

## *Abram Father Beginnings*

### *The Bible Study*

What you will need:

- Bible, pen and note pad for each participant
- A stone to add to the altar. Paint the stone blue and stick silver confetti stars to it
- A pair of glasses for centre piece as a reminder of the story
- Play CD "He knows my name" as background music during supper



Genesis 11 quickly tells the story of the tower of Babel and then goes into the lineage of a man called Abram. This is our introduction to the next key development in how God continues to reveal Himself to humans. We see God creating humans, the rebellion and fall of humans, salvation through Noah's obedience, humanity's second chance ending in confusion and further alienation from each other and God. We see God making further attempts to redeem the world through establishing a covenant relationship with Abram. Abram would be the father of many nations. The word nations means people groups. More specifically he would be the main ancestor of the chosen nation of Israel from whom the Messiah would come into the world for the purpose of redemption.

The call of Abram is recorded in Genesis 12:1-5. It includes the first promise or covenant that God makes with Abram. We do not know much about the man and his character at this point, but as we look at the different altars Abram builds to commemorate his God encounters, we will see him develop into a man that God will use.

Reading Genesis 11:27-32, we learn that Abram is one of Terah's three sons. We learn he was most likely the oldest since he is named first and because after his brother Haran died he took responsibility of the care of Haran's son Lot. Abram was most likely born in Ur of the Chaldeans as was his brother Haran. Haran seems to be a popular name of the time as Abram's brother, Nahor, married Milcah the daughter of Haran. Listed are the two children of that Haran and Lot is not listed as one of Milcah's siblings. Haran is also the name of the city where Terah settled with his family on his way to live in Canaan. Abram is married to Sarai and it is mentioned that she is barren.

Most maps show that Ur was located in the southeast corner of modern day Iraq just north and west of Kuwait. Others show an alternate location going north and east from Haran toward Nineveh.

After Terah died, if Abram was the oldest son, he would have inherited all that belonged to his father. It was now his responsibility to lead the family. In Haran Terah would have made a business, purchased property and built a life. God called Abram to leave all that and go to a new place. This is not the first big move for Abram and company, but it had to be a difficult one. His brother Nahor remains in Haran and takes control of the family while Abram follows God into the unknown. The fact that Lot went with them would indicate that he was like a son to Abram.

- ❖ Note and remember this relationship.

God instructs Abram to leave his country, his people and his father's household. If Abram chooses to obey, God will bless him. This is the first covenant God makes with a specific individual after the rebellion and fall. The Noah Covenant was made with the earth and with all living things. Look up Genesis 12:2-3 in the New International Version. The basic theme of this covenant is blessing. When God blesses us, the blessing is for us and it is to overflow and bless the lives of others.

- ❖ Is your life blessed by God? Think of a recent blessing from God.
- ❖ Are you a blessing to others? Think of a way you have blessed others recently.
- ❖ How have others blessed you?

Abram was 75 years old when he began this journey. That may sound old to us today and many might think that is too old to begin something new and challenging. The men and women of Abram's day lived to be 200+ years old. Genesis 25:7 tells us that Abram lived to the ripe old age of 175. Today people, in well developed countries, are considered to live long if they make it to their 90s. Abram was less than halfway through his life so it is possible Abram's age 75 would be like a modern age of 45. Sarai was 9 to 10 years younger than Abram. (See Genesis 17:17) She would have been around 65 as his faith journey began. She died when she was 127 years old. We learn from Genesis 20 that even at the ripe old age of 90 she was quite beautiful. Her chronological age at 65 would be more like 40 today. Young or old in mind and body, one thing is sure - change is not easy. The older you get, the more difficult it is to make changes in your life.

Abram and Sarai set out on a faith journey trusting in the promises of God. Their first stop was Shechem. This site is located between Jerusalem and the Sea of Galilee. The site will develop a significant history as the promises of God are fulfilled through the descendants of Abram. God appeared to Abram there and revealed more of His plan. Abram built an altar. From there he moved on to the hills of Bethel. It is pretty specific to say he went to an area with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. Looking at modern maps there is a wadi, stream bed that would only have water in the rainy season and a dry lake bed that would have been a travel stop in the desert at the right time of year. This area is about 30 km north of Jerusalem. He built another altar there and the Bible says he called on the Name of the Lord. Throughout Abram's journey with God we learn that God is given names by those who encounter Him and that on certain occasions He gives one of His Names to the person with whom He meets.

- ❖ Why is God's name important to us? How are we to treat the Name(s) of God?
- ❖ What are some of the names you call God?

From the hills of Bethel, Abram continued his journey heading south to explore the land of promise. As they travel, Abram and Sarai grow and mature to become the people God needed them to be in order to receive their promised child. Because of famine in the land Abram detours into Egypt. This particular story is one where it is important for us to not judge the details by modern values and mores. One thing we can gather is that lying is never a good policy even if you think you have a good reason to lie. Abram feared that Sarai's beauty would get him killed so they decided to tell a white lie and say she is his sister. We see them repeat the same story in Genesis 20. However in Genesis 20 we learn that they have been telling a half truth as Sarai was the daughter of Abram's father and another woman. In both stories, God rescues Abram and Sarai. At the very beginning of the faith journey, God promised to bless those Abram blessed and curse those he cursed. There was an inferred promise of protection from God. Abram had enough faith to believe God would bless him, so why did he not believe that God would protect him? Abram and Sarai took things into their own hands regarding their safety and regarding the promised son. Taking things into their own hands caused serious complications for Abram, Sarai, their descendants, and the world.

- ❖ While it is important to rely on God, quite often we are expected to take initiative and make a decision or take an action. We usually make our decisions based on our life experience, our values, the circumstances, the advice of others, and what we understand to be God's will. To be honest, we do not always make the best decisions due to inexperience, lack of knowledge or the pressure of the tyranny of the urgent. The story of Abram and Sarai can help us to be more careful about making right choices.
- ❖ What is a lesson you have learned from their story?

After Abram, Sarai and their company were sent out of Egypt, they returned to the place near Bethel and Ai where Abram had built an altar. Abram and Lot part company. Lot chose the Jordan Valley and moved near the city of Sodom. Abram moved to Hebron. After Lot was gone, God met with Abram again and once again He told more of His plan to Abram. Could it be that, until this point, Abram thought of Lot as his "back up plan" as an heir? He and Sarai had taken Lot in after his father died and he must have been like a son to them. Yet God promised Abram a son from his own body. Had Abram matured enough to realize that Lot's presence with him kept him from trusting God completely? Or was it just a practical decision because of the lack of pasture land? It is significant that after Lot left, God met with Abram again. God promised the land to Abram's descendants. Can

you count the dust particles or the sand on the seashore? Counting Abram's descendants would be just as difficult. Abram built an altar to the Lord. (Genesis 13:18b)

- ❖ Being human as we are, we like to quantify things. We want to know how much. There are things we cannot quantify like love. A young bride asks her husband how much he loves her. It is said that when God was asked how much He loved us – Jesus spread out His hands and allowed them to be nailed to the cross and He said, "I love you this much."
- ❖ How much does God love us? He loves us. There is nothing we can do to make Him love us more. There is nothing we can do to make Him love us less.
- ❖ How much does God love us? Can you count the dust of the earth or the grains of sand? He loves us that much and more.
- ❖ How much do you love God? Do you love God enough to live for Him? Do you love God enough to trust Him?

In Genesis 15 we see that Abram has a crisis of faith and pours out his frustrations to the Lord. Abram had rescued Lot and won a great battle. In his encounter with two specific kings Abram had shown great wisdom and discernment. Now back at home and no longer affected by the positive adrenalin of battle and victory, Abram contemplates his mortality. Perhaps seeing Lot again reminded Abram that the promised son and heir had not yet been born. Abram considers that if he had died in the battle that all his possessions would have gone to his servant Eliezar. Abram walked outside under the night sky and God tells him to look at the stars. Can you count the stars? Abram's descendants would be like that number, too many to count. Genesis 15:6 states that Abram believed the Lord and that because of his faith God counted him righteous. Abram asked for more details and God instructed Abram to make an animal sacrifice. God appeared in a vision. In that vision God gave Abram specific details about his descendants and the land that would be theirs. Can you imagine Abram's joy and excitement? He returns after this and tries to share his experience. Sarai has heard all this before and the pressure gets to be more than she can handle. We don't have a lot of details about the emotional tension between the two, but we can guess.

Sarai comes up with a plan. According to the law of the day she could give her handmaid Hagar to Abram and Hagar would be a surrogate mother. If this did not work then all the world would know it was not Sarai's fertility that was in question. If it did work, well Abram would have a child. To Sarai it must have seemed like a situation where everyone would win. That is until Abram agreed and Hagar actually did become pregnant. This must have intensified Sarai's sorrow and frustration of being barren. Hagar would have been delighted to become pregnant with Abram's child as it raised her status. Happy and possibly a bit hormonal she did something to offend Sarai. When Sarai confronted Abram, he told her to deal with it. Hagar must have realized that her status was not as high as she had hoped. There must have been enough drama in the household of Abram to make life there seem unbearable. Hagar decides to put herself and her unborn child at risk and she ran away. Through Hagar's predicament we learn a new name for God and learn more about His character. Hagar stopped beside a desert stream to rest and get water and she has an encounter with a heavenly being. The being that Hagar sees is continually referred to the angel of the Lord. The word angel means messenger. This being was sent from God's Presence and radiated God. Hagar is told about the child in her womb. She is assured that God has seen her misery and would meet her needs. She is told to return to Sarai. Hagar calls God, El Roi or Lahai Roi which translates as the Living God who sees me.

- ❖ Would it make you happy to know that God sees you? He knows your name and He knows you. God is concerned about every detail of your life.
- ❖ If that is true, why do bad things still happen? Why doesn't God help us more?
- ❖ Do you ever wonder how many times God sent us help and we did not recognize His help? Do you think Hagar happening to find the desert stream was by design or by accident?

- ❖ The truth is we do not always recognize the angels or the help God sends our way. Since God is the Living God who sees us, we should ask Him to give us eyes of faith to see Him.
- ❖ Put a pair of glasses somewhere you will see them. Every time you see them, pray and ask God to help you see Him. When ever you see a pair of glasses, remember that God sees and loves you.

Thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, Hagar's child, Abram had another significant meeting with God. God reaffirmed His covenant and reminded Abram of the promised son. God gave the covenant sign of circumcision to Abraham and all his male descendants. It would be a physical symbol of a heart covenant. This happened when Abram was 99 and Sarai was 89. God changed their names to Abraham and Sarah. Abraham meant father of many and Sarah meant princess. Now God chooses to fulfill His promise. When it would be impossible for menopausal Sarah to become pregnant, God made it occur. Sarah gave birth to Isaac. By this time Abraham and family had migrated to the Philistine country. He dug a well and made an alliance with Abimelech. They named the place Beersheba, which meant well of the oath. Abraham planted an oak tree and possibly built another altar as it is said he worshiped the Lord there.

In the next lesson we will look at one of the most significant altars Abraham built. We learn that Sarah died when she was 127 years of age. It is significant that she was able to enjoy Isaac for 37 years. After Sarah died, Abraham sent Eliezar to go and find a bride for Isaac. Abraham married a woman named Keturah and she gave birth to his six sons. Abraham died at the age of 175 and Isaac and Ishmael buried him with Sarah.

The "take away" from the study of the altars of Abram/Abraham is all about his faith journey and how that journey helped develop him. There are many lessons in the story of Abraham and Sarah. We gain insight into the character of God through the different God encounters noted in these passages. The lives of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar serve as examples of how our decisions large and small can affect and change our world. Key thoughts include: quantify – stars and sand, qualify – God requires our total commitment, obedience and trust, faithfulness of God – we can trust His Word, and finally what we do for God can change our world. In Hebrews 11 we learn that Abraham and Sarah died before they saw all of God's promises fulfilled. That is faith and trust. One more thought, if you were to take a fertile apple seed – would you be able to count how many apples could come from that seed? Abraham and Sarah were the beginning through their line Jesus was born. Because of Jesus how many have become the spiritual children of the Living God who sees us?