

4 October 2009

Aliens with Title Deeds

Read: Genesis 12:1-13:4

I find that there are two main problems when you announce a series on the life of a man like Abraham.

The first is: What relevance can this possibly have for us today? Abraham lived so long ago, about 4000 years ago in fact. Most of us are probably as familiar with a camel as he was with a PC. Haddon Robinson, one of the finest preachers of recent times, commented: "Normal people do not lose sleep over the Jebusites, the Canaanites or the Perizzites or even about what Abraham, Moses and Paul has said or done."¹ I think we are going to find his experience very relevant indeed. The incidentals may be different, but the essential issues are the same. You see, Abraham is probably the example *par excellence* of faith. We see from his life what true faith is. And this perennial dimension is as true in the 21st century AD as it was in the 21st century BC.

In addition, Abraham's place in God's plan to save mankind is so strategic that a knowledge of what God said to him and did with him helps us to understand God's great plan. And since we all want to know as much as we can about God's wonderful plan of salvation, I cannot apologize for speaking about Abraham.

The second problem is, I suspect, is more of an obstacle to most of us than the first. The Abraham we normally encounter seems too good for words. In a way he *inspires* us but, in another way, he *intimidates* us.

The Writer to the Hebrews applauds his remarkable faith:

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 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 (Heb 11:8-10).

Listen to Paul's high commendation:

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his

¹Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. Second Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 28.

faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised (Rom 4:18-21).

But, this may actually make us feel somewhat detached. We can admire him from a distance, but we don't believe that we can be like him. We can certainly *appreciate* him, but we can hardly *identify* with him.

NOW WAIT A MINUTE! I have some encouraging news. *I* certainly find it helpful. This Abraham, who ended up so well, had some serious struggles along the way. In fact, he failed on more than one occasion. He hesitated; he actually left the land of promise after settling there; he lied, jeopardizing his entire mission and causing a major incident. Later, he lied again in very similar circumstances. He almost gave up hope that the promise would be fulfilled. He felt the pressure to settle for second best and water down God's promise. By succumbing to a scheme that his wife proposed, he caused himself and others great grief.

But he grew. He learned. He obeyed. He was called “the friend of God” (James 2:23). When all is said and done, his life was a life of the most remarkable faith and trust. He stands as a beacon that tells us that when ordinary people respond to God's call, extraordinary things happen!

Now, I find that most encouraging! Because I have failed, and, as much as I don't want to, I'll probably fail again. ***But I too can grow.*** The faith that flickers at first can develop into a steady flame. The erratic episodes can give way to a trust that is “strong, firm and steadfast” (1 Pet 5:10). Every trial can lead to growth. As James said, “The testing of your faith develops perseverance (and) perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:4).

So now, let's look at his first steps. They are bold but, in some respects, they are tentative. Let's trace the amazing set of events that took him from one of the most advanced cities in the world to a land he knew nothing about.

1. THE STORY STARTS IN A CITY CALLED UR

Other gods

There, in this sophisticated city, where the worship of the moon god, Nanna, was all the rage, lived a man by the name of Terah. He had three sons, one of whom died in Ur. Joshua said to all the people, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods (Joshua 24:2).

It is quite possible that, like his father Terah, Abram was involved in idol worship in his younger years. But one day God spoke to Abram. I love the way Stephen referred to

this call when he addressed the members of the Sanhedrin: “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia” (Acts 7:2). We are not given any details of the circumstances. That would have deflected attention from the really important thing. It was what God *said* to Abram that was important.

Indeed this is one of the key passages in Scripture.

The LORD (had) said to Abram,
 ‘Go from your country,
 your people, and your father’s household
 to the land I will show you.
 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’ (Gen 12:1-3).

It Was a Radical Call

We tend to lose sight of just how challenging it must have been. The Hebrew term *lek l'kā* is a very strong one. It means, literally, “Leave by yourself.”² It is a call to deliberately dissociate himself from his country, his people and his father’s household. Calvin paraphrases it as follows: “I command you to go forth with closed eyes . . . until, having renounced your country, you shall have given yourself wholly to me.”

“To the land I will show you . . .” We cannot overestimate just what a wrench this would involve. In that day and in that culture, people virtually derived their identity from their extended family. This was a tight family! The dislocation would be immense. But he has to leave his homeland, his clan, his compatriots and his parental family to go to a place he has never seen. In fact, we are explicitly told that he did not know where he was going (Heb 11:8).

Immediately he determined to obey God. Here is the most likely scenario. Abram did not decide to get up quietly in the middle of the night, round up his animals and perhaps a servant or two and then steal away on tip toes under the cover of darkness. Although I don’t want to say more than Scripture does, it is safe to assume that he would have told his father about God’s command. We can only imagine the scene as his father received the news. A departure of this nature would in all likelihood be a final farewell. Terah would probably never see Abram again. He had already lost one of his sons and now a

²Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 205.

second son is going to leave and go far, far away but who knows where. It must have been an emotionally-charged scene to say the least.³

A Serious Stutter

I think this explains what actually happened. In chapter 11, we read that “Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, his daughter-in-law Sarai . . . and *together* they set out to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there.” (Gen 11:31). It looks as though Terah wanted to come along. Because he was the patriarch of the family it is said that he led the family. Haran was on the north-western border of Mesopotamia. Like Ur, it too was a centre of idolatry and the worship of the moon god. And the mission got bogged down there.

There is no explicit word of reproof, and God no doubt used the sojourn in Haran, but I can't help feeling that the delay was a compromise of sorts. It seems like a serious stutter in the mission, an understandable accommodation of one's father, but it certainly takes the edge off Abram's radical obedience.

So, there was a fairly lengthy delay in Haran. They didn't just *stop* there, they *settled* there. And, according to Stephen, Abram only left Haran once Terah had died (Acts 7:4). He was probably 145, not 205, when he died. That's what it says in the Samaritan Pentateuch, and probably also in the original manuscript that lay behind it. It certainly makes much more sense when we take all the details into account.⁴

Delays

Some of us may have experienced such a delay. We set out in obedience, but someone or something got in the way, side-tracked us or slowed us down. Fortunately that was not the end of the story. The delay did not result in an abortion of the mission. The call of God on Abram's life did not evaporate. It doesn't! Scripture does not comment, positively or negatively, about this interruption. And, in the providence of God, even those delays occasioned by compromise can turn be incorporated into God's plan. So, whether a delay comes because God says, “Not yet,” or whether it is because you have put the brakes on, a postponement does not have to be a cancellation.

So, in due course, at the tender age of 75, Abram set out with his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and the wealth and servants he had acquired in Haran. The journey would not have been easy. For days they would travel through “a vast monotonous waste broken by the

³Some writers believe that the call recorded in Genesis 12:1-3 took place in Haran [e. g. John E. Hartley, *Genesis*. NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000), 132, 135, 145]. But the problem with this is that we have to explain why Terah, Abram's father, left Ur *to go to Canaan* (Gen 11:31). Why does God refer to Ur as the place from which he brought Abram (15:7), and why does Stephen say that God appeared to Abraham *before* he lived in Haran (Acts 7:2-4). The verb in Gen 12:1 can be rendered “had said,” but even if it is perfect rather than pluperfect, the inclusion of Abram's call here makes complete sense. Haran is 885km. north-west of Ur.

⁴Waltke, *Genesis*, 205.

scantiest vegetation.”⁵ But Abram would have felt the smile of God upon him. There’s just something about being in the centre of God’s will. In all likelihood, they took the main highway to Damascus and then travelled through the Huleh Valley to the Sea of Galilee. Once in Canaan, they would have left the main highway, choosing to travel through the sparsely settled hill country rather than the more densely populated Jezreel valley.⁶ But, at last, they were in the land of promise!

2. **HERE HE WAS, A COMPLETE ALIEN, BUT WITH A TITLE DEED FROM GOD.**

As Stephen pointed out, “(God) gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land.” That’s why Iain Duguid entitles his book on Abraham, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality*.⁷ (In a sense, we all do that, for like Abram, we are “looking forward to a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10). It is “in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have. But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently” (Rom 8:24, 25).

Living like a Pilgrim

Watch this man. He travels through the land quietly and wisely. The author comments, “At that time, the Canaanites were in the land” (12:6). This is more than a simple observation. And they were both idolatrous and notoriously immoral. He comes to the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that high place there was a shrine at which Canaanite gods were worshipped. But there, in a fairly central location, “The LORD appeared to him and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land’” (12:7).

“So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.” It is significant that he did not use the one employed in Canaanite worship. He travelled south and slightly east and pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. Again, he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. He travelled further to the south toward the Negev. It seems that he was touring his territory. And what joy he must have experienced as he worshipped God at those altars.

One cannot help but think of Peter’s exhortation, exemplified in the life of Abram: “I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires that war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pet 2:11-12). The glorious irony of the life of a pilgrim! God had given him the land. He

⁵F. B. Meyer, *The Life of Abraham* (Lynnwood, Washington: Emerald Books, 1996), 28.

⁶John E. Hartley, *Genesis*. NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000), 134.

⁷Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham* (Phillipsburg: P and R Publishing, 1999).

held the title deeds. But, as Stephen said, God “gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground” (Acts 7:5). Instead, “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” (Heb 11:9). Paul later explains the blessed irony of “having nothing and yet possessing everything” (2 Cor 6:10). True believers never settle down completely. Our citizenship is in heaven from whence we eagerly await a Saviour (Phil 3:20). For here we do not have an enduring city but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Heb 13:14).

We are not exactly sure how long this lasted, but when you live by faith there is no guarantee that things will always be easy.

3. INDEED, WHEN YOU LIVE A LIFE OF FAITH, YOU CAN BE CERTAIN THAT YOUR FAITH WILL BE TESTED.

And Abram’s faith was about to face a test. There was a famine in the land of promise (12:10). With great economy of language, the author tells us that “Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while, for the famine was severe” (12:10). We must be careful not to argue from silence either to criticize or to exonerate Abram. He was not forsaking his calling. He was seeking a temporary reprieve from a famine that threatened to decimate his flocks and herds. He obviously had every intention of returning as soon as possible. But nagging questions remain. Could not the God who promised to give the land to him and his as-yet-unborn descendants provide for him in the land, even during the famine? He doesn’t seem to have consulted God. Let’s not be self-righteously hard on the man. We are, however, left with the impression that this was a misstep. He placed himself and his party in a precarious position. And, in striking contrast to his life of worship in Canaan, we read of not altars, and no divine voice of reassurance.

One Thing Leads to Another

In Egypt, he had to face a life-threatening situation. He speaks politely to his beautiful wife as they are about to enter the land. This is clearly a request, not an instruction.⁸ The term used could be translated, “Please say you are my sister, so I will be treated well for your sake, and my life will be spared because of you” (12:13). What was Abram thinking? Again, let’s be fair! The very fact that Sarai was taken into Pharaoh’s palace shows that Abram’s fears were well founded. She must have been a strikingly beautiful woman. Apparently she was not given a choice. Pharaoh showered gifts on Abram, perhaps as a belated dowry. One can only imagine what was going through his head (and Sarai’s). The situation was simply awful.

Without trivializing their predicament, in a sense, it reminds me of my golf game. I have a good friend and colleague, who decided, when I was in my late thirties that I should take

⁸Waltke, *Genesis*, 213.

up golf. I would arrive at the first tee at the crack of dawn on a Monday morning. My friend and I were relatively strong and could get some good distance off the tee. We were regularly joined by two recently retired gentlemen. Bruce and I would lean into our drives. He'd go off to the left into some vicious looking rough and I'd invariably go way out to the right. First I'd help him look for his ball and then he'd help me look for mine.

Meanwhile our semi-geriatric friends, playing modest shots, were safely on the fairway. Their second shots were easy with the flag clearly in view. We may have out-driven them, but we were in serious trouble. I would be playing at a ball buried in thick bush, needing to curve the ball around a large pine tree in order to get back onto the fairway. The point is that the wonderful game of golf has a way of punishing you by compounding your error. One wrong move can so easily lead to extreme difficulty and huge frustration.

That's what so often happens in the more serious game of life. Place yourself in a precarious position and the next shot can be awfully difficult. Best not to get into the rough in the first place!

Even in such situations, God does not abandon us. Pharaoh seems like the innocent victim here. Because Abram and Sarai have lied to him, he bears the brunt of God's intervention to protect Sarai's purity. Pharaoh expresses his displeasure in no uncertain terms. His reprimand is probably appropriate. But we ought not to think that he was entirely innocent. It doesn't seem as though Sarai had much choice in the matter. If his power entitled him to simply summon a beautiful woman at will and add her to his harem, perhaps Abram's fears were well-founded. The king who showered Sarai's brother with gifts may well have murdered her husband. But their "white lie" had proved both dishonoring and dangerous. (It's hard to get back onto the fairway when you have shanked the ball into the thick rough).

Not Irretrievable

This episode was undoubtedly a blot on Abram's record. But all was not lost. Fortunately God doesn't write us off because of a misstep. Of course we should not be careless, any more than a golfer should deliberately hit the ball in the thick rough among the trees because he knows he will get another shot. We sometimes pay a huge price for our wrong moves. But if God doesn't write us off, we ought not to write ourselves off. There is an old proverb that says, "You've made your bed; you'll have to lie in it." Someone once said in response to this proverb: "Please Lord, let me make it again!"

And, notwithstanding his mistake, God blessed Abram materially. How amazingly faithful God is: "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:10).

Back to Square On

“From the Negev, Abram went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the LORD” (13:3-4).

This had been a dubitable excursion to say the least; costly in many ways, but not catastrophic. But Abram and Sarai are back where they belong in the land of promise. What I find particularly significant is that we see Abram grow until his faith is unwavering. It didn't happen in two minutes, two years, or even two decades.

Conclusion

Yes, Abraham's life was one of highs and lows, ups and downs. It was not without pain and suffering.

Suppose we could interview him at the end of it all and ask him if he could have his time over again. Let's say we could offer him a quiet but easy life and prosperous life in Ur or Haran. No painful partings. No agonizing wait for a son. No dangerous skirmishes; ease and peace and time for leisure. Good health and prestige among his compatriots and kinsmen. “Is this not preferable, Abraham, to all the drama, the struggles, the trials, and the pain?”

He'd look at us in utter disbelief. “Why would I want to swop significance for ease? And besides, I was longing for a son. It was a long wait, but Isaac was born. What's more, I now know now that God's plan was bigger and better than I could ever have imagined. When God spoke to me in Ur and told me all the nations of the earth would be blessed through me, I could not know what he meant. I did not know that he had a son in mind far greater than Isaac. I now know that when he made the promise, he had Jesus in mind all along. I am the most privileged of men. What has happened has exceeded my greatest expectation. I rejoiced at the thought of seeing God's salvation come. I have seen it and I am “filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (John 8:56; 1 Pet 1:8).