

Dr. Kenneth Mathews, Genesis, Session 10, Abraham's Calling and the Promises of God Genesis 11:27-12:3

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This is Dr. Kenneth Mathews in his teaching on the book of Genesis. This is session 10, Abraham's Calling and the Promises of God. Genesis 11:27-12:3.

Session 10 is entitled Abraham's Calling and the Promises of God.

Session 10 introduces the narrative of Abraham. We're turning a page now. Chapters 1 through 11 concern the universal history of the families, human history.

Now, we turn our attention to the specific history of the patriarchs. The superscription begins in chapter 11, verse 27. This is the genealogy my version reads.

This is the account of Tera. Now, the reason why it does not read this is the account of Abraham. The function of the genealogy superscription is a structural device, you remember, that functions as a hinge or a binding device between what has preceded and what follows. So, in the case of Tera, that very name is an echo of what preceded in the genealogy of Shem, ending in verse 26, that Tera became the father of Abraham, Nahor, and Haran.

So that must be in our minds as we begin to look at the narrative account of Abraham. And as a hinge, it also speaks of the coming future of that family that is named, in this case, the Tera family. So in that way, the patriarch or father is named first.

Now, the superscription introduces a very long narrative regarding Abraham. It begins in chapter 11, verse 27, and runs all the way through chapter 25, verse 11. So, this is a remarkable change in pace.

The narrative is much slower than what we had read before in chapters 1 through 11. And much more attention is given to the wife of Abraham, the patriarch named, and then what we will find is that more details are told. There's an emphasis in each of the patriarchal accounts of the relationship, the interaction, the dialogue between God and the patriarch.

Now, when you think about such a long stretch of narrative interest on the part of the author of Genesis, in comparison to what we find in, say, an event as important as creation, there we have two chapters given to creation, chapters 1 and 2. And then the all-important cosmic transformation in trauma when humanity, Adam and

Eve, rebel in the garden, and the consequence of this series of broken relationships. One chapter was given to it, but now all of these chapters are given to Tera's offspring, Abraham. And we would want to ask the question, why is this? And this is because God is giving focal attention to the remedy to the sin problem, the brokenness that humanity has experienced as a consequence of the events that occurred in the garden.

Now, the interest that I will bring to you, or attention I will bring to you, is going to be more so on Abraham than what we find in the two long stories of Jacob and then also Joseph. You may remember from the introduction that the Isaac narrative is brief because it functions as a hinge between Abraham and Jacob. When you think about Isaac, you first think that he lives under the shadow of his father, Abraham.

Then, in the story of Jacob and his twin brother Esau, when we think of Isaac, we pay attention to the tension in the family between these two, Esau and Jacob. The Abraham narrative is setting the plan, the pattern, that once we know it well, the major ideas, the major challenges, then we can address the subsequent patriarchal narratives with less focus or attention. So, I'm going to take the Abraham narrative and carve it up into seven sessions, with a couple of chapters in each session.

Now, another reason why Abraham is so important in the eyes of the author and for our study is because Abraham is the matrix, he is the linkage between chapters 1 through 11 and then what would follow in chapters 12 through 50. As you know, he is named in chapter 11 and we read that passage in verse 26 of chapter 11 where we have the conclusion to the Shemite genealogy. So, he is a person that is set in the wider context of the universal family.

And then, when we come to the first person that is focal in the narratives, then it's on Abraham. So, he functions there as a person who was born in the world of the post-flood world, yet he also leads the reader to a specific narrowed attention on the particular family. He's also critically important because he is identified as the father of the Hebrews.

One thing that is often overlooked is that actually Abraham was not born a Hebrew in the sense that his father was a Hebrew. Rather, he came out of Mesopotamian lineage, and as we'll come to realize, his homeland was in Mesopotamia, and it is later that he's identified as a Hebrew. We'll speak of what that means in a later lecture, but let me just say that a Hebrew was a person who is identified as a traveler, a migrant, someone who crosses boundaries. And certainly, that is characteristic of Abraham.

In fact, he actually identifies himself as a sojourner. Now, the structure or contents, let's speak to it. There are some highlights that we will give attention to and it is under the umbrella of the term covenant.

In chapter 12, verses 1 through 3, although the word covenant does not appear in this passage, we have the classic expression of the covenant that is made with Abraham. Typically, Bible students will refer to this passage when we speak of the Mosaic covenant. Covenant.

Then in chapter 15, there we have a ritual of the covenant. Remember now that covenants in the ancient world focused on the binding relationship between two parties. In some cases, it's one way, one direction, as is the case with Noah.

The word covenant first appears in chapter 6, followed by its contents in chapter 9. The sign is also described in chapter 9. But my point is that God made these promises to Abraham and his descendants, and the focus is on that one direction. The same is true here when it comes to Abraham. These are promises based on goodness and love.

Deuteronomy 7 says specifically that God chose the patriarchs as the ancestors of the nation Israel out of his elective love, his love for the fathers. And so, when it comes to the Abraham covenant, it is God who chooses to enter into that covenant. Chapter 15 is the ritual through which the covenant partners experience acceptance of the covenant, the making of, and then Abraham's acceptance of it.

Chapter 17 focuses on the sign of the covenant, and that is circumcision. We will speak at length about the importance and significance of circumcision, which is the removal of the foreskin of a male's sexual organ. And then last, in chapter 22, here we have an activity, an action on the part of Abraham that is confirming the covenant.

Let's talk now about the background of the whole. Remember when in the introduction I spoke of the necessity to interpret the parts of Genesis in the context of the whole Pentateuch, the Torah, to interpret Genesis as the prelude and introduction to the whole of Exodus through Deuteronomy, and that the focal character of the whole is Moses, his 120 years of life. Moreover, I spoke of how Genesis, its first readers would have been those who received the various parts as they accumulated and then were closed out to the community of Moses, progressively the first generation in the wilderness, and then that second generation who would have received or inherited the book of the law as it was named in the book of Joshua.

So what we find is that there is a theme that's overarching the Pentateuch, the Torah, and the theme is very important for us to take note of because it does concern the promises that God made, first at creation, the blessing, in chapter 1 verses 26 through 28, and then again in the garden where God makes promises to Eve regarding a deliverer, and again we will find that repeatedly there is the idea of

blessing in our passage for today, chapter 12 verses 1 through 3. When we read all of the Pentateuch, we will recognize that the pattern was established at creation, in the garden, and then here with the Abraham Covenant, and it's the Abraham Covenant that gives us the specificity of the theme. Now let me mention what a theme is versus that of what scholars call a motif, that's M-O-T-I-F. For a theme, we might see the analogy of a very colored, variegated colored garment, let's say a sweater, and it has a dominant color pattern, but then there are also other colors, but they are not so dominating, but they contribute to the artistry and the beauty.

So, the overarching theme would be the dominant idea, it's the umbrella under which you would find the minor ideas, and those are the motifs. There are three dominating ideas that when you weave them together you have an overarching idea of promises. So, when it comes to the Pentateuch, we do not have the promises fully realized in the lives of the patriarchs, but rather they are partially fulfilled because the promises we will find made to Abraham concerning his descendants, and therefore, there implied a fulfilling, a progressive process of fulfilling.

When we use the word fulfilled or fulfillment, it may be suggestive that the promises have been fully actuated when the theme of the Torah Pentateuch is, and here it is in this statement, the partiality, the partially fulfilled promises of God, or we could say the yet fulfilled promises of God. And so here are the three strands. First, there is a territory, a land.

Second, an offspring or population, a progeny, a lineage, a heritage. Third, a blessing, and this blessing assumes, as does really the land and the population, but especially when it comes to blessing, that there is presupposed a relationship between God and the blessing. So, the idea that is played out through the remainder of Genesis, through all of the Pentateuch and beyond, would be the promises of God and how God is going to actualize them in the time and space of history.

Land, population, blessing, and relationship these three. When we think about the creation promises, we find these three, and they are indicated and suggested, not explicitly. First, you remember that in chapter 1, verse 28, God speaks to the human family and blesses them by speaking to them and treating them as having personhood.

And so there is a relationship that is inaugurated, initiated by God, who is spirit, and he made men and women spiritual beings, made men and women in his image so that they may be able to communicate as spiritual beings and have personhood. Second, there is the promise of procreation because the blessing involves the multiplication of offspring. Third, after procreation comes the idea of rule or domination, where the human family exercises derivative authority to be good stewards of God's creation.

Now, in the garden, we see the same three ideas. First is there is a blessing relationship with Yahweh. He is named as Yahweh because there's an emphasis in chapter 2 on the notion of relationship.

Yahweh is the covenant name, the identification of the name of the God of the indicate. There is a relationship person to person and a dialogue. Then, there is the promise of procreation.

In chapter 3, verses 15 and 20, there is mention of procreation. And in especially 3:15, it says there will be offspring given to the woman. Adam names Eve, the mother of the living, all living, in verse 20.

Then we find that there is a land. Now, in chapter 1 of creation, there is attention to the whole earth. In chapters 2 and 3, there is attention to the region Eden.

And then within Eden is a garden. The word earth is also translated land, and that's the appropriate interpretation of that word in chapters 2 and 3. So that then matches what we find in the creation promise, but also in the promises made to the patriarchs. Now, let's talk about Abraham's calling.

When we look at the account of Abraham and his journey, we can think of it as a spiritual journey of faith. This is the preeminent idea when it comes to interpreting and understanding what the author wants to focus on when it comes to Abraham. His faith in the word of God, his faith in the promises of God.

It is an appropriate parallel when we think of Abraham's various journeys from his homeland to Canaan, and his various stopping points. He spends time in Egypt and then returns to Canaan. Abraham's journeys geographically are a good understanding of his faith journey.

So let me show you how this would work in terms of the important steps. Like bookends, we have in chapter 12, verse 1, the Lord had said to Abraham, leave your country, your people, your father's household, and go to the land I will show you. Now, the language of 12, verse 1, will occur again in chapter 22.

Chapter 22 of Genesis is the concluding bookend. From 12 to 22, we can trace the ups and downs of his spiritual journey. He increases in faith, but at the same time, he fails in his faith and faithfulness.

And so, we might think of his life as in the school of training. It's not just traveling. It is also training.

God is training him up in growing in knowledge. And that's interactive knowledge. Just like you know a person by interacting with that person, not just about knowing

that person, but by interacting and walking with God and living with God and God superintending Abraham's life and bringing into his life those markers that would increase his faith.

It comes to a great climax in chapter 22 because there in chapter 22, God instructs Abraham to take the son that would be his successor, the one in whom Abraham had placed his whole hope, the one that God had designated as his successor. And through him, God would continue to carry out the promises. And this is Isaac.

There was, after all, Ishmael, a son born to the servant to his wife Sarah. Her name was Hagar. And Ishmael was born first and Isaac second.

But God had said it is through Isaac that the promises come. And so, he says to Abraham, I want you to go to Mount Moriah. You're going to travel there, and you're going to give Isaac to me as a burnt offering like that of an animal.

And so, we are told in verse one of chapter 22 that this was a test whereby Abraham would be able to act out fully and completely what he had declared. That is his faith, and his faith would only be genuine if he matched it with faithfulness. So, there has to be an action that confirms one's faith.

We read then in chapter 22, verses one and two. Sometime later, God tested Abraham. He said to him, Abraham, here I am.

Abraham replied. Then God said, Abraham, take your son, your only son, that is the son of promise, whom you love, Isaac, and go. There's the same language that we found in chapter 20, verse one.

Go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain. I will show you again the language that occurs in chapter 12, verse one.

I'll read it and go to the land. I will show you here in chapter 22. Go to the mountain.

I will show you. And he does carry out the plan of God to show his allegiance and loyalty to God as first and foremost. And he does so in a symbolic fashion rather than actual fashion, because symbolically he raises the knife to plunge it into the body of Isaac.

But the angel of the Lord intervenes and tells Abraham to put away the knife. I now see, and really now Abraham sees, with confidence that you are faithful to me, that you love me, that you trust me. And that's why we find in the book of Hebrews when it speaks about the faith of Abraham, there's special attention given to it.

Verse eight reads of chapter 11, Hebrews. By faith, Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, that is, Canaan, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith, he made his home in the promised land like a stranger, a sojourner in a foreign country.

He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Now that is a remarkable insight into what was taking place in the interior life, the inner life, the mind of Abraham.

Because Abraham evidently would not have been satisfied with a promise that only had to do with the now, having to do with the material and the physical. He rightly understood at some point in his faith journey that the promises that God had made were only temporary, that the promises that he himself, Abraham, would not be fully received, that he would not control the land of Canaan, that he would not be in his own lifetime the king or the patriarch of a great nation, or that his relationship with God would be perfected, and that he would have blessings that transcended, that went beyond the present into the future. He didn't receive any of this, but what he did receive was God and his promises.

And he knew that there was more to come because these promises are said to be in the genitive narrative forever, for eternity. And so there were promises to be realized after his death in those of his descendants, promises of a spiritual order, promises of a city, a place of dwelling, whose architect and builder is God. Now, let's talk a little bit more about faith.

Hebrews 11 actually defines faith. Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. I like the word confidence.

As you know, the word faith can sometimes be watered down in our minds. It may be simply beliefs, and beliefs can be superficial because a belief is not just simply an idea, but a matter of entrusting oneself, acting out, acting with confidence, acting upon what we believe because the person or thing in whom or in which we're placing our faith is found to be trustworthy. And why is it we believe it's trustworthy, or that person is trustworthy? By our knowledge and by our experience.

For example, when it comes to flying in an airplane, you have a belief that that airplane will take you from your departure point to your planned arrival point, so you act on it. You're not satisfied with just thinking, well, this will be the case, but you presume it is the case, and then, of course, you board the plane and arrive at your destination. Now, why would you think that plane could do that? Well, it's because you have knowledge.

You've observed it. You've come to a place of education to acknowledge it, but also experience it. Thousands of departures and arrivals occur every day, and so out of the knowledge and then experience, maybe your own experiences, maybe you've flown many times, or knowledge coming from family and friends and whatever the vehicle of knowledge is, and so you've had that knowledge and then experience so that you find that trustworthy person.

Well, Genesis 15:6 says Abram believed the Lord, and God credited it; in other words, he added it to his account as righteousness. See, Abraham came to understand that God was trustworthy, that God could be counted on, and how did he come to know this? Well, he came to know this by knowledge and interacting with God through dialogue, through meditation, through prayer, prayer, through reflection, and then also he learned of God being trustworthy because he experienced God's promises and God carrying out his promises, his provision, his protection. So therefore, when it comes to that climactic moment in chapter 22, he is enabled by finding faith in a reliable, faithful God that even if it were necessary, God would raise that boy, Isaac, from the dead in order to carry out the promises that he had made to Abraham regarding Isaac.

So what we find in chapter 12, verse 1, is a calling that Abraham would leave his past, and then what we find in chapter 22, he's saying to Abraham, give me your future, his past, leave your comfort zone, leave your security found in your family with their wealth, with their security, and that the inheritance you would receive from your father, so leave that and come to a place you've never been, you've never known, it will be all new to you. So, there will not be an inheritance from your family, and there will not be the security of a clan and tribe to protect you. So put your faith totally in me, get up and go.

In verse 4 of chapter 12, it says he got up and he went. He was willing to leave the past and not rely upon it, simply relying upon God's promises. But then, he was also willing to give God his future.

It says, as we read in chapter 22, it reads, take your son, your only son, the one of promise, whom you love. Now we will discover that Abraham loved Isaac and, in fact, suggested to God that Isaac be his heir. But God said, no, the appropriate heir will be Isaac.

And so that was Abraham's hope and promise and his commitment to Isaac. But God said to him, will you trust me with the promises that I will carry out the promises? So, when it comes to challenging Abraham's faith, he, in effect, is saying, do you love me, Abraham, because of the gift that I have given you, that I have promised you? The land the family, the wealth you will accrue. Is that what is the motivation and generation of your faith, of your love? If I take that away from you, will you still love

me? Will you still trust me? And so that's why we have the challenge of the gift, the gift of Isaac.

What if I take away the gift? Are you willing to sacrifice the gift because you trust the giver? You trust me, the giver, more so than just the gift that I have promised you. Well, that is the spiritual journey of faith that we will want to follow. And it's a challenge for each of us to consider whether or not we have confidence in God.

And as we come to better know and appreciate God. Now, I'd like to say a few things about the background in verses 27 through 31. There we find that there are two primary items to be remembered as sharing in the background in verses 27 through 31.

Let's look at it together. If you have your Bible, otherwise, I'll just read it slowly and you can follow along. It begins in the second half of verse 27.

Terah became the father of Abram and also Nahor and Haran. So Abraham had two brothers, and Haran became the father of Lot. So, Lot, you see, is the nephew of Abram.

While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died, evidently prematurely, in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth. Ur of the Chaldeans, of the Chaldeans, is an addition to help us understand where Ur is located. Chaldea is a region, a province, in southern Mesopotamia, where the Tigris and Euphrates come together.

And the Ur then is in southern Mesopotamia. Haran, on the other hand, says that Terah was still alive and actually lived in a place called Haran, and his son was named Haran. Haran was in the northwest area known today as Syria, and it was not too much farther to the land of Canaan.

Now, picking this back up, Haran died in Ur. Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai.

Later, she'll be called Sarah. I'll back up a step and remind everyone that Abram's name is changed. The same chapter describes Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah in chapter 17.

But at this point, until chapter 17, in the narrative, he'll be identified as Abram. So we're told that Abram and Nahor are both married. The name of Nahor's wife was Milcah.

She was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milcah and Iscah. Now, Sarai was barren. She had no children.

So here are the two items of importance. The introduction of Lot and also that Sarai is barren. Why the introduction of Lot? He presumably, in the mind of Abraham, since Sarai is barren, would qualify to be his heir.

Verse 31, Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram. And together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there.

Terah lived and then died. So, these two items then need to be kept in mind. And that is Lot as a potential heir.

Then Sarai was barren and could not have children. And the challenges that proposed for a patriarchal leader over a family group and of a clan. And that is there must be an orderly succession of inheritance.

And this, as you know, would be particularly important for us as readers in light of the genealogies and their emphasis. And how the writer to in Genesis has brought together through the genealogies, the genealogy of Adam-Seth in chapter 5 down to Noah, and then Noah's son Shem down to Terah, who fathered Abraham. And that's found in chapter 11.

So, it runs from Seth to Noah to Abraham. So, the promises that were given at creation in early human history are maintained through the deliverers, Seth and Noah, and now we'll see through Abraham how important it is, and who's going to be the successor to Abraham. This is the setting for the call of Abraham.

I should pause here and talk about the chronology of Ur or Haran. Here it says that it says Ur, from which is their homeland. The context for the call of Abraham, beginning in chapter 12, verse 1, that context is the city Haran.

So, which is it? Is his birthplace from Ur or is his birthplace from Haran? Well, we know from Genesis 15, 7, and also Nehemiah 9, verse 7, wherein these two passages, Ur the Chaldeans are named as a land from which Abraham departed. Verse 7 of chapter 15, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it. And then Nehemiah 9, 7, you are the Lord God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham.

We are additionally helped by Stephen's sermon in Acts chapter 7. What Stephen brings together is the vision of God in Genesis chapter 15. And also, this calling from Ur of the Chaldeans, he brings this together with the Haran setting and merges the two into one great act. So let me read verses 2 through 4. Stephen then speaks to the Jewish audience: Brothers and fathers, listen to me.

The God of glory appeared to our Father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia before he lived in Haran. So there was a vision that Abraham receives in chapter 15. And you can read of what transpired in that vision in chapter 15, because God does speak, but you do not have this calling such as we find in chapter 12.

But the description that Stephen gives is derived from chapter 12. So, you see, he's merging 15 and 12 into one episode. It's called telescoping.

He says in verse 3 of Acts 7, leave your country and your people. God said, and go to the land I will show you. So, in verse 4, he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran.

After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. I think that's the proper way to understand these two sites as his homeland. It is possible that there were two callings, one calling in Ur and then one calling in Haran.

That has been a proposal. Now, when it comes to the promises of the covenant, I am going to look at chapter 12, 1 through 3 in detail next time. But I do want to bring to your attention how 12, 1 through 3 is the potential resolution to what has happened with the table of nations.

Verse 1: 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. See, there's that word we derive from the Table of Nations because you have 70 nations that are named in that listing.

And 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. Of course, that's going to be reminiscent of what we find throughout chapters 1 through 11.

And then it says at the end of verse 3, which is critical, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. And so we have the language in the setting of land, nation, and people groups. We have the memory of bringing forward the language of blessing and curse.

These ideas are occurring in chapters 1 through 11. And what we found, for example, in chapter 9, where the covenant is made with Noah, and there's a repetition that they will procreate, they will become the fathers, his descendants, Shem, Ham, and Japheth of all of these nations. There is also a moral mapping of anticipation where there is the curse delivered against Ham's son, Canaan, but a blessing is invoked, prayed for, for Canaan, for Shem, and also for Japheth.

Now, I want to make this last point. The word bless and its various word parts, it has the word bless, has the word blessing, has the word blessed. When you take these

forms of the word bless and count up the occasion of bless, it comes to five times there is blessing.

I think this is a hint at the counter to the five curses that occur in chapters 1 through 11. In other words, it is a subtle way telling us that Abraham is going to bring blessing to all of these nations. He's going to be the vehicle of resolution, but also it says that he's going to reverse curse into blessing for those who will place their trust as Abraham has in the promises of God.

Now, where do these five occasions occur? The serpent is cursed in chapter 3. The ground is cursed, specifically in chapter 3. Cain is cursed in chapter 4. So that would be three occasions. The fourth occasion is found in chapter 8, verse 21, where God promises never again to curse the ground, and that has to do with the flood. And then last, number five, is that curse in chapter 9 against Canaan.

Five blessings counteracting the five curses, showing that God has an outgoing, on-working plan of salvation and that those who will place their faith and trust in his word will experience that blessing. Next time we will be focusing on the specifics of the promise and the subsequent journeys of Abraham.

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