

## THE INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

### Genesis 12, 13

Today we're starting a short series on the life of Abraham. Like several characters in the Bible he had a change of name which marked a deeper change in his life. He began life as Abram, meaning exalted father. In Genesis chapter 17 we read that God changed his name to Abraham, father of many.

Abraham is significant for no less than three of the world's great religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He towers over history like a colossus and yet he was just a man. The Bible records his weaknesses as well as his strengths, and at times his weaknesses seem to far outweigh his strengths. What was it that marked him out as such an important figure in the history of the world? I think the key words are found in Genesis chapter 12 verse 2. The LORD said to him, 'I will make you...'

In the last analysis the story of Abram is not the story of a great man but the story of a great God. Genesis begins with creation and as the climax of God's work the creation of Adam. Adam had the world at his feet but almost immediately he sinned and his failure was to lead eventually to the terrifying judgment of the flood.

Then God made a new start with Noah, but almost immediately Noah sinned and his failure was to lead eventually to the cataclysmic judgment at the Tower of Babel. Now God makes a new beginning with one man, Abram.

Abram was born and brought up in the city of Ur, along the banks of the great Euphrates River in Mesopotamia, later to be Babylonia, and in modern times, Iraq. The city of Ur was in what is now southern Iraq. Archaeology has identified it as a sophisticated city. Ur had all the paganism we associate with the tower of Babel and the later city of Babylon. It was an unlikely place for the living God to find the one who would receive such great promises.

God called Abram to leave that great city and go to – well, that was the problem. He didn't say where. He just said, 'Go,' and I'll show you where. And so Abram and his close family set out. His father, Terah was the patriarchal figure at this time and they travelled north west to a place called Haran, situated in what we now know as Syria, in the eastern sector. It was a distance of some 600 miles. When they got there Terah said, 'That's it. We're stopping here.' And they did.

But God spoke again to Abram and said, 'This isn't the place. Keep going.' So this time Abram left his father and took only his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot. They set off at God's command and travelled a further 450 miles. We live in a mobile society with excellent travel facilities. It's nothing to some people to travel a thousand miles and more. But in those days it was a different matter. We don't live in a patriarchal society. It's not unusual to leave the family home and make a life of your own elsewhere, but in Abram's day that was very unusual.

It was no small thing to obey God's call. It was costly – emotionally as well as materially. There were no doubt many people who questioned Abram's actions. But Abram had heard God's voice and he obeyed. What motivated him? What drove him on to follow an unseen God to an undisclosed destination? Genesis 12:1–3 tells us.

'The LORD said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'"

We talk about thinking outside the box and leaving your comfort zone. That doesn't begin to describe the promise that was made to Abram. The New Testament reminds us that Abram's obedience was all about faith. 'I will make you into a great nation.' He

wasn't going to see that in his own lifetime. 'All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.' What evidence did Abram have that such a great promise would be fulfilled? Nothing at all. Only God's word.

The writer to the Hebrews lists Abram with other heroes of faith and says this about them. 'All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance' (Hebrews 11:13). He also says this, 'Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.'

Paul describes Abram as 'the father of all who believe' (Romans 4:11). Abram's faith is a model for us. God calls us to step out from the crowd of unbelievers and to trust in him. He calls us from the familiar world around us to live for a better world to come. But we have to make a choice.

The first disciples whom Jesus called included fishermen. That wasn't their hobby; that was their job. Mark 1:16–18. 'As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him.'

Verses 19 and 20 continue: 'When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.'

They followed Jesus. But there's not just one thing here. Mark tells us two other things that were involved in their decision. Simon and Andrew left their nets. There was a financial dimension to their decision to follow Jesus. James and John left their father. There was an emotional dimension to their decision to follow Jesus.

Is Jesus calling you to leave the crowd and follow him? Maybe you're worried about what you'll have to give up. Maybe you're worried about what your family and friends will think of you. It's a decision to be made and not one to be made lightly. You're risking everything you can see for everything you can't see.

Jesus said, 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Matthew 6:19–21).

Paul reinforces this in his letter to the Philippians, chapter 3 verses 18 to 21. 'Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. They are going to end up in hell, their god is their stomach, and they are proud of what they should be ashamed of. They think only of things that belong to this world. But we are citizens of heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control.'

Paul said, 'We live by faith, not by sight' (2 Corinthians 5:7). How about you? Is God calling you as he called Abram, as he called Simon and Andrew, James and John, as he called Paul? What will your answer be? But before you answer you must count the cost and make a decision. Once you've decided you can't go back.

It's tempting to trust the security which the world offers. But you're actually safer to trust the security which God offers.

Going back to Abram in Genesis chapter 12 we find him acting on God's promises, making the journey on a one-way ticket with no destination on it, and finally arriving where God had sent him. Verse 5: 'He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they

set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.'

As he travelled through the land that was to be his new home something happened. Verse 7: 'The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." There are so many things in the Bible we would like to know more about. 'The LORD spoke to Abram ... the LORD appeared to Abram.' How did he speak? In what way did he appear? We're not told. What we do know is that when Abram trusted God and obeyed his call God confirmed his promises in an unmistakable way.

Then we read, 'he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.' Verse 8: 'From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.' Abram responded to the LORD in worship and prayer.

What happened next is rather unexpected. Verses 9–10: 'Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev [the south]. Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.'

Abram's wife Sarai was very beautiful and Abram got the idea that the Egyptians would bump him off so that one of them could marry her. So he made her pretend that she was his sister. Unfortunately Pharaoh, the king, took a shine to her and added her to his harem. Abram, the brother of the bride, so to speak, was treated extremely well, but the LORD wasn't pleased. We read that 'the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai' (verse 17). This is one indication of just how seriously God regards the marriage bond. Eventually the truth came out. Sarai was released from Pharaoh's palace and she and Abram went back to Canaan.

What are we supposed to learn from this? Simply that faith doesn't make you infallible. Christians still make mistakes, and some pretty awful ones at that. There's no room for pride. The Bible encourages us again and again to be humble, ready to admit our faults and failings. But what we also see here is the way in which God can overrule even our mistakes.

I was talking to a gentleman recently who felt he had made a mistake in coming to Coventry. He hadn't prayed about it, things had gone a bit wrong, and in retrospect he couldn't help wondering if he had sinned. Well, of course, you can't turn the clock back, but God can overrule even our mistakes. God can un-mess the mess. That's the lesson here.

If you've made a mistake, however bad it may be, the message here is 'Get over it.' But, you say, it's not that easy. I know. So how did Abram cope? Chapter 13 tells us. Verses 1–4. 'So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold. From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the LORD.'

Abram retraced his steps, both literally and spiritually. He went back to where he had met with God and he called on the name of the LORD. He put himself in God's hands. He acknowledged his sin and his need. He asked God to help him. And God did.

God doesn't expect you to go out and find big stones to build an altar. You can make an altar in your heart. Tell him all about your situation. Ask him to forgive your sins, to un-mess the mess, and to guide your steps in the days ahead.

Life is an incredible journey. Jenny has just started it, but how about you? How is it going? What's your plan? Where is God in all of it? Is it time to call on him and make a new start?