

Our Father Abraham: A Series in Genesis (Part 2)

From Shem to Abram (Genesis 11:10-32)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on April 16, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're taking a break from our series in the book of 1 Corinthians. We'll return to it in August and pick up where we left off in chapter 9. But what we'll do today is to return to a sermon series we started over a year ago when we covered Genesis 1-11. We stopped in Genesis 11, after studying the story of the tower of Babel.
 - **You could say we paused at a low point in the story. The human race had tried to unite under the banner of human pride and ingenuity.** To build a city that stretches to the heavens; to make a name for themselves (11:4). But the story ended with humanity divided. **They couldn't understand each other. And they couldn't stand each other. So they scattered to the ends of the earth.** Things looked bleak.
 - But we know the story doesn't end at this low point. Because, immediately in the next chapter, in Genesis 12, we're introduced to a man named Abram (better known as Abraham). This is the man that God promises to make into a great nation. **And through this one nation, the LORD intends to bless all nations.** All the divided and scattered families of the earth will be united once again and blessed through this one family with Abram as its head.
- ❖ So in the span of one chapter, the story unfolding in the book of Genesis changes direction – from pessimism to optimism; from despair to hope. **The story suddenly slows down in chapter 12 and narrows focus onto one man and his one family.**
 - For eleven fast-paced chapters, Genesis covered the story of humanity as it spiraled fast and out of control. But for the next fourteen chapters, the pace slows remarkably, and everything centers on one man and the events surrounding his life and calling.
 - And our passage serves as a bridge – connecting the depressing story of Babel with the hopeful story of Abraham. **And the overall message is meant to reinforce God's faithfulness to keep his promises to redeem us in spite of our human pride and rebellion.** So that's the function of this bridge text.
- ❖ **And what's noteworthy is that our text is a genealogy – a genealogy of Shem, one of the three sons of Noah and a distant forefather to Abram.** Now let's be honest, this is one of those texts that we tend to skim over. Perhaps you've never actually read through this word-for-word until today. I think it's a good exercise. But not very exciting. Are we really going to preach through this whole thing? Preaching a genealogy doesn't sound like a very riveting or relevant exercise.
 - But that's where I hope to surprise you this morning. **I hope you come away convinced that every text in this divinely-inspired book is both relevant and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16).**
 - I hope you come away recognizing three observations: (1) Shem's genealogy gives hope that God always keeps his promises. (2) Abram's pagan background reminds us that anyone can be chosen by God. (3) Abram's obedience serves as a good illustration of genuine faith.

Shem's Genealogy

- ❖ Let's begin with an observation that has to do with the genealogy itself. I'm sure some Bible readers do get excited about genealogies. They love to get into the nitty gritty and the intricacies of these biblical family trees. Who's related to who and how are these characters connected. Some people love this stuff. I think it's a small minority, but they're out there.
 - **But beyond appealing to the intellectual fancies of small minority of readers, I'm convinced that a biblical genealogy has an overall theological message to communicate.** One that relates to the overall story of redemption. In this case, I'd argue that **Shem's genealogy gives hope that God always keeps his promises.**

- ❖ Now what makes our genealogy more interesting is the fact that it appears, at first glance, to be redundant. If you were reading straight from Genesis 10 to 11, you would've noted that we were already given a genealogy of Shem in chapter 10:21-31. So why give us another?
 - **But you need to remember, that in ancient times, any kind of written communication was deliberate.** It was a calculated choice. We forget that in our digital age where you can write an email or a text and be as verbose as you want. You can be redundant or ramble on without any concern of running out of room. But not in ancient times. **When you're writing on clay tablets or papyrus fragments, you have to be economical and intentional.**
 - So you don't repeat yourself unless you have a really good reason. **So if you do come across a text in the same book of Scripture, by the same author, that seems to repeat itself – you had better pay close attention.** Because there's a good reason and to miss it would be to miss the point of the passage.

- ❖ If you compare the genealogies, the difference that stands out is – **when you get to Eber, the great-grandson of Shem, the genealogy in chapter 10 diverges in a different direction compared to chapter 11.** Genesis 10:25 says, *“To Eber were born two sons: the name of the one was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided, and his brother's name was Joktan.”* And v26 goes on to follow Joktan's line, which leads directly to chapter 11 and the story of the Tower of Babel. **But in Genesis 11:16, when you get to Eber, notice how the genealogy follows Peleg's line, which leads to Abram and the hope of redemption and blessing.**
 - So if you don't read these genealogies carefully, you're likely to assume that they're redundant. When in fact they're intentional. This genealogy in chapter 11 was written to convey the same theme that's been woven throughout the pages of Genesis starting in chapter 3. **Namely, this theme of an ancient struggle between two lines of progeny – the seed of the serpent vs. the seed of the woman (3:15).** Cain vs. Abel. Ishmael vs. Isaac. Esau vs. Jacob. In this case, we're dealing with Joktan vs. Peleg.

- ❖ And Peleg represents the line of promise. **God's promise to Adam and Eve – that a Chosen Seed would one day crush the head of the serpent and redeem humanity and all creation from the curse of sin.** That's what this Genesis 11 genealogy represents. And that's why it was intentionally recorded. To remind readers that the God of Genesis is faithful to keep his promises by preserving that line of progeny destined to inherit the promises of God.

- ❖ Now there's more juice in this genealogy if we squeeze a little more. **If we compare it to another genealogy we've already seen, we can draw out even more observations.** Back in Genesis 5, we're given Adam's genealogy. Remember, Cain killed his brother Abel, and so the lineage of promise was passed down through Adam's third son Seth. And so in chapter 5, we're introduced to ten generations from Adam to Noah. Which lines up perfectly with Shem's genealogy from Shem to Abram – another ten generations.
 - **Now it's important to understand that ancient genealogies were usually not written with precise chronological order.** Meaning it was a common and accepted practice to skip multiple generations. Even the term for "*fathering*" someone could be applied to a descendant further down the line and not just to your literal son. **And the reason why an author would skip generations in a genealogy is because his main purpose is not to detail a family tree. It's to make a literary connection in order to convey a theological point.**

- ❖ **So there's actually more than ten generations between Shem and Abram, but the author of Genesis limits it to ten so that readers can see a literary connection between the two genealogies and make a comparison.** And when you read Genesis 5 and Genesis 11 together, there are two striking differences.
 - **First, you notice a huge drop in the lifespan in Shem's genealogy, after the flood.** From Adam to Noah, these men had lifespans that averaged around 900 years old. Noah lived to 950 (9:29). But in chapter 11:11, we're told that Shem died when he was 600. So he lived less than two thirds of his father's lifespan. And then his son Arphachsad's life was shortened by another third. And by the time you get to Peleg, his lifespan is cut by half compared to his father.
 - And we're told that Nahor, Abram's grandfather, lived 138 years, which gets us closer to the prediction in Genesis 6:3 that – because of humanity's corruption and the consequences it reaps – man's "*days shall be 120 years.*" **So that stands out in Shem's genealogy – man's lifespan is increasingly shortened as a consequence of man's sin.**

- ❖ **But there's another key difference between the two genealogies – the deletion of the phrase "*and he died*" when you get to chapter 11.** In the Genesis 5 genealogy, the common refrain after each generation is that phrase "*and he died.*" Those three little words served as a cruel and constant reminder that – ever since the day Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – "*you shall surely die.*" Death reigned supreme.
 - But that's what makes the absence of those three words so notable in Shem's genealogy. **Here the stress is no longer on death reigning but on hope rising.** Yes, mankind's lifespan is increasingly shortened, but that fact is counterbalanced by the absence of "*and he died.*" **Thereby striking a more hopeful tone as this genealogy moves towards Genesis 12 – as it moves towards promise and blessing.**

- ❖ **And hope keeps rising as the story of redemption continues to unfold and the lineage of promise is preserved from one generation to the next.** Until we reach another genealogy in Scripture that also starts with Adam and includes Seth and Noah; Shem and Abram. But this genealogy, found in Luke 3, extends further. All the way to Jesus, the supposed son of Joseph (Lk 3:23-38). **Jesus ends up being the Offspring of Eve who suffers and dies for the sins of man, and in so doing, crushes the head of the serpent and accomplishes redemption.**
- ❖ Friends, that's the theological message being conveyed in this genealogy. **It's a needed reminder that the promises of God cannot be thwarted – not even by the events of Babel.** The confusion of languages and the scattering of the nations certainly has the potential to crush our hope and wreck our optimism.
 - Which is why we're given a genealogy of Shem. Shem, in Hebrew, means "*name*". And that's significant if you think about it. Because, as we've seen, one branch in Shem's family tree – through Joktan – tried to make a *name* for themselves but ended up receiving the shameful *name* of Babel (meaning confusion).
- ❖ **But the other branch – the line of Shem that goes through Peleg – leads to Abram and ends with an everlasting *name* to be exalted as great (12:2).** And that's how grace works. You can try so hard to make a name for yourself. You can devote all your time and energy to building a legacy for yourself. It could be as grand as a tower stretching to the heavens.
 - **But the point is that no matter what kind of name you try to make for yourself – the only name that matters, in the end, is the name that God makes for you.** The name you receive by grace through faith.
 - Friends, don't underestimate the richness and relevancy of an OT genealogy. This one is a needed reminder that – in spite of our pride and rebellion – the Lord always keeps his promises and preserves our hope in the face of despair.

Abram's Pagan Background

- ❖ Now there's another observation from this text – from vv27-30 as the focus falls on Terah and his household. This is Abraham's father. And what we can learn – based on historical background and their names – it becomes clear that Terah and his household were pagan worshippers. They worshipped the ancient Sumerian moon-god named Sin (ironically).
 - So here's our second observation: **Abram's pagan background reminds us that anyone can be chosen by God.** If being an idolatrous worshipper of the moon doesn't disqualify you from being saved – from being chosen by God to be a channel of blessing to the world – then that gives hope and encouragement to all of us.
- ❖ **Now, like I said, scholars think that Terah and his family were moon worshippers because of their location and their names.** First, Ur and Haran, as ancient cities, were known to be thriving centers of moon worship. We're told in v28 that Terah and his family are from Ur of the Chaldeans, and, on their way to Canaan, v31 says they didn't complete the journey but settled in Haran. **So Abram spent a significant portion of his life in two of the most important centers of cult worship dedicated to the ancient Sumerian moon god.**

- ❖ **What's more, consider their names and their meaning.** Terah's name, in Hebrew, is related to the word for *moon*. For Sarai, Abram's wife, her name in Hebrew means *princess*, but in the language of ancient Mesopotamia (Akkadian), her name means *queen* and was the name of the queen-consort to the moon god Sin. And then Milcah, Terah's granddaughter mentioned in v29, bears the same name as the daughter of the same moon god.
 - And lest you think we're reading too much into these locations and names, this idea that Abram grew up with a pagan background is confirmed later on in Scripture. In **Joshua 24:2**, Joshua recounts the story of Israel and said to all the people, "*Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.'*"

- ❖ Think about that. **Father Abraham, the patriarch to the people of Israel – the Old Testament exemplar of saving faith – was originally a polytheistic idol worshipper.** I can just imagine how – in his pagan days living in Ur of the Chaldeans – he must have spent so many nights stargazing. Looking up at the moon; looking up at the stars.
 - **And little did he know that all those years of staring into the night sky – all of his familiarity with the starry host; all of his wonder and amazement at how vast they are – all of that would be utilized by the LORD to, one day, floor the man.** To blow his mind. And more importantly, to strengthen his faith in God's promise of offspring as numerous as the number of stars in the sky (Gen 15:5).

- ❖ Friends, there is nothing that God leaves to mere coincidence. He does everything with intention. **That means every aspect of Abram's background – every detail of his life experience – was intended by God and used by God for a greater purpose.** To strengthen his faith and to use him to be a blessing to others.
 - And the Lord is doing the same thing in our lives. **The very aspects of your background – the very details of your life experience that you find difficult or you think are disqualifying to God – are likely his very purposes to strengthen your faith and to prepare you with a unique testimony to be a blessing to others.**
 - Why did he allow that tragedy to take place? Why did he give you a difficult marriage or a painful home life? Why did he permit that traumatic experience? Why do you have such a different background – socially or spiritually – compared to everyone else in your faith community?

- ❖ It is not without purpose. He leaves nothing to coincidence. What you find so shameful, so disqualifying, about your life experience – God sees as an opportunity. **As all things work together for good, the Lord can redeem that difficult or disqualifying experience and use it to make your faith even stronger and make you even more effective to bless others who have gone through that same experience.**
 - Who knew you can be used by God to do great things? If he can use a pagan moon worshipper, he can use you. Again, that's another lesson we can squeeze out of a text that, at first glance, seems pretty dry.

Abram's Obedience

- ❖ Now there's more to be learned. We simply have to look at vv31-32, which describes the move of Terah and his family from Ur of the Chaldeans to eventually settling in the city of Haran. And with the help of some related texts in Scripture, we learn a thing or two about Abram's faithful obedience. Here's our third and final observation: **Abram's obedience serves as a good illustration of genuine faith.**

- ❖ So we're told that Terah had three sons, Abram, Nahor, and Haran (not be confused with the city). Haran, we're told, died relatively young while the family was still living in Ur. He fathered Lot, Abram's nephew – who plays a more prominent role later in the narrative.
 - Abram and Nahor marry wives. Nahor marries his niece, the daughter of his deceased brother, Haran. And with Abram marries Sarai – who we later learn is his half-sister (Gen 20:12). **The unorthodox nature of these marital unions were not uncommon in that era of primeval history, but these incestuous unions would eventually be prohibited by the clear teaching of Mosaic Law (Lev 18:6).**
 - And then, in v31, we're told that Terah and his family made a significant move. *“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.”*

- ❖ Now based on Genesis 11 alone, it appears that Terah is the one who initiated this move towards the land of Canaan. But when we read chapter 12 or other biblical texts referencing this event – it's clear that the LORD had called Abram to leave his country and to go to the land yet unknown. Listen to **Nehemiah's recounting** of events, *“You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham.”* (Neh 9:7)
 - Or listen to **Stephen's retelling** found in Acts 7, *“²And Stephen said: “Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ ⁴Then 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.”*

- ❖ So if we piece together what we learn from these various texts, we can deduce that – while Abram was living with his wife and extended family in Mesopotamia, in Ur of the Chaldeans – **he received a divine call to go to a land that God would show him.** And he was able to convince his father Terah and his nephew Lot to leave with him.
 - But when they arrived in Haran (another prominent center of moon worship), Terah refused to go further and settled there. **So Abram waited until his father's death before leaving Haran and continuing on in his journey to the land of Canaan.**

- ❖ And the last reference to this episode of his life, that's found in Scripture, is in **Hebrews 11:8**. The writer of Hebrews presents Abram's obedience to the call of God as a good illustration of faith. *"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going."*
- ❖ So we have a pagan idol worshipper unfamiliar with the LORD God. Advance in years. Settled and prosperous. With family all around. He's at a stage in life that most of us aspire to. **And yet, because he heard God calling, Abram was willing to risk it all and leave everything he was comfortable with and everything he was familiar with – to go to a strange new land.** In obedience to God's Word. That's a good illustration of genuine faith.
 - The writer of Hebrews defines faith as *"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."* (Heb 11:1) **Abram didn't wait until he got a glimpse of Canaan before he was willing to leave his country and kindred behind.** No, he started walking before he knew exactly where the Lord was leading (cf. Heb 11:8).
- ❖ **He walked by faith and not by sight.** He went out from the familiar and the comfortable simply because God's Word said so – not because he was able to figure out all his plans first and iron out all the details.
 - **And notice how his faithful obedience to his calling didn't ask for him to neglect his family or abandon familial duties.** Abram still managed to honor his father and care for him until he died. And he took on the responsibility to care for Lot, his orphaned nephew. And he remained faithful to his beloved wife, even though she was barren and unable to bear him any children.
- ❖ This is a lesson for us. You're wrestling with God's Word. **He's clearly calling you to step forward in obedience, but that would mean doing something unfamiliar, something uncomfortable.** Perhaps God is calling you to step forward and reconcile a broken relationship. Perhaps he's calling you to step forward and initiate a difficult, uncomfortable conversation with your spouse or with a friend. Perhaps he's calling you to step forward, into the unknown, and to trust him with a career change, with a significant move, with a life-altering decision. Perhaps he's calling you to himself for salvation – to trust his promises; to turn away from sin; and to follow him in the newness of eternal life.
 - **No matter the particulars of your situation, heeding his call is going to take faith.** And you manifest that faith through obedience. By taking that first step in the direction of his call. **Like Abram, at this point in the journey, you're not going to know exactly where this is going to lead.** You won't know what the final outcome will look like.
- ❖ **But I can promise you this – if you're obeying God's call on your life, then you can know exactly Who is going to be with you along the way.** Our God is faithful – to keep all of his promises and to keep by our side until all those promises come to fruition. Never will he leave us nor will he forsake us (Heb 13:5).