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The Call of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-4)

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This morning, I would to begin a series on the life of Abraham, the great patriarch of the Jewish nation who has come to be known as "the father of all who believe," since his life and walk established a pattern for all believers who would come after him in all subsequent generations. Although the Jews of the first century laid exclusive claim to Abraham as their own forefather, the apostle Paul set the record straight in Romans 4 when he called Abraham "the father of many nations" and "the father of us all"-- that is, the father of all who walk in the steps of the faith of Abraham, whether they be of Jewish or Gentile descent.

A study of the life of Abraham can be very strengthening to our Christian lives, because we learn from him much about what it means to walk by faith, and to live as sojourners in this present world-- and that is something that we all need to learn, isn't it? Especially in these difficult days in which we are living, days in which multitudes of people are falling away from the faith, espousing gross heresies and falling into outright apostasy from the revealed truth God. How can we stand firm times like these? I believe a study of Abraham's life will show us how.

We will begin this morning considering the call of Abraham, as recorded in Genesis 12; this is one of the most important passages in all of Scripture, for it sets the stage for all subsequent biblical history. We will look at six characteristics of Abraham's call, and along the way, we will make application to our own experience as Christians.

I. The Centrality of the Call-- Let's begin by considering first the centrality of God's call to Abraham. It could very well be argued that the event recorded here in Genesis 12 is the central event of the Old Testament, for it is the pivotal event on which the whole subsequent biblical narrative turns. Everything before Genesis 12 is preparing for this moment, when God calls out one man from the human race in order to establish with him a covenant that will lead to blessing for the whole world. That's why Genesis 1-11 is sometimes regarded as the Bible's prologue, because it is setting the stage for the main story line to follow. Likewise, everything after Genesis 12 flows out of this pivotal moment of history, as God proceeds to fulfill His promises to Abraham step by step until we reach the climactic fulfillment of these promises in the coming of the Christ, the completion of the work of redemption, the going forth of the gospel to all nations, and ultimately, the creation of new humanity that will be eternally blessed on a new earth through the seed of Abraham par excellence, the Lord Jesus Christ. All the spiritual blessings that we enjoy at the present time and will

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enjoy in the future flow to us from the rich treasure chest of promises given to Abraham for the first time here in Genesis 12.

The centrality of these promises to the whole of Scripture can be illustrated in various ways. They are like a backbone that runs through a body and holds it together in one piece. They are like the hinge on which a door turns, so that no matter how wide you open it, all the movement of the door turns around the hinge. They are like the basic outline from which an essay is developed. Whenever I write a sermon, the first thing I do is to prepare an outline that is clear and easy to follow. Once the outline is in place, I know where I am going with the sermon, and it is simply a matter of developing each point fully. That is a good way to think of the promises God gave to Abraham when he called him in Genesis 12. They provide the basic outline of the biblical story, and that outline is filled in by the subsequent events of history.

II. The Setting of the Call-- Let's consider now the setting of this call. The call of Abraham took place around the year 2000 B. C. In the years between the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden and the call of Abraham in Genesis 12, we see repeated demonstrations of mankind's incorrigible sinfulness and depravity. Adam's fall was followed by one moral failure after another on the part of his descendants, leading to repeated acts of divine judgment. When Cain murders his brother Abel, for example, he is judged by God by being made an outcast and restless wanderer on the earth. When the people in Noah's day grow so corrupt on the earth that their lawlessness knows no bounds, God judges mankind by sending the flood. Later, when Noah's descendants try to build a world empire based on godless humanism, with a mighty tower as a symbol of their proud defiance, God judges them by dividing the languages, so that people are forced to migrate in different directions and fill the whole earth, which is what God commanded them to do at the beginning. All these events bring to light a deeply ingrained corruption in the human heart and a self-destructive bent that cannot be overcome through mere education, enlightenment, and humanistic efforts at self-improvement. Left to himself and the inclination of his own corrupt will, man will inevitably destroy himself. It is clear, therefore, that if there is to be any hope for the human race that hope must come from heaven above. God Himself must intervene to deliver men from themselves by providing a Redeemer from sin. It was to lay the groundwork for redemptive that God entered into His covenant with Abraham. As Warren Wiersbe explains, "God called a man and his wife to leave their home and go to a new land, so that He might give humanity a new beginning. Because of God's call and their obedient faith, Abraham and Sarah ultimately gave to the world the Jewish nation, the Bible, and the Savior." So the call of Abraham represents a major step forward in God's plan of redemption, which was first announced in Genesis 3:15 after Adam fell into sin. In the Garden, God announced the good news that a coming Redeemer would defeat the devil and undo his works. There, the Redeemer was referred to as "the seed of the woman." Now in God's dealings with Abraham, we learn that

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this favored seed will be "the seed of Abraham," and in Him all nations will be blessed.

But who exactly was Abraham? Where was he from? In himself, Abraham was nobody special. He was the son of a man named Terah, whom we meet in the eleventh chapter of Genesis. We know from Joshua 24:2 that Terah was an idolater, so without a doubt, Abraham was raised to worship idols. Terah lived in a city called Ur of the Chaldeans, which was located on the Euphrates river in what is now southern Iraq. Archaeologists have dug up a number of artifacts from the ruins of Ur which showed that Ur had a very advanced civilization in Abraham's day. It was a teeming city with busy streets, libraries, schools, and even a bank. The inhabitants were skilled at making glass objects, and the local jewelers made ornate and very beautiful jewelry for their clients. No doubt, the people were very proud of their culture and way of life. But from a spiritual standpoint, it was a very dark city, given over to the worship of the moon god, whom the inhabitants of Ur called Nanna or Nannar. The worship of Nannar was an evil, false religion that involved performing superstitious rituals and participating in immoral acts. It was in that city that Abraham was born and grew up, along with his two brothers, Nahor and Haran. It was there, as well, that Abraham married his half-sister, Sarah. Because Sarah was barren, they remained childless, and no doubt, Abraham expected to die without ever having an heir. Little did they know what God had in store for their lives!

For some reason, Terah decided in his old age to migrate with his sons, their wives, and their families, to the land of Canaan. So they left Ur of the Chaldeans, but they did not get any farther than the city of Haran in Mesopotamia, because there Terah decided to settle. But Abraham did not put down roots in Haran, because God had other plans for His life, which He made known to Abraham by means of a mysterious call.

We read about that call in the first three verses of chapter 12: "Now the Lord had said to Abram: 'Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'" Apparently, the Lord's appearance to Abraham in Haran was not the first time he appeared to him, for notice what Stephen says in Acts 7:2: "And he said, 'Brethren and fathers, listen: the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran.'" It was before his arrival in Haran that God first spoke to Abraham about leaving his relatives and his homeland and going to Canaan. What may well have happened was that Abraham first told his father he was going to Canaan while they were living in Ur; his father responded by saying, "I'm going with you!" and decided to migrate there with the whole family. When they reached Haran, however, Terah was tired of the journey and decided remain

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there; but Abraham could not stay there, because the call of God was clear; he had to leave Haran and go to the far off land that God would show him.

Now, there are several very striking things about this call of that came to Abraham.

III. The Sovereignty of the Call-- Consider the sovereignty of this call. When God began to speak to Abraham, He did so entirely on His own initiative, for reasons hidden in the unsearchable depths of His divine being. We cannot say that God spoke to Abraham because He saw that Abraham was seeking after Him. We know that could not have been the case, because the Bible teaches that no fallen sinner ever seeks after God on his own initiative, apart from the ministry of God's Holy Spirit within him. If we think God revealed himself to Abraham because he saw in Abraham a righteous character, an understanding mind, or a seeking heart, then we need to think again, because the Bible just the opposite about the natural man. As Paul put it in the book of Romans, "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is no one who understands; there is none who seeks after God." As I pointed out earlier, Abraham had been brought up in an idolatrous household and culture. He was a worshipper of the moon god Nannar, and had God not taken the initiative to intervene in Abraham's life and bring him out of that idolatry, Abraham would never have sought after God. The initiative in salvation always lies with God.

The same thing was true in our own salvation. When God called us to Himself through the preaching of the gospel, He did so in the same gracious manner in which He called Abraham. When we were not seeking Him, He sent us the good news of Christ and His salvation-- perhaps by the mouth of friend, or neighbor, or relative. He initiated contact with us and drew us to Himself with cords of love through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who quickened our hearts to respond in faith to the Word that was given us. We did not seek God on our own, but only as a response to His prior seeking of us. He initiated everything. That why we can have such confidence in our final salvation and be assured of the fact that we will persevere in faith until the very end; because we know that our faithfulness depends ultimately on God's faithfulness.

In Abraham's case, the sovereignty of God's call was highlighted by the total lack of godly influences around him. All his relatives and fellow countrymen were idolaters. When God began speaking to him, he could not seek out the fellowship of other believers in Ur and join himself to them. He could not run by his local Christian bookstore and buy a Bible to learn about God. There was no Bible available. There were no written Scriptures of any kind. There was no church to attend, no sermons to listen to, no books to read, no prayer meetings or share groups to join in. He was all on his own; but he had the Lord to sustain him, and that was all he needed.

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IV. The Supernatural Character of the Call-- In addition to being sovereign, Abraham's call was also completely supernatural in character. There is a sense in which all of God's works in the spiritual realm are supernatural, since they are works of the Holy Spirit, who is a supernatural Person. What I am emphasizing now, however, is the extraordinary, miraculous nature of this call. In some mysterious manner that the Bible does not explain, God spoke to Abraham-- and the revelation He gave him was infallible and unmistakably clear and compelling. Whether God spoke to him in a dream or vision or in an audible voice as Abraham went about his daily work, we do not know. We only know that Abraham had no question at all regarding the meaning of God's words to him, and no doubt as to what response God expected of him. This divine revelation, in whatever form it came to Abraham, constituted God's Word to him, and it was through this Word that God generated faith in Abraham's heart, because the Bible says, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Romans 10:17).

Because Abraham received a direct word from God, an infallible word of revelation telling him in no uncertain terms exactly what he needed to do, he did not need to consult with anyone before obeying it. He did not even have to consult with his wife Sarah. He didn't have to go to her and say, "Honey, what do you think about this situation? How do you perceive it? What matters do you think we should consider in deciding what to do?" All such questions were irrelevant and unnecessary, because Abraham's call as a prophet of the Lord was an extraordinary call. He didn't have to discern anything, or evaluate anything, or consider anything, or judge anything. All he had to do was obey what God explicitly told him to do. All he had to do was go to Sarah and say, "Pack your bags, honey, we're off to Canaan, for the Lord has spoken to me and told me plainly what we need to do."

Sometimes I envy Abraham, because it was so easy for him to know what he had to do. He had received a direct revelation from the Lord that was so sure, he could not doubt it, and his assurance of what he had heard enabled him to go to Sarah and say, "Thus says the Lord." We do not always have that same certainty in making many life decisions, since God does not reveal His vocational will to us in the same extraordinary manner-- by immediate, direct revelation. The Lord doesn't write in the sky the name of the partner he would have us marry; He does not give us an infallible, miraculous sign as He gave to Gideon, showing us where he would have us live or how He would have us serve Him. The extraordinary means by which He revealed His will to the prophets in the past is not His normative method of guiding us today.

We should not doubt for a moment, however, that God still guides His people. He most assuredly does guide them, by His Word and Spirit, in all the important decisions of life; but He does so in a different manner than that by which He directed Abraham to the land of Canaan. God does not speak to us in an audible

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voice or by miraculous vision, as He spoke to Abraham; rather, He enables us to discern the path of wisdom in every major decision that we have to make. He speaks to us through the revealed Word that has already been given in Scripture, as we carefully meditate upon its teaching and view our circumstances in the light of God's revealed truth. He guides us through the wise Scripture-based counsel of other believers, and through a careful consideration of His providential working in our lives. He guides us as we consider our gifts and desires and inclinations, as well as the needs of other people. Moreover, He has promised to grant us wisdom for making decisions as we appeal to Him directly in prayer and earnestly beseech Him for wisdom, being careful at the same time to walk faithfully before the Lord at all times, being diligent to keep every know commandment of God in Scripture. In these ways, God guides us.

To receive wisdom from the Lord in our decision-making, however, there are three absolute prerequisites-- a trusting heart, a submissive will, and a persevering attitude.

1) A trusting heart-- First, we must trust with all our hearts that God is willing to impart to us wisdom, or we will not receive it. James 1:5-6 says "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.").

2) A submissive will-- Second, we must also make sure we have a submissive will, for if our will is not submitted to the Lord, and are simply determined to do our own will regardless, we will not discern the path of wisdom. When the Jews were disputing among themselves whether or not Jesus' teaching was from God, He answered them by saying, "If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority" (John 7:17). A submitted will is essential to discerning the path of wisdom.

3) A persevering attitude-- Finally, we need a persevering attitude as well. In Luke 18, Jesus taught his disciples a parable on the need for persevering prayer; the basic lesson of the parable we read in verse 1 was "that men ought always to pray and not lose heart." Quite often, when our prayers for guidance are not answered immediately, we lose heart and give up praying. But God gives good things to them that wait upon Him in prayer.

V. The Surprising Nature of the Call

We have the sovereign and supernatural character of Abraham's call. Now let us consider its surprising nature. There are many surprising things about God's call to Abraham, things that are really quite shocking, when you think about it.

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For one thing, consider the loving tone of God's call. Abraham had every reason to expect that God would speak in a harsh tone, for there was nothing in himself or in the life he was living to commend him to God. He was a practicing idolater living in spiritual darkness and engaging habitually in practices that were abominable to God. Well might he have expected God to thunder at him words of wrath and judgment.

Instead, however, God came speaking to him tenderly, like a man proposing marriage to the woman he loves. Alan Stibbs highlights this unusual feature of God's call when he writes, "God came to Abraham like a man to a woman, to ask for one thing. He virtually said, 'I want you' . . . The Lord demanded, as the lover who proposes to the woman of his choice, that Abraham leave everything else in order to become his; that he should leave his own family and join God's-- the people who are God's; that he should depart from his present home and surroundings and go to live with God." Likewise, when God addresses us through the Word of the gospel, it is with similar loving tones that He addresses us. He assures that He does not want us to perish with the world, but to be saved, so that we can belong to Him exclusively and live with Him forever. His call to us in the gospel is a loving call.

Another surprising thing about God's call of Abraham was the timing of this call. If Abraham was going to have to make such a long and difficult journey and if he was going to live such a hard and unsettled life in the land to which he was heading, the nomadic life of a shepherd, we might have expected God to call him in the days of his youth. Instead, God called him when he was seventy-five years old. Now, it is true that the average lifespan of the patriarchs at this time was considerably longer than it is today. Abraham himself lived to be a 175 years old. Nevertheless, to undertake a new endeavor such as Abraham was about to undertake was most unusual for a man his age. We can imagine how his friends and neighbors must have scratched their heads trying to figure why a man Abraham's age should be uprooting himself to go to a faraway land he had never been to before, far removed from his kinfolk and culture and the way of life that was familiar to him. As Jill Masters puts it, "Why should an elderly man who has acquired a nice home, a successful business, and a place of respect in the community, want to throw all these assets to the wind? And all for nothing!" No doubt many of his neighbors must have thought that Abraham was acting in a foolish manner.

Far from being foolish, however, Abraham was doing the only wise thing that a man can do when he has been given a specific command by God to undertake a seemingly risky venture-- he was obeying God, and trusting Him with the consequences of his actions.

VI. The Specificity of the Call-- Both obedience and trust were required in light of the specificity of the call that Abraham received. Abraham was given a specific

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command, to which he had to respond in obedience, and he was given specific promises, to which he had to respond in trust. What was the command God gave him, and what were the promises?

A. The Command-- The command was to leave everything that was familiar to him, including his own family and friends, and to head off for a land that he had never seen before; there he was to settle down and raise his family that land as if he owned it, for in fact God was giving that land to him and to his descendants to receive as an inheritance.

Think of the tremendous sacrifice it must have been for Abraham to obey that command. The fact is, he knew no one in the land of Canaan. He had no kinfolk living there. He had no travel brochures to look through, with beautiful pictures of green pastures flowing with milk and honey, and amber waves of grain blowing in the wind. He had an arduous journey before him fraught with many inconveniences and discomforts. As Geoff Thomas points out, "There were few roads from Ur to get there, no police, no restaurants, and no service area along the way. Once Abraham had got to the place there'd be no instant communication with his family back in Ur. He might never see them again, any more than William Carey of India ever saw the kinfolk he left behind in England. It was a call to great sacrifice and cross bearing, and it was the first word Abraham heard. 'Count the cost!' the Lord was saying, as he always says to those being invited to follow him."

Now, we must not take God's specific command to Abraham as if it were directed to every believer. God does not call every believer to leave his familiar surroundings in order to serve the Lord in a far distant land in the way He called Abraham. In fact, most believers are called to stay right where they are, to serve the Lord in the land of their birth among their own people; and the truth is, sometimes it takes greater faith to do that than to go off to a distant land. Sometimes, the desire to go off elsewhere represents an attitude of escapism, rather than faith. Think for example, of the Christian who is in a difficult marriage, such as the believer who finds himself or herself unequally yoked to an unbeliever who has no interest in the things of God. In one sense, the easiest thing would be to leave the unhappy relationship and to find a believing spouse with whom one is equally yoked on a spiritual level. The hardest thing is to stay in that difficult relationship, for it requires a measure of self-denial and a willingness to bear the cross that is quite beyond the power of the flesh; but that is what God calls Christians to do who are married to unbelievers. Under no means should they initiate divorce; rather, they must do what is in their power to preserve the marriage; unless the unbelieving spouse insists on leaving, they are to remain with that spouse (1 Cor. 7:12-14). It would be a gross error, therefore, to take the example of Abraham and apply it to all Christians by saying that all Christians who are full of faith will demonstrate that

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by leaving their familiar surroundings to serve God on the foreign field. That would be a total misapplication of this passage.

On the other hand, it is true that, in one sense, that a genuine believer will always manifest his faith by undertaking a journey of separation-- but the separation is not geographical, so much as spiritual. Every believer shows his faith by separating himself in a spiritual sense from the unbelieving world. That is what Ur of the Chaldeans and Haran represented to Abraham; the unbelieving world-- the ungodly world in which he had grown up and spent the days of his youth. They were pagan cesspools forever associated in his mind with idolatry and false worship and all manner of unholy, unclean ways of thinking and living. For Abraham to leave Ur and Haran was tantamount to leaving behind a whole way of life that was based on the denial of God. And of course, every believer must be willing to follow Abraham in that separation. "Like Abraham," says Jill Masters, "we must be prepared to cut our ties with this world. We must be different friends and set our hearts and minds on eternal things. We may have to make a break with some of our old friends and pastimes. We shall change our reading habits, be much more careful what we watch on television, and fact the scorn and annoyance of our friends when we are no longer interested in their parties and discos." Have you found God making such a change in you since first confessed yourself to be a follower of Christ. Do you find yourself more concerned than before about the things you take into your mind and heart from the popular culture? There is a saying that says, "You are what you eat," and that principle holds true in the spiritual realm, as well. If we are always feeding our minds on entertainments that glorify things that are perverse-- profane and vile ways of thinking and living and speaking that are totally contrary to God's Word, we need to ask ourselves if we are truly following in Abraham's footsteps, or are we trying to serve God without separating ourselves from the world.

Abraham knew that he could not serve God and live in disobedience of His commands. He had to make a choice, one way or the other. He had to follow God unreservedly without qualifications, or he had to follow the world. God was saying to him, in essence, what Joshua said to the children of Israel many years later when they came into the promised land: "Fear the Lord, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River. . . Choose for yourself this day whom you will serve."

That was the choice before Abraham, and it is the choice God puts before those to whom the call of the gospel comes. To all would be disciples, Jesus says, "Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27). It is an absolute decision we must make between following Christ and following the world, between doing the will of Christ and doing the will of the flesh. We must be willing to mortify our own will in any matter that would take us away from the path of obedience to which Christ is calling us; even as our Lord had to mortify his own will to go to the cross.

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Abraham made the right choice; he surrendered himself to the call of God and bid farewell to his family and his father's house, to build a new life for himself and his family in the land of Canaan. He was able to make that difficult decision through of faith that was operating in his heart, a faith kindled by and nourished by the precious promises that God gave to him. Those promises, stated briefly were:

- 1) That God would give him the land of his sojourning as an everlasting possession for himself and his family.
- 2) That God would make of him a great nation, and would make his name renowned, pouring forth blessing on his friends and cursing on his enemies, and protecting him from all harm.
- 3) The most wonderful promise at all-- that is a way which was yet to be revealed, Abraham would become a blessing to all the families of the earth: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." This last promise shows that God's design in entering into this special relationship with Abraham ultimately had in view blessing for all mankind. It was not a narrow nationalistic program that God was going to pursue through Abraham, but a world-embracing, world-transforming agenda.

Next week, we will consider in greater detail these promises God gave to Abraham, and Abraham's response of faith. What we need to see this morning, however, is that God's dealings with Abraham not only advanced God's redemptive purposes for the world, but also provided us with a very instructive pattern of the life of faith. We are called, as the apostle Paul puts it, to walk in the steps of the faith of Abraham, and that walk begins by hearing and heeding God's call to repentance from sin and faith in his promises and a firm commitment to follow Him wherever He leads, beginning with separating ourselves spiritually from the corrupt customs and ways of thinking and living that characterize the unbelieving world. We are here, like Abraham, as sojourners, aliens and strangers in this present world, eagerly desiring and looking for a better country, even the heavenly country which is our promised land, our eternal home. Amen.