



# THE CALL OF ABRAM

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Genesis 12:1-7;  
15:1-7

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

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.  
(Gen. 12:7)

Daily Bible Readings			
<b>M</b>	Aug. 29	Heb. 11:8-19	The Faith of Abraham
<b>T</b>	Aug. 30	Ps. 84	How Lovely Is Your Dwelling Place!
<b>W</b>	Aug. 31	Rom. 4:1-12	God Reckons Righteousness Apart from Works
<b>Th</b>	Sept. 1	Rom. 4:13-25	A Promised Inheritance
<b>F</b>	Sept. 2	John 8:51-59	Abraham Rejoices in Christ
<b>Sa</b>	Sept. 3	Gen. 11:27-32	First Steps of Faith

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

This quarter we will look at Scriptures that highlight the amazing ways in which God chooses individuals and groups to be part of the divine plan. The surprise is that God rarely chooses the obvious—the *best* or the *first* according to cultural norms or human standards. Instead, God chooses the unexpected so that we can better see the divine love and power in action. This is certainly true with the members of one particular family who are the focus of unit I.

Lesson 1 begins with the first patriarch, Abram (whom God later renamed Abraham) and his wife Sarai (later known as Sarah). When asked to leave their home and journey to a new land, they packed up their household and went. They responded to not only God’s call but to a specific promise as well. Although they were far past childbearing years, God promised them many descendants. Their lives were changed by an act of faith that was based on trusting God’s choice, answering God’s call, and believing in God’s promise.

We too are called by God and given the promise of blessing and new life. Like Abram and Sarai, we are chosen through no merit of our own and called to journey into an unknown area in which God’s promises will be fulfilled. Fears, doubts, trials, and impatience may nag at our faith. In spite of this, believing in God’s promise means trusting God enough to leave behind all that is familiar and safe. It means being willing to

move from where we are—geographically, spiritually, or emotionally—to go to the “land” that God will show us.

*God of the ages, we thank you for the opportunities that come when you call. As we wait, strengthen our faith and help us to act in ways that please you. Help us to trust your promise and purpose for our lives, not only today, but in all the time to come. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

Genesis 12:1–7; 15:1–7

**12:1** 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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, <sup>6</sup>Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. <sup>7</sup>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. . . .

**15:1–7** After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” <sup>2</sup>But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” <sup>3</sup>And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” <sup>4</sup>But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” <sup>5</sup>He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” <sup>6</sup>And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

<sup>7</sup>Then he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.”

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

## A PROMISED BLESSING

The choice of Abram and Sarai is surprising because of their life setting. Many scholars place Ur and Haran in the ancient nation of Sumer. If so, then both cities were pagan strongholds linked by the worship of the moon-god, commercial routes, and a common culture. Therefore, Abram and Sarai were part of a society that did not worship our God (and, in fact, may never even have heard of the biblical One). In addition, their family was very wealthy and comfortable, not exactly the circumstances under which someone would go willingly into the unknown.

But Abram and his family apparently did not question God's choice. Rather, they set forth in faith. Abram was so confident of God's promise that he entered the powerful foreign nation of Canaan and promptly built an altar for Yahweh on one of its holy sites. It was a way of saying, "Lord, I believe that you will give me and my descendants this land."

In the Scriptures that come after this, we see the growing frustration of Abram and Sarai as they increasingly agonize over God's words to them.

Year after year passed, but still no baby arrived. Thoughts must have whirled as the couple pondered what God had told them. Perhaps when they were ready to give up on ever being what they thought God had called them to be, "the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision."

God's words in the vision were encouraging, offering divine protection and a great reward to Abram. What good would protection and a reward do, though, when what was needed was a child? Time was running out. So maybe, Abram thought, he had misunderstood and God really expected him to utilize the ancient law that would let him adopt the slave Eliezer to fulfill the duties as an heir (v. 3).

God countered this idea by repeating the promise that Abram's "very own issue shall be your heir" (v. 4). God underlined the point by taking Abram outside to view the starry heavens. In gentle admonishment, God said, once again, that Abram's descendants would be innumerable. The illustration God used was that the offspring would be as many as the stars in the sky.

At last, Abram was convinced. As a result, God declared Abram righteous—or, in essence—said that Abram was now fulfilling his part of the bargain by trusting in God to keep promises.



**How have you trusted in God's call and promise to you?**

## A JOURNEY OF FAITH

God's call to Abram and Sarai was a call to turn their backs on all that had previously defined them and to live in faith. The call did not promise health, wealth, or a care-free existence, but it did promise that Abram and Sarai would *be blessed* and would *be a blessing* for all the families of the earth.

The words "you will be a blessing" (12:2) are expressed in the Hebrew as a consequence to be expected. In Genesis through Deuteronomy, the term *blessing* almost always refers to something continually being given and received. The implication is that Abram and Sarai would continue to have fertility, growth, and success through their ongoing relationship with God. Moreover, the blessing would be inherited by others. Abram and Sarai would become the founders of a great people, and their names would be remembered for generations.

Names in the Old Testament were perceived to have real power. They were a summary of an individual's essence, nature, and personhood, an extension of their personality, if you will. Consequently, when God promised to make Abram's name great, it was a powerful gift. The essence of Abram (and Sarai) would live on and be renowned because of God's promise. They did not know exactly how God would bring about the fulfillment of the promise, but they trusted it would happen.

Abram's and Sarai's trust in God to prepare the way eventually became a faith model for the Hebrew people. In future generations, they would be a people in quest of a promised land, rooted in the promise of God's commitment to the covenant between them. They would be a people who, unlike other nations, constituted themselves on firm belief in the providence of God. What other families of the earth had succeeded in that? Such an accomplishment was by no means easy, nor to be achieved all at once. It would be a journey by stages, just like Abram's and Sarai's.

As those who inherit the future, we too undertake a pilgrimage of vast uncertainty, full of blessing and new identity. We live in the world as an alien people, always seeking our new home, and in some sense always without an earthly home, except in that home we call God. Thus we go forth on a journey of faith, seeking the abundant life that God promises us. Just as Abram and Sarai trusted God to guide and protect them physically, so we must trust God to guide and protect us spiritually.



**What are some key moments in your own journey of faith?**

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

This week's text highlights a basic reality of human life: the circumstances in which we find ourselves do not always match our expectations. When this happens, we may struggle, as Abram and Sarai did, to stay hopeful. We may wonder what action will let us move forward faithfully. We know some things might help—like prayer and Bible study—but we may still question how to find our blessing and how to be a blessing to others within our current situation. We may wonder if there is any point in trying to be patient and wait for God to act.

In this case, I tend to think of Abram and Sarai as classic examples of “living in the meantime,” that time between promise and fulfillment. Many people today know the tension of this kind of living: The proposal to marry has been made, but the actual ceremony has not been performed. The offer on the house has been accepted, the “earnest money” has been put down, the loan has gone through, but the actual signing of the contract has not yet occurred. The call to another church has been offered, but the pastoral relationship with the church now being served has not been dissolved.

Perhaps these examples do not encompass the same kind of tension exhibited in God's promise to Abram and Sarai, but the anxiety is the same. Until the deal is done, any of the above promises could be broken—some with financial, personal, or professional penalty—and the uncertainty can be hard to handle.

We know that some people have difficulty living up to their commitments. Was it any different in ancient times? Did Abram and Sarai have friends and relatives who had let them down before? Had they themselves backed out of some pledges? If so, then any doubt they had is understandable. Based on human behavior regarding promises, how could Abram and Sarai know that God would live up to the divine commitment to provide an heir who was to be the beginning of a long line of descendants?

We are invited to reaffirm our conviction that God's promises are sure and will never be broken. We are invited to put ourselves in the hands of the One who has always been sovereign in the life of the covenant people, who is still sovereign in the chaotically changing world of 2022, and who will continue to be sovereign in whatever events the future holds for humankind.



**What helps you get through times when life is not what you want or hope for and change seems unlikely?**

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture.*

1. The cycle of invitation, obedience, promise, faith, and blessing Abram experienced is repeated throughout Scripture (for example, Jacob, David, Deborah, Mary, Paul) and the history of the church. We experience this same cycle in a continual spiral of spiritual growth as God grows us up in God's image (Rom. 5:1–5; 2 Pet. 1:4–9).
2. God made a promise before Abram asked for anything. This is unlike any other religious system in Abraham's day or in our own. The Holy One takes the first step, and so proves that God is unlike any other person or power in existence. The power and kindness in initiating this promise is matched only by God's patience and faithfulness in finally fulfilling it.
3. Even though Abram trusted God, he impatiently tried to force God's hand (Gen. 16). God rejected Abram's efforts to *help* fulfill the promise, knowing that the divine plan was better than Abram's efforts.
4. The three phases of God's call on Abram identify the spheres of influence in his life that Abram must leave behind. They move from broad strokes to specific areas: from "your country," from "your people," and from "your father's household." God progressively removes every security from Abram, forcing Abram to rely completely on God. (See Matt. 16:24–26 for a similar challenge from Jesus.)
5. God identifies God's self to Abram (15:1, 7) in terms of Abram's experience of the divine. It is Abram's experience of the Holy One that should be his rationale for continued faith in God's promises. Paul uses these Scriptures to defend the doctrine of justification by faith (Gal. 2–4). God declared Abram righteous on the basis of his faith in the divine promise and not on the basis of Abram's obedient actions.
6. The blessing God promises Abram sets the themes for the rest of Genesis: land, family, and name. And while the promise that Abram will "be a blessing" (12:2) refers to Abram's influence (in these spheres) over those around him, it also parallels the prophetic words in Zechariah 8:16, in which Israel's role as a blessing is primarily in attracting others toward the God who blesses.