure in the Bible. Elsewhere in the Bible he's described as 'the friend of God'. And we're going to be learning from him what it looks like when God takes hold of your life. His story begins at the end of chapter 11, where we're told about his family background. These details are important, so this is where *we're* going to begin, this morning. So, I've called our first heading, simply, Abram's family.

Abram's family

The last paragraph of chapter 11 begins with these words: **This is the account of Terah's family line.**

Terah is Abram's father. We're told that Terah has three sons, one of whom dies. We're introduced to Abram, one of the remaining sons, along with his wife, Sarai, who is childless. We're told that the family move their home, from Ur of the Chaldeans to Harran. And then we're told of Terah's death at the age of 205.

It's a short, potted history of Terah's family line, a bit like an obituary you might read in a newspaper. But the details reveal a lot about Abram's family background.

Most people identify Ur of the Chaldeans with ancient remains found in modern day Iraq, in this area on the map. It was one of the largest cities in the world at that time. Here's an old black and white photo of the remains from above. It contains royal tombs, being excavated here in this photo. Excavations have revealed items such as these, which are evidence of unparalleled wealth. They point to the importance and splendour of the city and the highly developed civilisation of its inhabitants.

Details of life in the city are known from more than a hundred thousand clay tablets that have survived and been excavated. All the evidence suggests that life in the city was materially comfortable and culturally rich. There was a busy market where goods were traded from all around the world. Whatever you wanted, you could get it there. The city was home to weavers, jewellers, carpenters, shipbuilders, potters, leatherworkers and many other kinds of tradesmen.

And it was dominated by a huge temple-tower, or ziggurat, which rose to 150 feet above street level. Here's a picture. Part of it has been reconstructed but the remains of the original structure can still be seen and touched. On the top stood a blue and silver temple dedicated to the Sumerian moon-god Nanna, whose Akkadian name was Sin.

The temple area is known to have housed a library and a school. Pupils' exercises and teachers' reports have survived. Students learnt to write in cuneiform and could learn a variety of subjects. Geography, zoology, botany, astronomy, engineering, medicine and architecture were all taught and studied.

And while the worship of the moon-god Nanna dominated city life, religion was highly polytheistic. More than 300 gods were worshipped in all. And the religious rituals were degrading, involving magic, superstition, and prostitution. According to another part of the Bible, Joshua 24, verse 2, Abram's family took part in the worship of these gods or idols. This was their cultural background. And it's from here that Terah sets out to go to Canaan, along with his family.

We're not told why they leave. Nor are we told why they settle in Harran, here, in modern day Turkey. What we do know is that Harran too was a major centre of culture and commerce. Its name means 'crossroads'. It was at the intersection of major trade routes. And it too was notable for the worship of the same moon-god. The city may even have been constructed to a vaguely moon-shaped design. The culture and religious life of the city would have been very familiar to Terah. And seemingly, he couldn't leave it behind, because he never made it to Canaan. He settled in Harran instead.

So, this is Abram's family background. And it's not an unusual one. The first eleven chapters of Genesis describe how humankind has turned away from its Creator. Rather than living under his loving rule, we have chosen a life of independence and autonomy. And Ur of the Chaldeans is merely one example of what that looks like. It can be a materially comfortable life. It can be a culturally rich and vibrant life. Yet it's a life marked by the worship of a whole host of false gods or idols that we trust to deliver the things we crave. It's what Ur looked like. It's what Harran looked like. And it's what our world *still* looks like today. In the society around us, those idols might be a career, a football team, a relationship, people's children, their house, their car, a celebrity they follow on social media, or any number of other things. It's unlikely to be the moon-god Nanna. But it's whatever people look to in the place of God for their happiness and good. Those are their idols.

And it's into this idol-worshipping world that the one true God speaks. And that brings us to our second heading, which is God's command.

God's command

Please look down at verse 1 of chapter 12.

The LORD had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.’

The first major discovery that Abram makes is that, in contrast to the idols of the world around him, the one true God speaks. This command marks the beginning of a lifelong relationship that will be characterised by communication with God. Those who subscribe to a purely materialistic view of the universe as a closed system of cause and effect will find that idea outrageous. But if we’re to take the Bible seriously, then we need to be open to the idea that there is a Creator God who can and does communicate with those he has created. He has spoken to us supremely through his Son, Jesus Christ. And he speaks to us today through the pages of his word, the Bible. If you wouldn’t yet call yourself a Christian, that may be the first big discovery you need to make: that you can hear God address you directly and personally through the pages of the Bible.

And his message to us today is the same message he spoke to Abram more than 4,000 years ago. It is ‘Go,’... ‘Leave’. Abram is to leave home. He’s to go from his country, his people, his father’s household. He’s to make a decisive break from the past idolatry and traditions of his family. And he’s to go to the land that God will show him. As yet, he doesn’t know where that is. It’s a call to exchange the known for the unknown. He doesn’t have a map. He hasn’t been given any directions. He doesn’t have a postcode to type into Google. He’s to leave behind all that’s familiar and comfortable and go wherever God leads him.

And that’s what God calls us to do, today, still. It’s the call of the gospel, to leave and follow. Jesus put it in very stark terms when he said these words, which at first are shocking. He said this: **‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.’** (Luke 14:26)

The danger that Jesus is addressing here is that our attachment to our family can prevent us from following him. These words *would* be shocking if Jesus meant them literally. But he doesn’t mean them literally. He’s speaking in a culture where family is everything. And the people he’s speaking to would know that he’s talking about loyalties. He’s saying that to follow him means a radical re-ordering of your allegiances. It means putting him before all others.

The call to follow Jesus is a call to make a decisive break from the past. That may mean a break with the beliefs and traditions of family and friends and work colleagues. It certainly means a break from many of the values and practices of the society around us. It means abandoning our old way of life, no matter how comfortable and secure it may have been. And it means starting afresh with Jesus. Like Abram, we may not know where he will lead us. When we sense God’s call on our lives, we may have little idea what it means or what to

do next. But the first step is clear. Like Abram, he calls us to make a decisive break from the past, to leave it behind and follow him.

And his command to 'Go' and 'Leave' is accompanied by a promise. And that's our next heading: God's promise.

God's promise

Please look down again at verses 2 and 3.

God says to Abram: **'I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'**

If we used one word to sum up God's promise it would be blessing. That word gets repeated again and again. There can be no doubt about God's intent. He has already promised Abram a land. Now he promises him more. He promises him people. And he promises to make his name great.

In chapter 11, people had tried to make a name for themselves by building the tower of Babel. But God had stopped them in their tracks. Their striving after greatness had failed. But now God will make *Abram's* name great.

Notice how tangible these promises are: a land, a people, greatness. There's nothing vague or unclear about them. Success or failure would be obvious. And what's even more remarkable is that one of them seems impossible.

We've been told in chapter 11, verse 30, that Abram's wife, Sarai, is unable to conceive. Yet God promises that he will make Abram into a nation. To state the obvious, that involves conceiving. It's a tangible yet seemingly impossible promise.

But, as we'll see, God will use these promises to teach Abram and his descendants that they can trust him. Abram himself would experience blessing in his own lifetime through a close relationship with God, through children, and through material prosperity. Those who helped and supported him would find the enriching touch of the Lord on their lives too. Those who alienated themselves from Abram would find the opposite.

But the most staggering part of the promise comes at the end: **'...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'**

We need to understand *that* in the light of all that's come before.

Genesis began by telling us of God's great work of creation, when he called the universe into being. In chapter 2, we're told about the garden paradise that God created for Adam and Eve to live in. Their lives were to be filled with blessing. But chapter 3 tells how Adam and Eve sinned against God and brought all creation under his curse. This is the world we live in

today. It's a world that's under God's curse. It's a world that's headed for judgement because of sin. It's a judgement that all people will face, you and me included. We all sin. And the Bible tells us that the wages of sin is death.

But God's promise to Abram, that all people on earth will be blessed through him, points us to God's great plan of salvation. It's a plan that's rooted in God's love and grace. He's under no obligation to save anyone. But this promise to Abram tells us that God's original intention for humankind, to live in fellowship with him, in the place he gives us, enjoying his blessing, still stands. It's a wonderful promise that anticipates the good news of Jesus. The apostle Paul describes this promise as the gospel announced in advance. It marks the beginning of the story of salvation, which runs all the way through the Bible to the cross of Christ, where he won forgiveness for sin and opened the way to heaven. And Paul says, in Galatians 3, verse 29: **If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.**

In other words, the promise of blessing comes to us today through faith in Jesus and his death on a cross. The promises of land and people were real and tangible. But they were merely tokens of the unimaginable riches, that were being kept ready by God to be poured out on people of all nations who belong to Christ.

And this is where the promise given to Abram about 4,000 years ago, becomes very relevant to each one of us today. God's promise of blessing still stands. It's not the promise of material blessing in this life now. It's not the absence of sorrow or suffering. It's the blessing of a restored relationship with our heavenly Father, and the joy of eternal life both now and in a new creation, which God will one day bring into being. It comes not through being religious. Not by earning it through good works. But through having faith like Abram's. Faith that trusts God's promises and acts on them. It's faith which is evident in his obedience.

That's our final heading: Abram's obedience.

Abram's obedience

Verse 4 begins: **So Abram went, as the LORD had told him...**

Abram leaves all the comfort and familiarity of Harran and goes to Canaan, in obedience to the Lord's command, and trusting God's promise.

The Lord appears to Abram and confirms that it is *this* land, the land of Canaan, that he will give to Abram's descendants. At that time, we're told, the Canaanites were in the land. That looks like a problem. God has said that he will give this land to Abram's descendants. But, for now, someone else lives there. Abram must receive this promise by faith. And his response is worship. He builds an altar to the Lord. And then he moves on further into the land, pitches his tent and builds another altar. It's his way of staking claim to the land on

behalf of his descendants, who are, as yet, unborn. Then he continues all the way down to the Negev in the south. He not only sees the land that has been promised, he walks through it from north to south and worships in it.

Hebrews 11, verses 9 and 10, say this: **By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.**

In other words, Abram left his old life as a city-dweller and embraced a new life as a tent-dweller, trusting a promise of blessing that could never be fulfilled in his own lifetime, because he knew that his ultimate destination was heaven.

It's a wonderful picture of the Christian life. Leaving the sin and idolatry of our old life behind. Living one day at a time. Trusting the Lord. Obeying him. Not knowing where he might lead us or the details of the journey. But being confident of the destination.

Conclusion

If you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, this is the journey that Jesus is calling you on. He's calling you to make a break with the past. To have an about turn. And to start afresh with him. It's a call to radically re-order your allegiances. To put him before all others. To trust that the path he leads you on is the path that leads to blessing, both now and in eternity. The path that has its ultimate destination in heaven.

Can you hear his call today?

If so, then please come back again next week. We'd love you to join us. You might like to come along to a course we run called Christianity Explored, where you can find out all about Jesus and the life he offers. It starts in February. But you might also like to say a prayer and ask God to help you to start following Jesus today, and to begin learning what it means to live by faith. I'm going to say a prayer now. You can make it your own by echoing it in your heart and saying 'Amen' at the end.

Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, the call to follow Jesus is terrifying, because it means leaving all that we find comfortable and familiar and giving our allegiance to him before all others. But you promise that the path he leads us on is full of blessing and has its destination in heaven. So please help each of us here to trust you, to take the next step, and to follow wherever he might lead us. Please teach us what it means to live by faith. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.