

# **GENESIS**

## **A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY**

***THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB***

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## THE LORD CALLS ABRAM (*GENESIS 12*)

The first eleven chapters of Genesis set out the scope of the Problem: God made a perfect world, and he created man in his image to rule over his world according to the unique structure that God used in creating it. But instead of cooperating with his Father, the son turned his back on God, set his own rules, turned the Creation into a source of pleasure for his lusts, and in general degraded himself to the level of a criminal and a reprobate. God responded in kind: he cursed man to misery and death, and turned the world, which was made to be a blessing for man, into a curse. Now the two are at war.

Surprisingly, instead of doing away with us all, we discover in Genesis 12 that God attacked this Problem from a different angle. His desire for man to be his son has an eternal foundation (see Ephesians 1); so he was not going to let sin get in the way of his eternal will. But he would redesign man so that sin would never be a problem again.

People may not understand this very well, but the very heart of what it means to live is to *know God*. And since man was made in God's image, that means God wants us to relate to him as a son does to his Father. That special relationship sets man apart from the rest of Creation – both in the beginning, and also through eternity. But in order for this to work, our relationship with God must now be set upon a firm foundation – one that would completely address the Problem, and enable man to live a new kind of life with God. God will destroy the old, resurrect the dead to life, and lift the new man up to his spiritual world. It will be a massive undertaking that requires the hand of God the whole way.

The process started with Abraham. God chose Abram (his name at this point) to be the Heir of this new life that God has in mind for his son. And since the new life won't be physical or of this world, Abram will have to learn the special skill called *faith* in order to understand, receive, and use the inheritance that God gave him. The story of Abram unfolds across several chapters in Genesis, but it's here in Genesis 12 that we see the essential steps of true faith – which is the vital key to our new relationship with the Father in Heaven. Through faith Abram learned to *know and love the true God*, to *separate from this world*, to *prepare for the next world*, and to *follow the LORD as he led Abram to that world*. That's the Mission here.

This is how all the children of God will relate to their Father. It's what the Bible calls a "shadow" of the relationship between Father and Son in the Trinity itself. As Paul tells us, if we have true faith, then we are heirs of Abraham and will inherit eternal life.

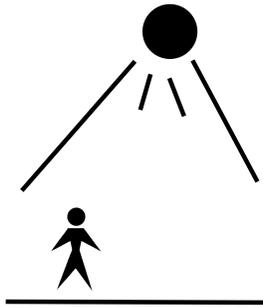
**The LORD said** – Here is the beginning point of true faith. What God was about to do with and through Abram comes from outside our world. We can neither see it nor know it through our senses; and it certainly doesn't appeal to our sinful nature. So the first step in any meaningful relationship with God is that

he reveals himself to us, and enables us to see and know him. He's a Light shining into the dark mind, a voice beating down the door to the grave of the dead. Everything that happened to Abram from this point on would be unexpected, and it wouldn't fit in at all with the way the natural world works.

Abram would literally be forced to follow the LORD's revelation every step of the way like a blind man led through the darkness.

But that Word opened up an entirely new world to Abram. It not only showed the inadequacies of this world that he was living in, and how to get around its problems, it also showed the new world that God had in mind for him and how to get there in a sure and certain way.

Abram was about to learn how to *live by faith*. Faith is **walking in the light of God's world**.



The new children of God must all live by faith, because they have the same Mission facing them that Abram had: to put this physical world behind them, and to strike out for the eternal Home that their Father has prepared for them.

So in Abram we see that this first step of God's Word establishes the all-important foundation for the new relationship between God and man. It's the *only* way that man the sinner, man who is spiritually dead, will be resurrected and cleansed and brought into the presence of the Holy God.

And at the beginning God's Word outlines the plan for the new Family that he is forming with Abram and his descendants. Here is what they must do,

and here is what the LORD would do for and through them.

- **Go from your country** – The LORD called Abram when he was seventy-five years old. He already had a “family business” of flocks and herds, and no doubt would have settled down into retirement in the land of the Chaldeans, his place of birth. But in response to the LORD's call, he moved his entire household and possessions and moved east to “the land that I will show you” – the land of Canaan.

The LORD instructed Abram to leave his country, his kindred, and his father's house. What he was about to do in Abram's life needed none of the things that people think are so essential for life in this world. All the supports in this world that we normally take for granted, that we depend on for success, are useless in the work of God's Kingdom. The power must come from above, not from below; the wisdom guiding Abram's steps would come from God, not from man – not even from Abram's reason or common sense.

Abram of course was guided solely by what the LORD told him at this point. He would have had no idea of how the plan would unfold, neither in his own life nor in the lives of his descendants. The thousands of years of Israelite history, and the thousands of years of the Church, were a Promise that rested on treasures still hidden in God's Temple in Heaven. But “the Word of the LORD stands forever.” Abram was beginning to see an eternal reality: he was finding a resting place in this transient world, a reality in his God that gave him a foothold in the land of Canaan. God

was real, and (though still in the future) so were his Promises.

- ***To the land I will show you*** – The history and events of the Middle East were shaped by its geography. Abram grew up somewhere in the middle of the Tigris and Euphrates river basins (there are two possible sites for the city of Ur – one in the south, one in the north). He and his family moved to Haran after God began speaking to him. Then he left his father and extended family behind in Haran and continued west in an arc (the “Fertile Crescent”) around north of the Jordan Desert and then south to Canaan.



In other words Abram had no idea of what the country was like where he was headed. He did not know God’s plans for him there. Notice too that it was not up to him to select a place to live, and it was not up to him to find his own way to Canaan.

The LORD already figured out this entire Plan and he wasn’t leaving anything for Abram to do except to *faithfully follow*. Here is another essential to true faith. It certainly goes against our natural inclinations, because we like to know what’s going to happen to us ahead of time, and we like to make our own decisions about things, especially when they involve such life-changing situations as

moving away from our home and family and friends to make a new life. But that’s not how God does things. He makes all the decisions – or else we can stay at home and he’ll take someone else who is willing to follow him!

- ***I will make*** – And here is why it was critical for Abram to learn how to obey and follow: God would be doing all the important work. The needs are great: sin and death rule over humanity, and there is no one who can help us overcome these great enemies except God working in power and wisdom. Salvation requires the hand of God or it will never happen. And if we are destined to live with God as his children, that too requires his hand to re-design us from the ground up. Our destiny is to join the Father in his Heavenly Temple, nothing less. And not only is that a spiritual destination (far above our capabilities of achieving), but it also requires a complete re-programming of our sinful hearts and minds.

This key concept forms the foundation of the true nature and scope and power of what God was promising Abram and his descendants: *the LORD himself will make it all work*. At no point will God require man to do any of it – because it’s a spiritual work. The Tree of Life is rooted in Heaven, and its growth comes by means of the work of the Spirit, not by means of the works of man.

In fact, Abram had to see himself as helpless in God’s hands, and follow him implicitly every step of the way. We see him make one mistake when he decided to “provide” a son for

himself (Genesis 16), but otherwise Abram did what God told him to do, believed everything God told him to believe, followed God's leading from Haran, through Canaan, into Egypt, and back to Canaan. In other words, Abram was leaving the field wide open for the LORD to work, and he wasn't interfering by adding his own works. This spiritual ability to *follow the LORD* is another of the key aspects of true faith.

- ***A great nation*** – Out of one man would come a Nation. From Abram's loins would come a new Family, descendants of their Forefather, who would inherit Abram's fortune. A "nation" is a political entity, which points out the fact that everyone who claims to be part of this Family has to show their legal rights before they can share in the inheritance. That aspect of rights was strictly adhered to as we see in subsequent Israelite history: nobody got anything from the Covenant Promises unless they could show their ties back to Abram. But once proof is offered, that person is considered part of the Family and can partake in all the privileges and responsibilities of the Family.

A "great" nation of course has preeminence over other nations. History will show that the line of Abram – both physically (the Jews) and spiritually (Christians) is the oldest in world history, and offers mankind something that no other peoples on earth have ever experienced. As the Prophets tell us, all the nations on earth will make their way to Jerusalem and the people of God for salvation, because here is the one and only place on earth where it can be found. The world will bow

its knee before Abram and his descendants.

Whoever wanted the favor of God had to come to Abram and ask humbly for his prayers, his intercession (see chapter 14 where Abram saves his nephew Lot from marauders, and chapter 18 where Abraham prays for the safety of his nephew), and his open-handedness with the Treasure. As God gave to Abram, so Abram gave to the rest of the world; he became God's representative on earth for the grace of God. The Promises always originated with God in Heaven, but they all come to the rest of us through Abram alone. His name has to be on our agreement with the LORD to make the contract genuine.

There are times when being related to the right person makes all the difference in the world. The Israelites would find out that the *only* reason God blessed them was because of their relationship with Abram, in spite of their sin (very trying to the LORD!). The treasure was Abram's – and to whomever could prove their lineal descent from him. Anybody who was not Abram's seed would get *nothing* from God concerning these Promises. At the time that meant that all other peoples all around the world would live and die as sinners, condemned by their Creator, with no chance at all of salvation from sin and death – a virtual extension of the Flood.

This principle still holds true in the age of the Church. Only those who can prove their spiritual descent from Abram will receive salvation in Christ. "If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." (Galatians

3:29) To Abram alone did God make his Covenant Promises, and our Forefather passed it on to his children alone. It's a very exclusive Family.

- ***I will bless you*** – We saw the curse of mankind in Genesis 3: death. Man ruined what should have been a paradise of joy and glory, and God reacted in wrath against the criminal. There had never been hope of a reprieve from that curse *until Abram*. Starting with Abram, God laid the foundation for the reversal of the curse: to change a sinner into a saint, a criminal into a righteous man, an alien into a son, a child of the devil into a child of God. God wasn't necessarily promising Abram the good life here; in fact Abram would know hardship and wandering all his life, as would many of his descendants. The hope laid out before them was not in this world but in God's eternal world. That's what Abram saw by faith, and that's what motivated him to follow wherever the LORD led him. That Blessing is a new Paradise where God and man will once again come together to form an eternal Family who live in the House of the LORD.
- ***Him who dishonors you*** – One might wonder how someone would "dishonor" Abram, but I'm afraid in our day we have many examples of that, from the halls of academia to the pews in the church. On the academic side, scholars have doubted everything about the story of Abram – from the events in his life, and the interventions that the LORD made, to the very fact that he ever existed. Everything has been put into doubt. Much of the scholarly world thinks it's a fabrication of the Jews of the Exilic period. Hardly any of them

think that God actually revealed himself and said anything to Abram. The nature of God that Abram supposedly learned about was, they say, an accumulation of the characteristics of gods of other cultures. All of this is pure speculation, of course, for no better reason than the scholars *don't want* to believe in a God who would show up and do and say these things to an obscure Aramean. They have no case that would hold up in a court of law.

On the layman's side (and the pastors and teachers who instruct them in our churches), Abram is dishonored in the way they malign his character: they accuse him of being a deceitful coward with doubtful morals. It seems he could do nothing right in their book; he certainly wasn't an example for modern Christians to pattern their faith after. God was merciful to him in spite of all his sins – so we are told. The problem with this interpretation (as we saw in the Introduction) is that the entire Old Testament, and Jesus, and the Apostles, are all agreed on Abram being a stellar example for our faith. The Biblical writers don't point at anything he did that was wrong. On the contrary, he followed the LORD exactly (except in the case of Hagar, where the text says explicitly that he chose the wrong path) and for that reason was accounted a "righteous" man in God's estimation. Our modern assessment contradicts completely the entire Bible's assessment of the man.

Both of these approaches show an abysmal ignorance of the character of Abram. He is getting nothing but "dishonor" from our present generation (for no better reason than

that of pleasing the modern consumer with his politically correct opinions). No wonder, then, that modern interpreters of the Bible are getting the entirely wrong message from the text and can't seem to see its true meaning. As the Promise clearly warns, such interpreters of the text will only inherit a curse, not a blessing, if they fail so badly to connect spiritually with the Father of the faithful.

In other words, God started a "hit list" of people he intends to destroy. And whoever insults or dishonors Abram is on the top of his list.

- ***Blessing to the nations*** – Though the Promises were originally only for Abram and his Family, there was nevertheless a clause in this contract that the Covenant would one day reach out and include peoples from all around the world. You can see the heart of the Creator here: he does not will the death of any man. All were created in his image, and therefore anybody can take part in this new life: "male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile."

During the period of the Old Testament the "blessing" would come in two forms: *first*, God gave the Israelites everything he promised to their forefathers. They were delivered, brought into a rich land, cared for, and experienced the treasures that come from the LORD God living among them. Here, for the first time since Creation and the Fall, was man and God once again living with each other in this world.

*Second*, the Israelites were a blessing to the rest of the world through their testimony. It was through them that God worked out the details of what it

means for the son to live with his Father. By watching them, by reading their history, everyone can learn the lessons of the Covenant Promises: redemption, righteousness, the priesthood, the Kingdom, the wisdom of Heaven, and God's glory. This life of blessing wasn't only for the Israelites but also for mankind around the world.

*Finally*, in the New Testament as well, the "blessing" would become an open door through which all who have the faith of Abram can enter: Jesus Christ. Through him the Promises took their final and spiritual form and were now open to any and to all who would come.

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This is the Mission that the LORD has for Abram and his descendants. It's a new relationship with God, one that solves mankind's deepest problems. We can see that it indeed requires the power and wisdom of God to execute perfectly. To enter into this new relationship, therefore, takes a special spiritual skill – faith – so that we can move successfully along the steps of the Mission and enter into God's world at the end.

**Abram took all his possessions** – The fact that Abram and his family took "all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran" (Genesis 12:5) shows that they knew they had to be self-sufficient while they lived in Canaan. Times were then as they are now: one doesn't just move into a neighborhood and claim whatever land or house one wants; there's someone already living there. The Canaanites weren't going to give up anything to a stranger, and they weren't going to hand over anything to his descendants without a fight, promise or

no promise. Future family history would prove the difficulty of their position: the Canaanites feuded with his son Isaac over the wells he dug (in their neighborhoods), which forced him to move out of range to avoid trouble. Abram and his family were always on the move because the locals didn't want them around.

Though Abram was forced to be self-sufficient, he actually had the Promise of God to depend on. He didn't need the Canaanites for anything – God provided for all of his needs. He had to wander around the countryside as a result, never stationary, eventually pushed out by the locals; but he was never in want. In fact God deliberately arranged for conflicts with the Canaanites so that they would be forced to give up their treasures to Abram. His treasure came from the Canaanites (and the Egyptians) in spite of them and not with their cooperation or blessing.

The cost of cooperating with pagans was too high for the Heir of God – they would have demanded that he take on their immoral lifestyle and worship their gods. Better for Abram to be on the outside and let God deal with the Canaanites in his own way; then there would be no compromise with the pagans.

So his self-sufficiency trained Abram and his entire Family to find the resources that he needed to survive in a hostile environment in God alone. And of course that meant the Family had to learn *how* to tap into those resources that God promised them so that they *could* be self-sufficient – none of which would be immediately obvious to them. Here is another key to true faith.

**Abram passed through the land** – The LORD led Abram through the entire

length of the land of Canaan so that Abram could see for himself the future Family inheritance.



And here is another key aspect of true faith: though he saw the Promise, it was, as far as he was concerned, “from afar”.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. (Hebrews 11:13)

This was not his land yet. God may have set it apart for his descendants, but Abram would never be able to claim the land for his own (except for one small plot – a place to bury his wife Sarah). And yet he “did not waver in his faith.” If he had reservations about the whole thing, if he thought God would never make good on his Promise to allow his Family to take the land over from the Canaanites, if he felt unjustly treated because he himself couldn't enjoy the land as his own, Abram would have had the chance to go back home to Haran. And yet he stayed in Canaan, because in his mind the Promise was as good as done. He was learning about his God: God's Promises are foundations, more certain than the whole world, absolutely dependable for all our needs. God was showing Abram the future home for his

descendants, and Abram could already see the “Sold” sign sitting out in front. The fact that there was someone else presently living there was just a minor detail that God would take care of later.

The *impossibility factor* that faith gets hold of, and overcomes, is characteristic of all true faith. So during his trip through Canaan, Abram was looking at a rich and extensive land *that did not belong to him*. It was firmly in the hands of not only Canaanites, but multiple tribes and nations of Canaanites. And their idolatry and immorality were legendary even in their own time. Add to that the fact that Abram was a small company – no sons, just his wife and servants and a nephew with wandering herds – and you may begin to understand how small and insignificant he began to feel as he was being shown this “inheritance” of his across its length and breadth. God makes promises, but he feels no necessity to tell us how he’s going to do it. Faith doesn’t focus on the impossibility of God’s Promises; only on their certainty.

**The LORD appeared to Abram** – The Covenant wasn’t intended only for Abram. God had in mind to start a new Family on earth, much as he did with the original Parents and with Noah and his family. There are two things to note here: *first*, the Family would share characteristic traits, just as any family would. At first the characteristic was the genetic tie back to Abram himself. The Israelites were always careful to provide their genealogical records going back to their Forefather in order to prove their rights to his Covenant. But even from the beginning there appeared a second and more important and more spiritual characteristic that tied the Family together – Abram’s faith – which enlarged the Family to include Gentiles.

*Second*, the Promises are only for Family members; nobody else has the right to them. God was strict on this point all through OT history. It is perhaps this concept that modern “Christians” understand the least about the grace of God – they think that anybody can casually lay claim to God’s salvation. That long-standing intention of including the Gentiles makes people think that it’s an open-ended promise “to any and to all.” But Jesus said he was sent “only to the lost sheep of Israel,” and the Apostles saw salvation come only to a few: “As many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” (Acts 13:48) In both OT and NT, nobody could tell where that Family line would be drawn which separated out the non-Family members, until God himself drew the line. And that’s why we must preach the Gospel to anybody and everybody we encounter and then step back as the Spirit blows where he wills. “The sheep follow him, for they know his voice.” (John 10:4). “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” (John 6:44)

**An altar to the LORD** – In his faith in the unshakable Promise of God, Abram built an altar at Shechem and worshiped the LORD there. When a reasonable man does unaccountable things that go contrary to reason and circumstances, he evidently sees something that others don’t see. This act of worship was one of those unaccountable things.

Later in Israel’s history we learn that one of the functions of the Temple was to be a Home where God and man came together to share a feast. It was the Father drawing his son into his presence and sitting down together at the table together. But as Jesus pointed out later (John 4:21-24), this Family meal can happen anywhere in this world. David

described the scene graphically when he experienced it.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (Psalms 23:1-6)

This was exactly the situation that Abram was in: amidst the Canaanites who had no sympathy for his situation, and provided no help, God nevertheless provided for his own – and God and Abram feasted together as Father/son in his future home.

This was a strange act of confidence and thankfulness toward a God who seemed to be leading poor Abram aimlessly through the land with no hope of a settled home. There was nothing in the outward act of worship that would have alerted the Canaanites to the catastrophic change about to occur in just a few generations; but between Father and Heir, there was a deep understanding of what was about to take place over the next two thousand years in this land. They sat down together at the table. As God and Abram made plans, the nation of Israel was about to become a reality.

**Shechem** – Abram first stopped at Shechem, and we are told that “at that time the Canaanites were in the land.”<sup>1</sup> And here the LORD appeared to Abram and promised to give this land to him and to his descendants. In other words, when Abram arrived at this spot, the LORD appeared to him and said, essentially, “this is the place I was telling you about back in Haran.” So Abram built an altar there to commemorate God’s revelation to him. It was at this spot that Jacob later buried his family’s idols and religious paraphernalia on his return to Canaan from Laban’s house.

Shechem would remain a crucial location for the Israelites throughout their history. Besides being an important city on a main highway running north and south through the land, numerous events recorded in the Old Testament occurred at Shechem – important to both the nation as a whole and to the Ten Tribes that separated to form their own nation apart from Judah in the south. Later the city would be the central location of the Samaritans, a problematic racial group that influenced even New Testament events.

Shechem (already a central point in Canaan and a site for pagan religious ceremonies) became emblematic for the entry of Joshua and the Israelites later in history. After defeating Jericho and Ai, the Israelites gathered at Shechem – on Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim – to recite the Covenant that their God made with

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<sup>1</sup> In Genesis 10:18-19 we read that the Canaanites had all the land from Sidon (north of Tyre) down to Gerar and Gaza, and over to Sodom and Gomorrah – in other words, the entire land that the Lord would one day mark out and give to Abraham’s descendants as the Promised Land.

them, and to begin their occupation of the land – in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. In other words, Shechem was their starting point to claiming the Covenant Promises. (Joshua 8:30-35)

**Bethel** – After this, Abram moved south to where Bethel would one day be (or at least the place which Jacob later called “Bethel”). In other words, God was creating memorials for Abram’s future Family. Since Abram first erected an altar at Shechem, it became their “birthplace” of sorts – the first claim to the territory of the promised inheritance. Memorials serve to connect people to historical events, and preserve the value of what happened so that their own actions will reflect those same values: “This is the land given to our forefather Abraham – *and to us.*” And at Bethel, Abram also worshiped the LORD (the Hebrew name **Yahweh**) – in other words, the *true* God, versus the false gods that the Canaanites worshiped. The LORD was first worshiped in the Promised Land by Abram, the Father of our faith. That’s going to form the foundation for Jacob’s experience at the same spot, when he saw the House of that God there.

These events are like setting the boundary lines and laying down the foundation stones for the Family’s inheritance in full assurance of faith. If anyone wishes to claim Abram’s inheritance, they need to carefully note just what it is that Abram was promised. He and his family were destined to take the land away from the pagans, by the power of God, and settle into this rich land “flowing with milk and honey.” And it would extend from Dan to Beersheba, the full extent of the Canaanites’ holdings.

The altar at Bethel was in anticipation of the critical importance of Bethel in Jacob’s day: “This is none other than the House of God, and this is the gate of Heaven!” (Genesis 28:17) God chose Abram’s inheritance as the one place on earth where men and women could find the true God. *Here* is where God would live among men, and all the world must come here, to the Promised Land, to see and know God according to his Covenant Promises.

**Called on the Name of the LORD** – At first glance this would appear to contradict the statement made later in Exodus that “I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them.” (Exodus 6:2-3)

But when the LORD sent Moses back to Egypt to deliver the Israelites, he told Moses to identify their God as the *same God* their forefathers worshiped.

I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. (Exodus 3:6)

Two points need to be made here: *first*, this provides historical and theological continuity with Israel and her history. The same God worked with his people from Abram’s day all the way through to the later Prophets. The LORD took the initial steps to create Israel in Abram’s day, then sent his “son” to Egypt (see Exodus 4:22 for God’s perspective on their true relationship), delivered him from there in fulfillment of the Covenant Promises, and brought him to Canaan to inherit the land promised to Abram. So to Israel’s mind, when Abram’s God appeared in their day to fulfill the Covenant, they could be assured of the faithfulness of God and

the certain outcome of the Mission. Nothing had changed from God's perspective; the original program laid out before Abram was still in effect.

*Second*, what the LORD did with the Patriarchs was the foundation for the nation of Israel. The LORD laid down critical eternal principles here in Genesis that formed the relationship between God and Abram's Family. Not only do we learn about the Covenant and its Promises through the Patriarchs' story, but we also watch the LORD at work putting together the Family along his own lines. He had ways of doing things that would remain characteristic of his ways throughout the rest of Israel's existence. As he did with the Patriarchs, so he would also do with all of Israel. He is the LORD: The God of Abram, the God of Israel, the Lord Jesus Christ. This of course extends into the age of the Church, since true Christians are also spiritual descendants of Abram and should expect the LORD to work with them along the same lines and in the same ways spiritually.

**Abram journeyed on** – This was the ironic thing about the Promise of the Land: Abram had to live in his inheritance as a stranger, as someone who didn't belong, who was ostracized by pagans who themselves didn't deserve the Land. Someday the situation would change completely, but for now Abram learned another key aspect to his faith: we aren't going to receive the Promise now – not in this life. The wrong people are almost always in charge in our world.

Faith has to submit to the humility of hoping for something we will never have in this world. In fact God had no intention of giving Abram any of the land of Canaan (except for one small

parcel, which we will look at in chapter 23). One could argue that it really was the physical land of Canaan that the Covenant Promise referred to, but Abram himself would protest to that interpretation.

By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. ... They desire a better country, that is, a Heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. (Hebrews 11:9-10, 16)

In fact, when we look ahead at Israel's subsequent history, the Israelites never did inherit the Land as the LORD originally described it – not without limitations, troubles, enemies and exiles. If what they experienced was "inheriting the Land," Abram would have had good reason to believe that it wasn't much of a fulfillment of the Covenant Promise. A true fulfillment befitting the power and wisdom of God would have been a total takeover, with no enemies, no limitations, and a perfect paradise (see Isaiah 65:17-25). No wonder, then, that the writer of Hebrews says that "They desire a better country, that is, a Heavenly one."

**The Point** – The Scriptures continually refer to "our father Abraham" for a good reason: he was (for the Jews) the beginning of the race; and he was (for all believers) the beginning of the Family of God.

There are two things about a father that the family depends on. *First*, what he

passes down to his children. Nobody likes to start out in this hard world with nothing in their hands. Parents like to, in fact they are responsible to, give their children something to help them form their own families. In the case of Christians, believers need a great deal to train them and equip them for life in this fallen world. Abram was given an inestimable Treasure worth far more than silver or gold, capable of freeing us all from our sins and guilt and bringing us into the presence of God as righteous and holy sons and daughters.

*Second*, the father provides the family characteristics. In other words, the children look and act like their father. Paul tells us that “those with the faith of Abraham” are heirs of the Covenant. It’s not a faith that simply believes or hopes; it’s a special kind of faith that Abram learned about. It pleases God, it opens the door to Heaven, it sees and hears the real God, and it receives spiritual treasures as only a son has the right to have.

When we receive anything of the grace of God through Christ, and when we live by faith in the Son of God, we prove our lineage back to Abram.

That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring — not only to the adherent of the Law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, *who is the father of us all*. (Romans 4:16)

Getting the right kind of faith is the first critical step in our relationship with God. There are four concepts that this passage shows us about what Abram learned concerning true faith in Israel’s God:

- **First**, God requires that we leave this world behind us. There is nothing here that will be of any use to us in our new life with him. Family, country, culture – these are not only of no spiritual use, they often get in the way of our walk with God.
- **Second**, God gave his Treasure only to Abram. *This* is what salvation is based on; the Covenant Promises are the very heart of salvation from sin and death. Anybody who wants anything from God concerning eternal life must show their relationship to Abram before they receive anything – and *what* they receive will be those four Promises.
- **Third**, God required Abram to be self-sufficient during his travels in Canaan. He would get no help from the Canaanites; he would be a “stranger and alien” his whole life there. In fact, he would actually grow rich at their expense. So Abram had to learn how to stay in touch with his God and the Covenant promises without any outside help; all his resources would be found within the Family as God blessed them from above.
- **Fourth**, Abram saw the Promised Land – but only “from afar.” He would never own any of it in his own lifetime. Yet he knew that the reality is in the next world, not this one. He was to “live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7), and put his mind on “things above, not things below.” (Colossians 3:1-3)

It requires a certain kind of faith to live like this. A person who has this faith can see God's spiritual world, and he can see how to live in this world in light of the realities of God. It's only Abram's faith that makes a true believer, not the many versions of "faith" that all the false religions have.

And faith is not something we can do on our own; it happens as a result of the real God revealing himself to us in his Word. Just as God came to Abram and set up the entire situation for him – including his hope, his lifestyle, his relationship to everything around him – so God also must come to each of us and set up the Way that we must walk before him. God shines the Light first, and then we simply follow him.

So in summary we can say this:

- God told Abram to leave his country (culture), his family, and his father's house – because none of those things (which all of us consider a normal part of our lives) is of any use in seeing and knowing God.
- God led Abram to a new land. It wasn't the physical land of Canaan, but the "Heavenly City" that Canaan represented. While the Canaanites all around him lived and worked in a typical, God-less environment, Abram walked with God – experiencing the "blessings" of God's world, becoming a great Nation before God, protection from his enemies who would curse him, blessing all peoples in the world. The life he started out on, the Family that he would become the head of, would unfold into God's eternal House.

Did Jesus approve of Abram's life of faith? 100%, without hesitation.

If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did. (John 8:39)

And we are told later that Jesus himself walked as his forefather Abram did: by faith, in a foreign land, with absolutely no outward signs of God's spiritual Promises in the middle of a physical environment, and yet with his spiritual eyesight set firmly on the Heavenly City.

Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)

And then we are told to do the same – if we claim to be Abram's heirs.

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. (Hebrews 12:3)

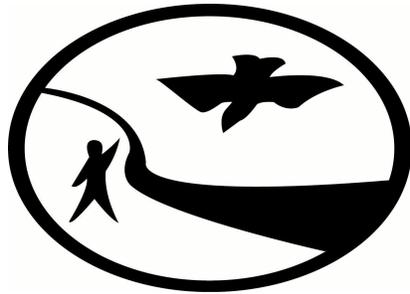
This alone is what constituted Abram's faith.

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