

GENESIS 12:1-4a **ST JAMES', 12.3.17, 11.00 am**

INTRODUCTION

“The most important event in the Old Testament” is the way one commentator describes the call of Abram¹, although others would disagree with him. It is true to say that if Abram had chosen to stay in Ur, or even in Haran, none of the promised blessings of verses 2 & 3 would have been fulfilled, and that includes *all peoples on earth will be blessed through you* (v 3). Without Abram’s obedience, you and I would never have heard the Good News of Jesus, we’d never have had the chance to know that the LORD is our loving heavenly Father, we’d never have been in a position to receive eternal life.

At the beginning of chapter 12, Abram has already moved from *Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan* (11:31). In Stephen’s speech in Acts 7, he tells us that God had already appeared to Abram and told him to *go to the land I will show you* (Acts 7:3). Abram took his family with him: not just his wife, Sarai, but also his father Terah, brother Nahor and his family, and the family of his brother Haran, who’d already died.

Uprooting themselves from Ur was a major undertaking. They seem to have been city-dwellers, and when they reached Haran, Terah and Nahor gave in to the temptation to settle there rather than to keep going to an unknown land which the LORD hadn’t yet revealed to them.

We don’t know how long Abram stayed with the rest of his family in Haran. But we do know that the time came when he made a decisive break. He left his father and the rest of his family in Haran, and moved on, taking Sarai and Lot with him. He would have taken a large household with him as well; there were probably hundreds of people altogether. It would have seemed a very risky move, travelling on into unknown territory, with no clear idea of where he was going.

LEAVE . . . HE STARTED OUT

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.” . . . So Abram left, as the LORD had told him (vv 1,4).

Abram was called to leave behind everything which was familiar. I guess that most of us have an affinity for the place where we spent our childhood, and especially if our family has lived in that area for several generations or more. If we still live there, the familiarity gives us a sense of permanence, of security. Maybe we still see the people we went to school with. Our local knowledge means that to some extent, we rely on ourselves and the people and places we know so well. Abram had to leave all that behind him. If he was going to fulfil the LORD’s purposes, he needed to be fully reliant on God for security, food, shelter, and all the other necessities of life.

Abram was called to leave behind his *people* – this means his extended family, not just his close relations. If we live in the place our family comes from, we probably we have aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews all living nearby. That makes it very difficult to break away

from family traditions and beliefs. We can see how difficult it would have been for Abram, if he'd stayed with the rest of his family in Haran, by looking further ahead in Genesis. Abram's grandson Jacob escapes the consequences of tricking his brother Esau by going to live with his relatives in Haran. He stays for 14 years, and marries Leah and Rachel, two of his cousins. When he eventually leaves, with his wives and children, and their households, we read that he had to tell them to *Get rid of the foreign gods [idols] that you have with you . . . So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods that they had . . . and Jacob buried them under the oak at Shechem (35:2,4)*. Even so, hundreds of years later, Joshua has to repeat the same command: *Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River (Joshua 24:14)*. It's very difficult to break away from the old ways. For C21 Britons, there are superstitions like 'touching wood' or throwing spilt salt over our shoulder, as well as the temptation to read horoscopes, or to try and contact our departed loved ones through a medium, for example.

Abram was called to leave behind *his father's household*. It really is very difficult in practice to put our relationship with the LORD higher up our priority list than our relationships with our nearest and dearest. Jesus exaggerated the point, when he said, *If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters . . . he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26)*. Abram's call to leave behind his *father's household* was a practical outworking of the call to every believer: we can't play our role in building God's kingdom if we're constantly distracted by the demands of our parents, children, or

grandchildren. There's a price to pay if we're to be faithful disciples. Abram had to stake his whole future on the LORD's command that he should *leave his country, people and father's household*. The price he paid was that he spent the rest of his life wandering from one place to another; as far as we know, he never saw his father, brother, or wider family again; and he had to live without the comfort or security of familiar places and people. Very few of us have to pay such a high price. But even so, Jesus is clear that *No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God (Luke 9:62)*.

BLESSING UPON BLESSING

The LORD's command to Abram was uncompromising, but even so it's heavily outweighed by the series of promises which the LORD makes to Abram. We're right to understand that the LORD will only pour out these blessings on Abram if he obeys the command. The meaning is, "Leave . . . so that I may give you many descendants . . . so that I may bless you and make your name famous", etc.

The LORD promises Abram blessing upon blessing: *I will bless you . . . and you will be a blessing . . . I will bless those who bless you . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you*. Those blessings include being made into a *great nation*; and they include the LORD making Abram's name *great*. The promises which the LORD makes to Abram are very similar to the ambitions of many kings in those days. In Psalm 72, for example, the psalmist prays for the king, *May his name*

endure for ever; may it continue as long as the sun. All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed (Psalm 72:17).

Of course, Abram himself didn't live long enough to see the outworking of all the LORD's promises to him. The only land he ever owned was one field; he had to wait nearly another 25 years until Isaac was born, and although he lived to see his grandsons Jacob and Esau, they were 15 years old when Abraham died. Abraham didn't live to see any of Jacob's 12 sons, so he had to take it on trust that the LORD would multiply his descendants to form *a great nation*. And the LORD's promise that *all peoples on earth will be blessed through you* (v 3) wasn't fulfilled for another 2,000 years or so, through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Abraham's descendant, Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

Abram, or Abraham, had a vital part to play in the LORD's plans to bless *all peoples on earth*. As we look back on his story, we can see that without Abraham's obedience to the LORD's command, nothing else could have followed on, and we would still be *without hope and without God in the world* (Ephesians 2:12). But Abram knew none of this. He only knew that the LORD had called him to *leave his country, his people, and his father's household, and to an unknown land*.

Abram chose to do as the LORD commanded him, and so the rest is history.

None of us can possibly have such an important role in the LORD's plans as Abram did. But equally, none of us can possibly know any more than Abram knew about the impact of our choice to obey or not to obey our LORD's commands, the consequences of putting the LORD first in our lives, or focussing on our own welfare or that of our families. The LORD has called each one of us to follow him. He has a unique role for each one of us in building his kingdom. If we choose to ignore him, no-one else can take our place and do what we fail to do.

But when we choose to obey the LORD, when we choose to love him above and beyond anyone or anything else, then he pours out blessing on us, and makes us a blessing to other people. Like Abram, we'll probably never know (in this life at least) the full impact of our commitment to our Lord. But we will know the joy of his presence, his peace, and his amazingly generous provision for all our needs.

¹ Alexander Maclaren, The Book of Genesis, (A C Armstrong and son, 1906), p 67