

Ministry of Grace

Lesson 1 - The Call of Abram

Genesis 12:1-9

¹Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan,

⁶Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

⁸From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. ⁹And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

The Personal Name of God

Before we get started, we need to point out that the personal name of God in Hebrew is spelled YHWH, with no vowels. Originally, written Hebrew had no vowels at all and pronunciation was based on tradition. In the 6th century AD, the Masoretes added a series of marks on each letter (called vowel points) to indicate pronunciation. However, the name of God YHWH was considered too holy to pronounce so the Masoretes included the vowel points for Adonai (Lord) from which we get the traditional translation, “Jehovah.” Today, most Hebrew scholars believe that Yahweh is a more accurate representation of YHWH. In some translations (like the ESV that we use in this study) YHWH is written as GOD or LORD. In others it is spelled out as Yahweh. In the text of this study (other than Scripture quotations) we will use Yahweh.

Synopsis

God’s first recorded interaction with Abram is given to us in this chapter of Genesis. From these verses, it appears that Abram was in Haran when God called him. We will learn in this lesson, however, that God initially spoke to him while Abram was in Ur of the Chaldeans. We are not told for sure whether it was an audible call or not. The important thing is that Abram recognized God’s call and was obedient.

From there he travelled with his father to the city of Haran. They remained in Haran until Abram’s father died. Then, Abram headed south to the land of Canaan until he arrived at Shechem, where God appeared to him and told him that He was giving this land to Abram’s descendants. In response, Abram built an altar to Yahweh.

From there, he moved south to a place between Bethel and Ai where Abram again built an altar and, for the first time, called on the name of Yahweh.



Figure 1 - Map of Abram's Journey from Ur to Shechem

Genesis 12:1

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

Where was Abram when God first called him? In the previous chapter we were told:

Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. (Genesis 11:31)

The current verse, which immediately follows Genesis 11:31, says:

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. (Genesis 12:1)

This would seem to indicate that Abram was in Haran with his father when God called him. However, in the book of Acts, when Stephen was making his defense before the Sanhedren, He said:

... "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham **when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran**, and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' Then he went out from the land of

the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. (Acts 7:2-4)

This passage makes it clear that God “appeared” to Abram before he lived in Haran, while he was still in the land of the Chaldeans (Ur). This appearance could have been a physical manifestation or it could have been a vision. Since nothing is said about a “vision” or a “dream,” it seems that Abram saw Him in physical form. It was there, in Ur, that God, “said to him, 'Go out from your land'”

“Now the LORD said to Abram” – The word “Now” does not appear in the original text, but has been added by the translators to make the narrative flow more smoothly. The past tense of the Hebrew verb *amar* as it is written here in the current verse can either be translated as “said” or as “had said.” Although it is fairly clear from these verses that God appeared to Abram and initially called him while he was in Ur, it is possible that God called Abram twice; once in Ur and once in Haran. Perhaps after the initial call, Abram obeyed God’s voice and headed west, accompanied by his father and other members of his family. Arriving in Haran, his father decided to stay there and Abram apparently was reluctant to leave his father.

If we look again at Stephen’s comments from Acts 7, we see that

God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.

From this it appears that God did, in fact, call him twice, once while he was in Ur and again while he was in Haran.

Ur of the Chaldeans

The city of Ur of the Chaldeans (the ancient Chaldeans are the modern day Kurds) was a city of great wealth and culture, having both a library and a university. They were worshipers of “other” gods, especially the Moon Goddess Urganu (or Enki). Ur also contained a massive Ziggurat temple (a type of step-pyramid) that was apparently used to study the heavens. The study of the stars and the constellations was an important part of their religion and culture. We will find out in the next lesson that according to a couple of secular historians, Abram taught astrology to the Egyptian priests and the Pharaoh while he and Sarah were visiting Egypt. We will also learn in Lesson 5 that God took Abram outside and told him to look up at the stars and to “number” them. The word translated “number” can also mean to “recount” or “tell the story.” So, it appears that Abram was well versed in the contents of the night sky and their meaning.



Figure 2 - Ur of the Chaldeans

Haran of Mesopotamia

Haran is in Northwest Mesopotamia (meaning the land between the rivers). It is on the route known as “the fertile crescent” through which travel was made between Ur and Egypt. Haran still exists today and is known for its unique “beehive” houses.

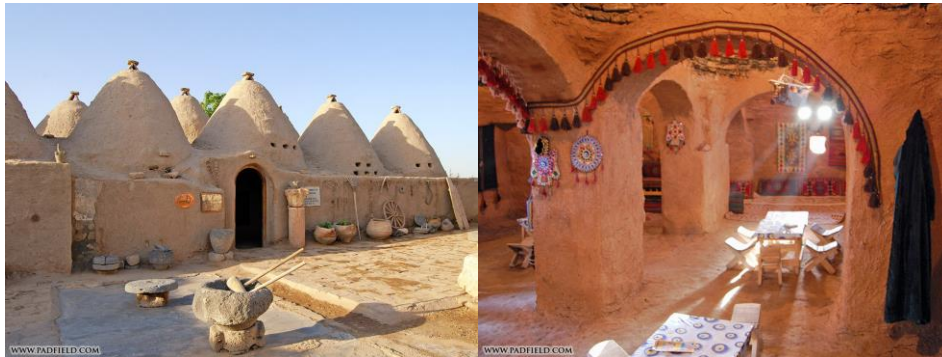


Figure 3 – Beehive house in Haran

The timing of the call

According to the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatian Christians, the call (promise) in Ur of the Chaldeans occurred 430 years before “The Law.”

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. (*Galatians 3:16-17*)

Though this is a specific reference to God’s restatement of the promise that was made to Abraham after he had offered Isaac on the altar on Mt. Moriah, it is an allusion to the original call (430 years before the law) while Abram was in Ur. It tells us that the giving of the Law of Moses at Mt. Sinai occurred 430 years after God’s initial call of Abram in Ur. We are also told that his offspring, (from Isaac on) would be strangers in a land not theirs for 400 years.

Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. (Genesis 15:13)

And God spoke to this effect--that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. (Acts 7:6)

Therefore, we can determine that the call came 30 years before Abram had descendants (Isaac). We know that Isaac was born in approximately AM 2109. (The abbreviation AM stands for Anno Mundi, or years from the time of creation.) Abram, who was born in AM 2009, was 100 years old when Isaac was born. So, we see that the call of Abram occurred when he was 70 years old (year AM 2079) and his father, Terah was 200 years old. (See timeline at the end of this lesson.)

The destination of the call

According to Hebrews, Abram did not know where he was going. All that he knew was that he was told to "Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you."

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. (Hebrews 11:8)

The substance of the call

What was Abraham told to leave?

"Get out of your country" – (literally, "land" or "ground") The familiar places, the political protection and influences, the national religion, friends and relationships outside the family.

The Christian equivalent is:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, (Philippians 3:20)

"from your family" – (literally, "from your nativity") The stability, financial support, comfort and fellowship as well as the support and personal protection provided by familial relationships.

The Christian equivalent is:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26)

"from your father's house" – The physical structure and the authority. He was not to be known as the son of Terah, but a child of the household of God.

The Christian equivalent is:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, (Ephesians 2:19)

Abram had to be willing to leave all means of comfort and security that he had known so as to trust completely in God for protection, care, and provision. This calling of Abram was not salvation itself, for he had to believe before God counted it to him for righteousness (see Genesis chapter fifteen). This was a **calling to discipleship** just as the twelve were chosen by

Christ to be his disciples. Note that they were not saved until later, after the resurrection, when they believed.

Genesis 12:2, 3

And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

The promises given to Abram are arranged in two sets of three. The first three are specific personal promises to replace the things he is to leave behind. The second three are general promises to mankind through Abram's obedience.

1. **I will make of you a great nation** – God promised to give Abram so many descendants that they would eventually comprise an entire nation. This was God's promise to Abram for having left the nation in which he grew up.
2. **I will bless you** – The word “bless” is from the Hebrew *barak* meaning “to kneel” or “to give honor and preference.” This was God's promise to Abram for having left the comfort, support, and protection of his family. God would be everything to Abram to meet these needs.
3. **I will ... make your name great** – Abram was promised to be recognized and well regarded. People throughout the ages would recognize the greatness of Abraham (Abram). This was God's promise to Abram for having left his father's house. He was no longer to be Abram ben Terah (Abram, the son of Terah); he would forever be known as one of God's family of called ones, as Father Abraham.
 - **you will be a blessing** – (literally “exist a blessing”, a command form, the same as the command for light to exist in **Genesis 1:3**) This announces the fact that Abram will himself become a blessing to all of mankind.
1. **I will bless those who bless you** – God promised to deal favorably with those peoples who deal favorably with Abram and his descendants. History has shown this to be true, and it is still true today.
2. **him who dishonors you I will curse** – Likewise, God promised to deal harshly with those who deal harshly with Abram and his descendants. Again, history has shown this to be true, and it is still true today.
3. **in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed** – The word translated “earth” is *adamah*, meaning “dirt or the ground.” When Adam sinned, God said, “**cursed is the ground (adamah) because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life.**” Now, because of the obedience of Abram, the families of the dirt will be blessed in spite of the curse on the dirt. This blessing is literally fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Genesis 12:4, 5

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had

acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan,

“So Abram went” – This refers to Abram’s departure from Haran, not his departure from Ur.

“as the LORD had told him” – Or “when the LORD had spoken to him.” It appears that his departure from Haran was a result of a second calling from God.

“Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.” – This is five years after the original call in Ur.

Why did Abram wait five years? Was he afraid to leave his father’s protection or did he get comfortable in Haran and conveniently forget about the call?

It appears from **Genesis 11:31** that Nahor, Abram’s brother, stayed behind in Ur, not making the trip to Haran.

“And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran,” Abram left Haran as a wealthy man.

This may be all the inherited wealth that he got as a result of his father’s death. Was this another reason he waited in Haran before continuing on to the Promised Land?

“they set out to go to the land of Canaan” – Did Abram know that it was Canaan to which he was called, or did he travel by faith until he reached Canaan. The writer of this book (Moses) knew it to be Canaan, but Abram may not have known the destination. (See verse seven.)

Genesis 12:6, 7

Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

“oak of Moreh” – Could also be translated as “plain of Moreh.” If you look at a topographical map of Shechem you see that it occupies the valley between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerazim, which empties out into a plain. This would have been an excellent place to pasture livestock.



Figure 3 - Shechem and the Plain of Moreh

“At that time the Canaanites were in the land” – The land was already occupied by the descendants of Canaan (see genealogy chart).

“the LORD appeared to Abram” – Whether in a vision or the person of Christ pre-incarnate, God personally appeared to Abram. When Abram first received the “call” to leave Ur, there may or may not have been physical manifestation. Once he arrived in Shechem, God appeared to him again.

“To your offspring I will give this land.” – Even though the Canaanites already inhabited the land, God promised to give it to Abram’s descendants.

“he built there an altar to the LORD” – This is Abram’s first altar. The building of the altar implies that Abram offered a thanksgiving sacrifice to God. This is the first evidence that Abram and God were developing a relationship built on respect rather than simple obedience.

Genesis 12:8, 9

From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

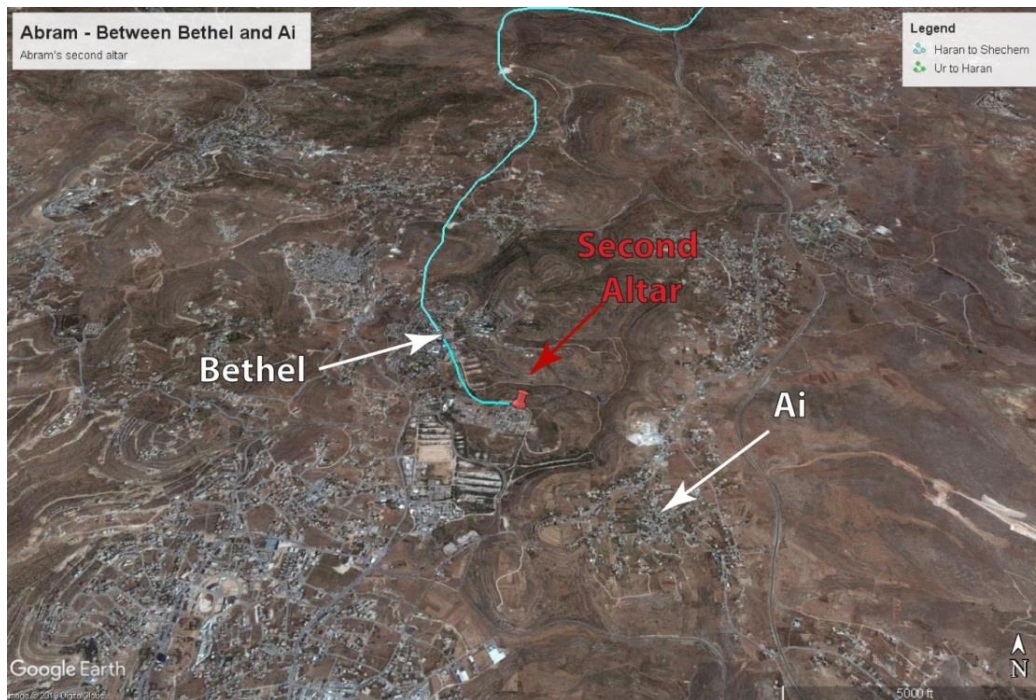


Figure 4 - Between Bethel and Ai

“Bethel” – This means “the house of God.”

“Ai” – This means “destruction.”

“pitched his tent” – Abram settled here for a while.

“he built an altar to the LORD” – This is the second altar that Abram built

“called upon the name of the LORD” – This is the first occurrence of this expression for Abram. The Hebrew text says that he “called-out” to Yahweh. The implication here is that Abram began to develop a relationship with Yahweh beyond simply offering a sacrifice to his God. Whether this was in the form of a prayer or a praise, it clearly indicates a growing “personal connection” with Yahweh.

“Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.” – He continued to travel southward through the land that God had promised to him. Negeb is the region in the southern part of Canaan. Negeb eventually became the word used to express “south.”

So What?

The Reluctant Follower

It appears that God called Abram out of Ur and then called him again out of Haran after his father died. It’s possible that Abram told his father about the initial call and that it was his father Terah who insisted that they head west. Once they arrived in Haran, however, it appears that they settled in. Perhaps they did so because of Terah’s failing health. Perhaps it was because they didn’t know where to go next and they were waiting for God to show them the next step. The problem with all this is that God specifically told Abram to leave his father’s house, not just the building, but the relationship. God wanted Abram to have a relationship with *Him*, and He knew that as long as Abram was with his father that would not happen. Notice that Abram did not build an altar nor did he call upon the name of the LORD until after he left the safety and security of his father’s influence. Once Abram’s father was dead, God could finally get his full attention.

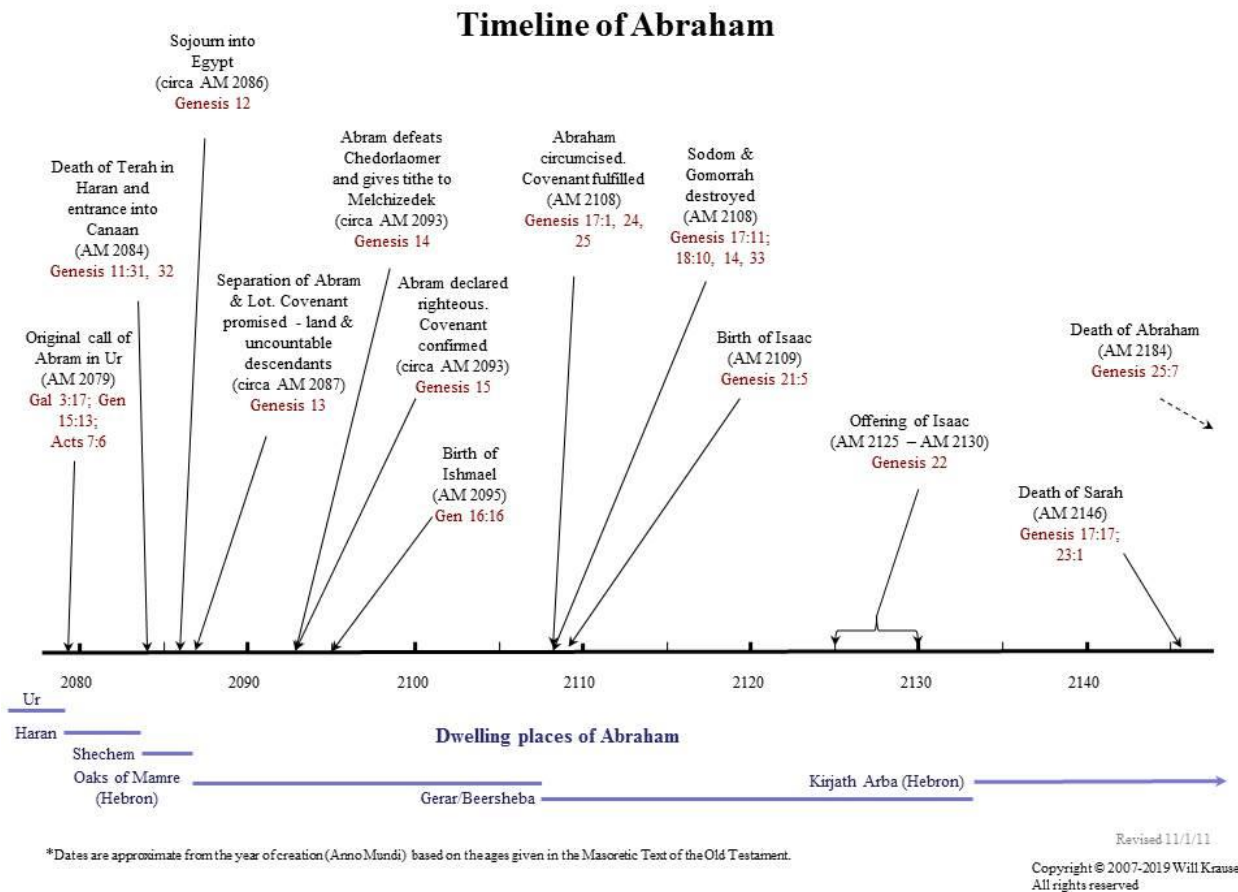
In a similar manner, God has called each of us out of the world. He wants us to take our eyes off the things of the world: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. (1 John 2:16) He wants us to have a relationship with Him in which we look to Him for everything we need. For too many of us, however, we don’t need God. We have jobs, family, and friends. We have comfortable homes, and all the clothing and food we need. Until we recognize how much we need God, it’s too easy to let our focus slip, get distracted, and forget that God wants us to know Him, intimately and completely.

The life and faith journey of Abram is a “type” of a Christian’s faith journey. As we go through these chapters in Genesis it will become clear that God wants a relationship with us exactly as he had with Abram. Abram didn’t suddenly “have faith” and walk closely with God. His journey started with a simple call and grew from there. We will see that Abram had his issues, but we will also see his triumphs. The key for us here at the start of the journey is to see that Abram was willing to follow. After the death of his father, he headed south to the land of Canaan. It was not until he arrived at Shechem that God finally told him, “you are here, in the land I called you to.” Having followed God’s call, he arrived and built an altar. On it he probably offered a thanksgiving sacrifice. But the story doesn’t stop there. As Winston Churchill once said, “This is not the end or even the beginning of the end. This is but the end of the beginning.” We see in today’s lesson that Abram continued to travel south, perhaps at God’s direction. We will find a couple of chapters from now that God will instruct him to walk the length and breadth of the land. For now, it appears that he was just wandering.

As he headed south from Shechem, he stopped for a while between Beth El and Ai. This is a picture of our brief stop here on this earth between Beth El (the house of God, that is, Heaven) and Ai (destruction, that is, Hell). While there, Abram built another altar, again probably offering a sacrifice of thanksgiving. In some ways, this is a picture of our Sunday service. We offer our sacrifice of praise as we sing unto Him. We also see Abram reaching out to God for the first time. It was here that he first “called on the name of Yahweh.” We don’t know the substance or the form. It could be that he loudly proclaimed the greatness of God, how He had brought Abram from Ur to Canaan. It’s also possible that it was just a quiet prayer, not only thanking God for what He had done thus far, but seeking His favor and protection throughout the remainder of Abram’s journey. His relationship with the personal Yahweh God was starting to develop.

So, how about you? Have you been obedient to God’s calling in your life? Perhaps you’re not even aware that God has called you. If He has, have you let go of the things of this world so that you can hold on to God with both hands? Whether you feel like a baby in the faith or a long time child of God, this study is for you. As we go through this study, put yourself in Abram’s sandals and let God show you that Abram was not that much different from you. Abram followed God, Abram eventually believed God’s promise, and Abram became an example of walking with God. That’s what God wants from all of His children.

Are you ready for your journey?



Lesson 1

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