

A Lonely Thing

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a six-part series

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Genesis 12:1–4 (CEB)

The LORD said to Abram, “Leave your land, your family, and your father’s household for the land that I will show you.² I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.

³I will bless those who bless you,
those who curse you I will curse;
all the families of the earth
will be blessed because of you.”

⁴Abram left just as the LORD told him, and Lot went with him. Now Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran.

Acts 9:26–30 (CEB)

²⁶When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him. They didn’t believe he was really a disciple.²⁷ Then Barnabas brought Saul to the apostles and told them the story about how Saul saw the Lord on the way and that the Lord had spoken to Saul. He also told them about the confidence with which Saul had preached in the name of Jesus in Damascus.²⁸ After this, Saul moved freely among the disciples in Jerusalem and was speaking with confidence in the name of the Lord.²⁹ He got into debates with the Greek-speaking Jews as well, but they tried to kill him.³⁰ When the family of believers learned about this, they escorted him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Sometimes commitment can be a very lonely thing.

Until I moved to Dallas in the early 80's, I had never lived anywhere for more than a few years. By the time I finished fifth-grade, I had attended six different elementary schools. We weren't in the military or anything like that; we just moved a lot. I remember trying to take it all in stride, but I also know that I learned about the seeming folly of growing too attached to any particular friend or place. So I suppose that if God had come and told me to pack up my baseball cards and move, I wouldn't have given it much thought. But God's "ask" of a man named Abram was of a different sort entirely.

Chosen

Toward the end of Genesis 11, we meet a man named Abram.¹ There is nothing distinctive about him. He is simply one of many living in the city of Haran, far to the north of Canaan.² God could have chosen anyone through whom he would begin the restoration of all creation, but he chose Abram. Abram, later called Abraham, would become the father, the patriarch, of God's people.

God comes to Abram with a straightforward request: "Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you." Leaving Haran is one thing, but leaving one's family – that is enormous. This was a culture like many even today; kinship ties were everything. It was all about the family and God has told Abram to leave it all and head south.

¹ Later in the book of Genesis, Abram will be given a new name by God. "Abraham" means something like "father of a multitude." The name of Abram's wife, Sarai, will be changed to Sarah. God changes Abram's name when God tells Abram that circumcision of male children is to be a sign of the covenant between God and Abram. In ancient cultures, a new name would signify a new phase in the person's life.

² Canaan is the ancient name of the land that would become the homeland of biblical Israel, given to them by God. Later, it would come to be called Palestine. The people living in this area in the time of Abraham were known as the Canaanites.

Around 800BC, Homer, the Greek epic poet, wrote “for there is nothing dearer to a man than his own country and his parents, and however splendid a home he may have in a foreign country, if it be far from father or mother, he does not care about it.” We live in a very mobile society; corporate moves are a staple of our lives. But this was not so in Abraham’s world. What God asks of Abraham is a profound commitment.

Abraham is to leave everything behind, even his home and family, so that he can head south toward the land promised by God. God’s blessing of Abraham is God’s freely-given gift, but it is certainly not cheap. Nonetheless, Abraham responds in faith, in trust. The truth is that commitments we are asked to make usually pale in comparison

to what was asked of Abraham, yet, like him, we are richly blessed by God.

A future

Abraham does as God asks and the story of God’s building and shaping a people begins. Though Sarah, Abraham’s wife, is long past her child-bearing years, God gives them a son, Isaac. Isaac’s sons are Esau and Jacob. Jacob has twelve sons who become the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.³ By the opening of the book of Exodus, the people of God are so vast a number that, though they are enslaved, Egypt’s Pharaoh is frightened of them! God would choose Moses to lead his people out of slavery and back to Canaan, where God would be their king, though not for long . . . and so the story continued for centuries. Through it all, God would relentlessly pursue his people, calling them back to the love of God and neighbor, rescuing them and always preserving a remnant of the faithful.

Lonely beginnings

God asks a lot of Abraham, but asked even more of a Pharisee named Saul, who terrorized the first followers of Jesus and even held the cloaks of those who stoned to death the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Saul was not only zealous, he was learned, having studied under Gamaliel, one of the most prominent rabbis of his day.

After the crucifixion of the radical named Jesus, Saul spent the next several years trying to stamp out the nascent movement. One day, as Saul made his way northward to Damascus to round up some of the Jesus-folk, he was suddenly surrounded by a bright light. Falling to the ground, he heard a voice. It was Jesus,

“All the families of the earth”

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of today’s passage from Genesis. God’s call of Abraham sets the stage for all that follows. Yes, Abraham will become the father of a great nation. Yes, he will go to the land given him by God. But, perhaps more importantly, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” through Abraham. In the OT, blessing is a gift from God, encompassing material well-being, peace, and success in life. Blessing shapes the lives of Abraham’s family and the “outsiders” they meet.

Abraham is not chosen by God merely for his own sake, but for the sake of others. God rescues the Hebrews from Egypt for the sake of the whole world. The book of Ruth tells the story of a young Moabite woman who, through her Jewish mother-in-law, is blessed by God and incorporated into God’s people.

Now of course, it was always easy for the Israelites to forget that they were to be the city on the hill to which all nations would stream (Isaiah 2:2-5; Matthew 5:14-16). It was tempting to them, as it is tempting to us, to turn inward, to build barriers, to see people as “outsiders.” Jesus would remind his fellow Jews that they were to be the “light to the world.” They were to face outward, pulling down walls and serving others.

³ I’ve learned from my classes that the term “Israel” can be confusing. “Israel” was the collective name of the twelve tribes descended from Jacob, Abraham’s grandson. After spending a night wrestling with a stranger who turns out to be God, Jacob was given the name “Israel,” which in Hebrew means something like “one who strives with God.” From that time on, the name “Israel” would not only designate the ancestor Jacob, but also God’s people, as in the twelve tribes “of Israel.” Later, it would take on national or political meaning as well. Thus, David would be King of Israel. Your reading of the Bible will be helped by keeping in mind that “Israel” sometimes refers to the people of God and at other times refers to a political entity.

asking Saul why he was harassing him and telling him to go into the city where he would be told what to do. For the next three days, Saul was unable to see and refused food and drink. But then, a disciple named Ananias came to see him, sent there by Jesus.

Even though Ananias had been sent to Saul by Jesus, the believers were understandably fearful of Saul. Not long before he had been tearing through the Christian communities like a wild beast. In Acts 9, Luke tells us only a bit about Saul, now Paul, making a new life among the Christians. What must it have been like for Saul, now Paul,⁴ as he tried to learn and to live as a believer, as one of those he had pursued. How lonely it must have been for this Pharisee, particularly in those first years after his encounter with Jesus. In all, it was about fifteen years from his conversion on the road to Damascus to his first missionary journey. Those years are largely opaque to us, but there must have been some lonely times for Paul.

When God called him, Paul had to turn his back on his old life. And when he began traveling across the Mediterranean proclaiming the *evangelion*, this good news about Jesus, he faced terrible abuse at the hands of his fellow Jews. He was beaten, stoned, whipped, and left for dead. Not once or twice, but numerous times. (In 2 Corinthians 11:22-27 Paul lists some of his treatment). The commitment asked of Paul and the grace poured out upon him was anything but cheap. In his commentary on Acts, John Stott writes:

The cause of Saul's conversion was grace, the sovereign grace of God. But sovereign grace is gradual grace and gentle grace. Gradually, and without violence, Jesus pricked Saul's mind and conscience with his goads. Then he revealed himself to him by the light and the voice, not in order to overwhelm him, but in such a way as to enable him to make a free response. Divine grace does not trample on human personality. Rather the reverse, for it enables human beings to be truly human. It is sin that imprisons; it is grace that liberates. The grace of God so frees us from the bondage of our pride, prejudice and self-centeredness, as to enable us to repent and believe. One can but magnify the grace of God that he should have had mercy on such a rabid bigot as Saul of Tarsus, and indeed on such proud, rebellious and wayward creatures as ourselves.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Don't you wonder what it would have been like to be Abraham? How did God call him? Was it an audible voice or something else? How could Abraham even know who was calling? After all, it would be centuries before God revealed his name, YHWH, to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). How does God speak to you? . . . God promises much to Abraham but he also asks much of him. What has God asked of you lately? How do you know when it is God doing the asking? You might begin by talking about what God asks of us all as Christians, at least in general terms. But don't stay there . . . be more specific . . . what does God ask of you?
2. Try to imagine you are Paul, newly brought to Jesus but feared and distrusted by your new brothers and sisters in Christ? How tough might it have been for Paul to hang on to the truth and the impact of his encounter with Jesus? How do you think you might have fared during those years?
3. I suspect that many of us have trouble being confident that God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, is guiding and directing us through our lives. *First*, how can we grow more confident that God is at work in our lives, guiding us forward? Do we

⁴ Paul's story can be confusing to those new to it simply because Luke refers to him by two names: Saul and Paul. In Acts, the apostle is referred to as Saul before his encounter with Christ and by Paul after his conversion. Saul, then Paul. Same fellow – just the Hebrew version of his name and the Greek version. Why the change by Luke? Because using "Paul" *after* the man comes to faith in Christ is a way of signifying that he will be the apostle to the Gentiles – to the Greco-Roman world.

even really think that God does? *Second*, what sort of guidance and direction do you think the Spirit provides? In what areas of our lives? How specific? When? What role do you think Scripture plays in this?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: More stories of loneliness

Monday, Genesis 27:41-46, 28:10-22 Jacob has to flee northward after betraying his father.

Tuesday, Genesis 38 Tamar is abandoned by her father-in-law, Judah, and must take things into her own hands.

Wednesday, Genesis 39:19 – 40:23 After being sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph is tossed into and Egyptian dungeon.

Thursday, Job 1:13-22 Job loses everything . . . and everyone.

Friday, Daniel 7:16-24 Daniel is tossed into a den of lions . . . all alone.

Saturday, Matthew 26:36-46 Jesus is abandoned in the Garden of Gethsemane; his disciples won't even stay awake while he prays.

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Genesis

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series – *Spring Training: Some Theological Curveballs*