
The Follower and the Fearful

Genesis 11:27 – 12:20

Advances and obstacles. Three steps forward, two steps back. This is so often our experience in life. We seem to move forward in our family, our finances, our work; then a setback occurs and we are trying to recover ground. Moses is using this idea to help us understand redemptive history. In doing so, he is highlighting the sovereign purposes and plans of God that God presses forward by His divine providences. And so we will see this throughout the rest of Genesis. There will be stunning advances and alarming obstacles.

This advance and obstacle is set in three scenes. Each scene is a movement, a trip, a migration.

The first scene gives us the migration of Abraham's family from a pagan center of culture to a pagan center of religion (Ur to Haran).

The second scene follows the initial obedient movement from the place where sin abounds to the place where blessing is promised.

The third scene shows the sad drift in the midst of hardship into deceit and difficulty. Yet, God will preserve and protect His called-out ones through His sovereign providence.

All the advances here are by faith and the obstacle is one of fear.

The Situation in Abraham's Past (11:27-32)

Moses records for us the particulars of Abram's past, his family, his home, his worship. He does so in a transition through Abram's father, Terah. Thus the section opens with "these are the generations of Terah." Again, we have the opening of a *Tol*dot*, the introduction to the central theme and narrative of Genesis.

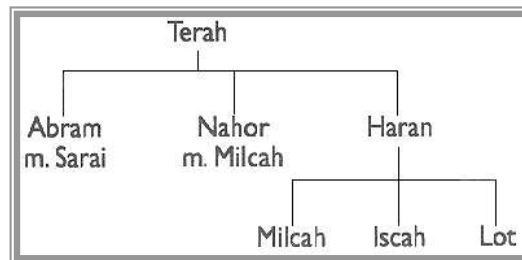
²⁷ Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. ²⁸ Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. ²⁹ And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. ³⁰ Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.

³¹ Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. ³² The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran.

As we peruse the text, let us not forget the importance of this narrative. So many important New Testament texts will come back to this call from God and covenant with Abram as central to understanding redemptive history. We will do well to think deeply about this, not in a way that creates two story lines in the Bible, but rather sees Christ as the center of all the Bible's story. Abram, his descendants, his covenants, his faith, his hopes and his obedient trust all are wrapped up in bringing us to Christ.

His Family Relations (v.27-30)

First, Moses helps us understand Abram's family situation. He is one among three brothers, the first of whom was born when Terah was 70. Haran, Abram's brother is the father of Lot. This name Haran is very important in the family. Haran was Terah's father and the name of the city where he lived. While they lived in Ur, Haran died, leaving Lot as the ward of Abram.



His Settled Residence (v.31-32)

There are a couple of textual issues to deal with here.

In Acts 7:2-4, Stephen, preaching to the Sanhedrin at his trial says, "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' 4 Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living." [ESV]. Stephen establishes a timeline that has what is recorded in Genesis 12:1-3 as actually happening here. God calls Abraham. The family heads towards Canaan (v.31). They settle down in Haran, named for Terah's father, which has become a center of pagan moon worship. We do not know the reasons, other than the possibility that Terah was unable or unwilling to travel on to Canaan.

The second issue arises from the dates and ages given. Without going into all the arguments, it is not possible for Abram to be born when Terah was 70, and for him to be 75 (Genesis 12:4) when he left Haran if Terah died at 205 years old. There are two solutions. Bruce Waltke points out the Samaritan Pentateuch has that Terah is 145, not 205. This would make sense of the numbers. ⁱ

Terah, as the patriarch of the clan and the subject of this unit, brings the family out of Ur and heads toward Canaan. We know they did so because God had appeared to Abram. They went to the ancestral home at Haran. We simply do not know the reasons why. We do not even really know how long it was. The only hint that it may have been long is the use of the phrase, "they settled there."

His Inherited Religion (v.27-30)

Was Abram a worshipper of God before he was called out? I do not believe so. Abram, like his father, was probably an idol worshipper. We know that Rebecca had access to and kept the household idols when she was brought to be Isaac's wife. And much later, Joshua, speaking to the people of Israel and challenging them to serve the Lord their God and to choose life, says, "Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many. [Joshua 24:2-3, ESV].

So here is the dark pagan past of Israel's great patriarch. His father is steeped in Babylonish pagan idolatry. One of his brothers dies leaving orphans for him to care for. His wife is infertile, leaving him with no children and no heirs. The call from God has come. There has been a long trip to Haran. His father is dead. And he lives in the center of pagan moon worship.

The Obedience of Abraham's Faith (12:1-9)

The sovereign call of God comes to this heathen Gentile. Here is the authentication of *patrimony* of Abram in the Messianic line.

12 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵ And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he moved to the hill country 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. ⁹ And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

God's Word Calls (v.1-3)

The reading here grammatically can and ought to be, "Now the Lord had said to Abram." As we mentioned earlier, the record of this call which God gave to Abraham in Ur is recorded, not in the Terah cycle, but rather in the beginning of the Abram cycle.

God's Word comes first as a command. If Abram is to be a follower of God, then he must be obedient to God. He must do what God says. Attached to this command is a promise from God. God promises what He has purposed or planned for Abram and his descendants. So here is the first draft, if you will, of the Abrahamic Covenant. It came as a call to obey. We have seen this pattern in the Noahic account of the command and then the covenant. This theme then unfolds in the larger redemptive history where we have the Mosaic Law then the New Covenant.

So what we have here is the launching of the purpose of Israel as a people. The Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic Covenants point to God as revealer, redeemer and regent. *THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT IS ABOUT GOD REVEALING HIMSELF.* The Abrahamic Covenant reverses Babel. Here God speaks (v.1) and appears (v.7). This revelation to them becomes the light to the world. Thus, the Lord Jesus comes as the fulfiller of the Abrahamic Covenant. Through Him, revelation is completed. He is the first and final Word.

THE MOSAIC COVENANT IS ABOUT REDEMPTION. It is about how God reverses the Eden. Redemption is not just the forgiveness of our sins; it is the total reversal of the sin problem in all the cosmos. The Mosaic Covenant, as revelation about redemption purchased, applied and completed is fulfilled in Jesus, our Redeemer.

THE DAVIDIC COVENANT IS ABOUT RULE. It is about how God reverses Satan. God is asserting His rule over all by establishing His rule on earth. David then points us to the Lord Jesus who ascends to the throne to rule over heaven and earth in the resurrection and ascension.

Each of the covenants then establishes the categories, motifs, images and concepts through which God discloses His saving work. It is easy then to see how Jesus comes as the fulfiller of all the covenants and as the new Israel. All of this was designed to point to Him. Better yet, all of these things are the shadows cast back into the Old Testament by the substance and reality of Jesus Christ.

God's command is to leave his place of residence, his family or clan relations and his inheritance (his father's house). It is a radical call. Even today, people resist even in the fast transportation we have the moving away from family. Yet God calls him to leave and to go for it will be in the land that God will show him that the promises will begin to be fulfilled.

God's command to go out is accompanied by a suite of promises. These "I wills..." later become the formal Abrahamic Covenant. So that Abraham will be a blessing, God promises *TO PROVIDE* for him by:

Making him into a great nation;

Blessing him with wealth, spiritually and physically;

Making his name and reputation great.

God also promises *TO PROTECT* him by:

Blessing those who bless him;

Cursing those who dishonor him;

God promises to make him the source of blessing to all the world.

These promises will be expanded and clarified when the Covenant is formally given and ratified in a later chapter. Moses' purpose here in giving the elements of the covenant in the call from God is to show that Abram's relationship faith and obedience are grounded in God's precepts and promises. We will do more to relate the Abrahamic Covenant with its fulfillment in Christ in later studies.

Abraham's Faith Obeys (v.4-6)

Abram responds to the Word of God in faith, in believing God in an obeying way. He goes as the Lord told him. So, Moses picks the chronology up here in Haran. Abram gathers up those who are his responsibility and steps out in obedience, as Hebrews says, "Not knowing exactly where he was going..." He is an immensely wealthy man with many servants and a nephew in his charge. Given other texts, Lot may also be

going because he is a believer and is attaching himself to the blessing from God for Abram and all who will honor him.

Abram obeys in spite of many obstacles. Verse 6 gives a couple of stops on a 500 mile journey. Then the ominous, the Canaanites dwelt there. His age, his great wealth and possessions, the long journey and the great dangers where he is going all stand against such a move. He is going from being a settled city dweller into a nomadic life. He is moving a large tribe of family, servants, livestock and wealth. But he believes God and goes.

Abraham's Fellowship Deepens (v.7-9)

At the Oak of Moreh in Shechem, God appears to Abram. The language is emphatic. God appears to him. God's appearing to people in the Old Testament are called Theophanies. They are the pre-incarnate appearances of the Lord Jesus. Since Abram has journeyed and is in the center of Canaan, then appears to Abram. He had left Ur and Haran to land God would show him. Here it is. This is the land your descendants will live in.

Abram responds to God with worship. At Shechem and then as he moves through the land, he builds altars. He is not building these as territorial markers. He is building these as places of worship and devotion to the God he trusts and obeys. We do not know how long he is in each of these locations, but we know that in building altars to the Lord, he also worships the Lord. He calls on the name of the Lord.

The Trouble of Abraham's Failure (v.10-20)

But even those who trust and obey the Lord can make unwise decisions and even sin. Moses intends for us to see the connection between these narratives. Even though Abram fails to trust God in the famine and goes to Egypt, the sovereign protection of God shields Abram and Sarah from a heathen Gentile. Here is the authentication of the *purity* of Sarah in the Messianic line.

¹⁰ Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. ¹¹ When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, ¹² and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake." ¹⁴ When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵ And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁶ And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.

¹⁷ But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. ¹⁸ So Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹ Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go." ²⁰ And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.

Abraham's Fearful Deceit (v.10-13)

In an unexpected twist, there is a famine in the promised land. This is an immediate testing of Abram's faith. Will he hold fast to God and His promises or will he do something else? In order to escape the devastation of the famine, Abram went down to Egypt. While there is no direct comment or condemnation on this, certainly Moses' audience would be cringing.

The reputation of Egyptian leaders for lust and for power allowed fear to rise up in Abram's heart. Sarah was a beautiful and intelligent woman, even at 80 years old. So, in fear that the Egyptians would kill him in order to obtain Sarah, he devised this half-truth and enlisted Sarah in the charade. Now look, there is no way to mitigate Abram's sin here. Sarah was his half-sister. At one level then, she is not lying. It is what she is not saying that is the deception. Abram draws her into the deceit by appealing for his own safety and her well-being

Pharaoh's Wrongful Marriage (v.14-16)

The Egyptians are quite taken with Sarah because of her beauty. When the Pharaoh is introduced to her through his court, he takes her into his house because he does not know she is married. Most rabbinical and modern commentators agree that while Sarah was brought into Pharaoh's household, they had no relations. She was a part of his harem, if you will.

God's Decisive Intervention (v.17-20)

In another ironic twist, Abram is blessed by the Pharaoh who enriches him even more. But God intervenes to curse Pharaoh because of the threat to Sarah's purity. Isn't this a violation of the promise to bless those who honor Abram? No, because God is intervening to protect and to preserve the Messianic line. He will curse Pharaoh with disease to get his attention on that which is wrong. Pharaoh confronts Abram and then sends him out of Egypt.

Moses again connects Abram's personal history with Israel's national history. The parallels are obvious. A principle of revelation is being established. There are times when personal histories follow the patterns of redemptive history. The great exhibition and exposition of this principle is seen in Galatians 3:21-4:7. There, the Christ's coming is at the center of redemptive history and faith coming is at the center of my personal history.

Certainly, Israel coming up out of Egypt has experienced the personal protecting and providing hand of God. The family had gone down to Egypt during a famine. They were enslaved there until God delivered them. God's promises will hold true. He protected Abram and Sarah in Egypt. He delivered Israel from Egypt. He will guide and guard them all along the way.

As we come to think personally and practically about this section of God's Word, let me remind you of something. We have a difficult tension to resolve. We don't want application to be a moralizing of the text so that we derive from this narrative moral lessons not intended by the author. Yet, we are also told in Romans 15:4 that these things were written for our instruction so that we might have endurance and hope. 1 Corinthians 10:6 also tells us that the Old Testament was written to illustrate how we are all vulnerable to sin so that we will not desire evil as they

did. So we will walk the third way, the way of hearing the instruction in the text teach us and observing the illustrations in the text to warn us.

Reflect and Respond

God's sovereign call comes to those whom He has chosen to love and to favor. God is not responding to some faith initiative of Abram. God has chosen Abram to call him to faith.

The darkness of one's sin is no barrier to bright light of God's saving revelation. It is a very great joy to know that God's saving call and the response of faith can come even in the greatest of sinners. God, who made the light to shine at creation, makes the light of salvation shine into the darkest hearts.

Having faith in God, following God, discipleship all demand that we be willing to leave all and do as God commands. True faith in God acts. It is not the acting that saves. But all saving faith acts. Following God will almost certainly mean leaving behind something. It will certainly mean leaving behind your sins. It may mean leaving behind your wealth or fame or family. If you are not willing to leave these things, then you are not bowing to the God you claim to believe in. Those who believe and bow are those who are saved.

We obey God by faith. Obedience to God is an act of faith. We hear His Word, whether in precepts, principles or promises, and we act on them. We trust in who God is and in what He says in such a way that we are moved to obey Him. Obedience in the flesh does not please God. The only way to please God, even in obedience, is by faith.

God will test our faith through the situations of our lives. Like the famine that came to Abram, the temptations in the wilderness to Jesus, the troubles to Paul in ministry, things will come that will test our faith. They may be huge hardships or just the monotony of life, over and over again. In the midst of these things, trust in God. Do not go back. Do not turn away. Do not devise your own ways out of these situations. Please God through them until He is pleased to deliver you from them.

Consider the greatness of the Lord Jesus who is our revelation, our redemption and our ruler. He is the substance of all these shadows, the fulfiller of all these covenants, the object of all these hopes. Worship Him.

ⁱ Another proposal is that Genesis 11:26 is saying that Terah was 70 when he began to have children. Those sons, in order of importance were, Abram, Nahor and Haran with Abram actually born when Terah was 130. The difficulty here is to imagine then why Abram and Sarah are concerned with having no children at 100.