

## Genesis 11:31-12:9 A Call to Start a Journey

### Introduction

Living by faith and trusting God is a journey. We know where it begins and we know where it will end but the pathway between our conversion and our eternal destiny can contain many surprises we had not anticipated. The stories of the patriarchs in Genesis illustrate this point so well. Their good days and their struggles are all seen so clearly in the pages of Scripture. Our lives are no different, except for the fact that the details of our faith journey may only be known between you and God or with a few close friends or family members. The church has been on what seems a long journey already in its exploration for fit for purpose premises for the twenty-first century. We have taken different steps over the years and seen certain choices removed from our list of possibilities –thankfully, because a more significant change was required than had previously been considered. Our recent proposals formally put to the Council planning department were ones we had been expecting to see accepted. However, we prayed, I hope, that the Lord would either open this door and confirm that this was the right way to go or close it and give us a pointer that He must have something better for us in the future. We have consistently said that doing nothing is not an option open to us, so we need to seek the Lord further and ask Him to guide us in which ever way He has for us. But we do it with confidence in Him. Our church motto for 2010, Jeremiah 29:11, is a clear reminder of why we can go forward with confidence in the Lord. It states: *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

This is why we have decided to go ahead with the Church Gift Day on May 22<sup>nd</sup>. Our future is in His hands and that is the safest place to be. Placing our security in any other person or place leaves us vulnerable to losing it as no-one else can guarantee their support for us into the indefinite future. However, the Lord who never changes is always trustworthy and reliable.

### 1. The First Call from God to start the journey (Genesis 11:31-32)

(a) **The World in which Abram lived** *Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there.*<sup>32</sup> *Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran.* After the flood in the days of Noah there are some quiet centuries in which nothing major is recorded in God's Word. Plenty of things would have happened but none had major significance in the purposes of God. It was a world very similar to our own where rulers like Nimrod, possibly the most powerful ruler in the Middle East after the Flood and before Abraham, focused on building a secular empire without reference to God (Genesis 10:8-12; 11:1-9). At the centre of that empire was a huge tower built to display his power in the presence of the gods and to show that he could do anything he wanted, the sky was the limit! Was the apparent silence from God evidence that He didn't care? Was it evidence of a lack of interest in humanity as a result of our persistent sinfulness? After all we might have been tempted to walk away if other people treated us like God was treated by the creatures He created. From the standpoint of a neutral observer it didn't look promising for the God of Israel. The nations of the world 4,000 years ago were all offering adoration to other gods, not their creator. The few remaining believers, a faithful remnant, must have wondered what kind of future remained when so few people wanted to acknowledge their Creator. Yet over time there have been various dark ages when only a handful of believers remained on earth, yet in each of these dire situations God raised up godly men and women to proclaim the truths of

the Gospel to their generation. God will never leave Himself without a witness. Here the story of Abraham begins in the family home in Ur of the Chaldees, southern Iraq. The people living there were worshippers of the moon god Sin. This did not look very promising for a witness to the one true God. Yet God was able to take the people that were there and begin this work. Never underestimate what God can do with people available to Him. This is all He asks that we offer our lives to Him and trust Him to do the rest. (b) **The Call that Abram received** Genesis 11:31-32 records: *Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there.*<sup>32</sup> *Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran.* This call was given to Abraham specifically, but did not exclude his entire extended family. Stephen in his speech before the Jewish High Priest said, in Acts 7:2-4: *Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.*<sup>3</sup> *'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'*<sup>4</sup> *So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living.* God had placed it in all their hearts to go to the cultural backwater of Canaan. Initially it looked so promising as they all packed up their possessions in the idyllic city of Ur and their comfortable two-storey homes, not that dissimilar from comfortable homes in the region today (apart from modern technologies). They moved to a place called Haran in Syria. This was a huge trek with all their possessions, but they willingly left their homes knowing that it was very likely that they would never return. This was not a holiday or even a mission trip. It was like the missionaries of former years who knew that when they set sail there was little likelihood of ever returning home alive again. We too both individually and in our families as well as our church family have set out on a faith journey. We have got to our Haran moment. We agreed to go forward with discussions and plans re the premises, but many I'm sure felt they had a fair idea of what the final decision might be. However, that is not now the case; we do not know the future, but I want to invite you to join me in following the Lord into the good future He has prepared for us. He is trustworthy and we can go forward with confidence in Him. The faith journey we have embarked on may take a new direction in coming days, but let's agree together wholeheartedly that we do not fear the future for the work of this congregation, because it is in His hands.

## 2. **The Second Call from God to continue the journey** (Genesis 12:1-3)

(a) **The Second Call**<sup>1</sup> *The Lord had said to Abram, Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.*<sup>2</sup> *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.*<sup>3</sup> *I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.* A second call comes to the man whom God called in Ur to travel on to the Promised Land. Why did it need to be repeated some years later? This was because the first call had been forgotten. The Lord had asked them to go to Canaan, but despite the good start they stopped at Haran. It was perfectly permissible to stop in Haran on the way; the problem was that having taken a great step of faith to embark on a journey the majority of this family group chose to give up along the way. Terah, Abram's dad, would die in Haran, having settled for missing out on the blessing God had provided for him and his family in Canaan. We have set out on a faith journey in our commitment to erecting fit-for-purpose premises for a more effective mission in our community in the twenty-first century. Will we like most of Abram's family stop part way along the journey, never finding out what God has ultimately provided for us? Or will we, despite some disappointments along the way, renew our determination to continue seeking His will, so that we will in His time see the rewards of

obedience as we follow in the way He has provided for us? This is not a small matter. All the members of Abram's family had made significant material and financial sacrifices to take the trip to Haran; possibly lucrative careers had been giving up to heed God's call; certainly they were now following a simpler lifestyle. Did they think we've made enough sacrifices for God He cannot expect any more from us? We will never know the answer to such questions. What is important to note here was that God intended Abram to move on to the place of future blessing. They may have had many encouragements in the years at Haran, yet God had a better place in store for them. This did not mean a place free from challenges and difficulties, but a calling to heed the voice of their Lord who invited them to continue their journey of faith. There are times when we, personally or collectively, want to take a break, take a step back, but God calls us once more to continue on in the journey with Him. He is Jehovah Jireh, the God who will provide the strength that we need. Do we really believe that? I think that we do, sometimes we need a little reassurance that this is the case, but we know that God can be trusted to guide and direct us into the future He has planned for us. (b) **The Nature of the Call** <sup>1</sup>*The Lord had said to Abram, Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.* <sup>2</sup>*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.* <sup>3</sup>*I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.* (i) A call to leave your country Abram can tick that box. Lord I have already done that one. Isn't God gracious to begin with words that would encourage His servant to see the progress he has already made. Sometimes we forget our progress in the Christian life and dwell too much on the negatives of our failings and shortcomings. The devil would love to keep us in that place. God doesn't because His grace is sufficient to cover all our needs whatever we have done. Abraham, God says, I appreciate that you loved the place where you have lived and worshipped and worked for generations in your family, but it is now time to move on to another place in another country. Sometimes that may literally occur to us today in a call to missionary service of whatever form overseas. This is of course a much more radical proposal than a congregation possibly moving the site of its main premises. Abram in the light of the call of God and the circumstances before him was called to leave Haran and move on to Canaan. (ii) It was also a call to leave your people. He was very comfortable with the community of what we would today call Iraqi people in Haran. His family felt very much at home there. It is natural that when people emigrate to another country that they choose to settle in locations where their fellow countrymen have settled. This has happened over the centuries, but God wanted to remind His servant that his calling was to go to Canaan. Sometimes the people of God can be too comfortable in our churches that we neglect to cultivate or maintain friendships with people outside the church community. How can we ever hope to lead people to Christ if we never spend time with them? We rightly value our Sunday gatherings and our home groups and it is right that they are a priority to us in our weekly schedules, but we also must remember the priority of mission and the situations and people whom we can serve in the name of Jesus. Although we value fellowship, we must constantly remind ourselves that our primary calling is to mission and evangelism. This ought to be reflected in our prayer life too. (iii) It was also a call to leave your father's household His physical family did not want to go on with God and the only way Abram would fulfil the calling God has for him was by leaving them behind in Haran. It is really tough when a Christian is the only believer in their family. It was a huge shock to the family of our link BMS missionary, who at that stage, were not believers and were stunned when she told them what she planned to do with the rest of her life. This is a tough challenge for every Christian. But Jesus did not water it down in His call to prospective disciples. Luke 9:23-25 states: *Then he said to them all: If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.* <sup>24</sup>*For whoever wants to save his life will lose*

it, but whoever loses his life for Me will save it. <sup>25</sup>What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? Luke is not implying that following Jesus wholeheartedly is all about what we give up. It may include some of that without question. However, we may also gain greater blessings than we had imagined also. Luke 18:29-30 reports Jesus as declaring: *I tell you the truth, Jesus said to them, no-one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God <sup>30</sup> will fail to receive many times as **much in this age** and, in the age to come, eternal life.* What Jesus is teaching primarily, therefore, is not so much what we are separated from, but whom we are separated to (God) and His priorities for our lives.

(iv) A call to receive a land (Genesis 12:2a) *<sup>2</sup>I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you;* Even now, in this second call, God did not give Abram a geographical location; instead he received a fresh invitation to continue a journey with God, to start once again in obedience to His call; When we have our setbacks it is so easy, like Abraham's family, to settle in our 'Haran' rather than trusting the Lord to go forward with us into the better place He has prepared for us. It may be some time before we know for certain the place for our future premises, but the geographical location is less important than in being in the place of obedience to the revealed will of God. The promises of blessing in verses two and three of Genesis 12 only applied if Abram honoured God and moved to the Promised Land. This was not an optional extra for a spiritual expert; rather it was a bottom line essential act for a child of God who wanted to be in the place of blessing, rather than in the barren land. Abram you have 'lost' your country, but you will gain a country for your descendants. (v) A call to receive a name (Genesis 12:2b) *I will make your name great and you will be a blessing.* I believe that this promise was not just to this one person, but to the extended family he would father through Isaac; and ultimately to the Jewish people in the Land. Yet these words are carefully chosen here. The presence of Abraham and his descendants in Canaan was not just for their benefit; it was not even solely to bring glory and honour to God, though it did. Notice the phrase at the end of Genesis 12:2: *you will be a blessing.* By your obedience to God, neighbours and other fellow citizens will have their lives enriched as His people live in the way God wants them to. The Jews were called God's Chosen People, but for the benefit of others currently outside God's kingdom. In the same way in John 15, in Jesus' powerful message on our relationship with Him, using the picture of a vine and its branches, He makes a similar point regarding the place of the Christian Church in the purposes of God. John 15:16: *You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit— fruit that will last. **Then** the Father will give you whatever you ask in My name.* Notice the causal link here between the blessings and obedience. It is easy to vote to go forward in God's work when all appears plain sailing, but our faith and reliance on God is proven when we make the same faith commitments when the going gets tough. I believe that the Lord would have us go forward with this building project, but whether it be here or elsewhere we will affirm 'Lord Your will be done'. Please open the door to that place and close the door to others—even if it is the option I would have preferred. In years to come it is these kinds of moments that later generations highlight to see how we have been willing to trust God (or otherwise) to lead us forward into the next phase of our service for Him. (vi) A call to be a mission-focused people (Genesis 12:3) *<sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.* In this immediate context these words are directly applicable to Abraham individually and then to the Jewish people collectively. The Jewish people in history have never been numerous. They have accomplished far more than any other race, in proportion to numbers. When other nations have abused and suppressed them God brought low that nation from its former glories. The Egyptians who enslaved the Jews were over powered by the mighty miracles of God in the time of Moses (Exodus 1 -15); when the mighty Greek Empire, in the person of Antiochus IV

Epiphanes, desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem in 168BC, the Romans soon overwhelmed that decadent empire. The Spanish Inquisition against the Jews between 1486 and 1492 so barbaric in nature would lead to the fall of that mighty nation. Spain and Portugal so dominant at that time in world affairs would lose their place due to the barbarity of their conduct in the centuries that followed. The freedom loving Dutch gained their independence in 1581 and welcomed the Jews into their territories. The House of Orange was strongly associated with Jews, especially after 1593 in the Netherlands, and their tolerant and open-minded version of the Christian faith was brought to Britain when William of Orange took the British crown jointly with his wife Mary in 1689. The British Empire that largely disappeared in the twentieth century, in part may have been hastened in its decline by its deceitful treatment of the Jews and the Palestinians in the Holy Land, in the promises made about the future of that geographical region. It may be no accident that America has been the only country in the last century to be a consistent friend of the Jewish people, and that she has prospered as a result of God's blessing, in line with this promise. This principle also has a New Testament application to Christian believers. The people that persecute Christians are not attacking believers primarily, but our Lord and Saviour Jesus. As a result they are storing up judgement upon themselves. Remember the words of Jesus to Saul of Tarsus, the brutal young Jew who had been beating, imprisoning and killing followers of Jesus. In Acts 9 we have the account of Saul's trip to Damascus with the intention of committing acts of violence against believing Jews in that city. Jesus intervened into that situation with an extraordinary message to this unpleasant young man: *As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, Saul, Saul, **why do you persecute Me?** <sup>5</sup> Who are you, Lord? Saul asked. **I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,** he replied. <sup>6</sup> Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.* When the gospel transforms peoples lives it makes a far greater difference to the quality of their existence than they ever expected. Historians have often argued that the Christian (Methodist) revival in eighteenth-century England saved that country from a French-style revolution. By leading people to Christ we do far more than see an individual changed it can have a huge impact in a family and in a community and even on occasions in a country. And as Paul reminded us in Romans 4:16-17, we are all children of Abraham if we share His faith in our great God, and consequently can be partakers in the blessings associated with Abraham. *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to **all Abraham's offspring** — not only to those who are of the law but **also to those who are of the faith of Abraham.** He is the father of us all. <sup>17</sup> As it is written: I have made you a father of many nations. He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed— the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.* What an honour in our journey of faith to be walking in the spiritual footsteps of Abram's literal and physical journey of faith, 4,000 years ago.

### 3. The Response to God's Call by His servant (Genesis 12:4-9)

(a) A Willingness to obey (Genesis 12:4-6)<sup>4</sup>*So Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. <sup>5</sup> He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. <sup>6</sup> Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.* Here is a man of seventy-five years who is asked by God to take the lead in going to a new place. In the previous generation the older men like Terah had failed to give the necessary lead and obedience to God and enter the Promised Land. Once again, in this case to Abram, the call comes to start a journey. He will not live to see the fulfilment of these promises and the settlement of his descendants in the land, but Abram was committed to setting out on the journey. Some of the older people in our midst may not live to see the

erection of the premises God has for us at a future date, but like Abram, I invite you to wholeheartedly come with us on this journey. Like Abram it may be hard to face the possibility of greater changes than we expected, but like him also we have in mind that obedience to God is the only place of spiritual blessing. Hebrews 11:8 reminds us that: *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.* I invite the younger people of our congregation to join us on the journey into the future God has for us. Sometimes when we are younger we have less patience and want things to happen quicker than the Lord may have planned for us. I ask you to pray with us for wisdom and patience that as a whole congregation we may step out on the next stage of this spiritual journey united and determined to honour God in the way we proceed.

(b) **An assurance of blessing** (Genesis 12:7-9) <sup>7</sup> *The Lord appeared to Abram and said, To your offspring I will give this land. So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him.* <sup>8</sup> *From there he went on towards the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.* <sup>9</sup> *Then Abram set out and continued towards the Negev.* Only after Abram and his immediate family group had travelled through the land did the Lord appear to him with the assurance of blessing. Abram had to start out on that journey of obedience into an unknown future. The place of greatest blessing for us will be when we commit to continue on the journey He has called us to undertake, with the express purpose of enabling us to reach more people for Jesus in the communities amongst which He has called us to live. Therefore, I want to suggest that rather than being merely a disappointing time, it is also an exciting time of opportunity for us to affirm our confidence in God in continuing on the journey which we began some years ago. As we honour Him on this journey we will see the greater blessings of conversions, baptisms and lives transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, for the glory of His name's sake, Amen.