

Dr. Kenneth Mathews, Genesis, Session 11, Abraham's Journeys

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Lesson 11 concerns Abraham's journeys. You'll recall that earlier in the sessions, I spoke of how his actual physical journeys from place to place reflected a metaphor of his spiritual journeys. And as we trace his physical journeys, it will also correspond in part to his spiritual highs and his spiritual lows.

In order to appreciate the journeys recounted in chapters 12, 13, and 14, we want to remember that there is the covenant promises God made to Abraham, chapter 12, verses one through three. We've referred to that passage a number of times, but we have not really anchored our focal study in that passage, and we want to do so today. So, if you look with me in chapter 12, verses one through three, I'll discuss it, but recall that in chapter 11, verse 27, we have the catchphrase that says, this is the account or genealogy of Terah.

And then it begins to talk about Terah's family and, prominently, Abram, who is later going to be named Abraham in chapter 17. There are two things that you'll want to keep in mind as you read chapters 12 through 14 and really beyond. The first is found in verse 30.

Now, Sarah, this is Abram's wife, was barren. She had no children. And then the second thing concerns Lot.

In verse 31, we learn that Terah, the patriarch of the clan, took his son, Abram, and then his grandson, Lot, who will be recognized as the nephew of Abram. He will continue with Abram and go into Canaan. Keeping those two items in mind then, we come to the call of Abram.

Here we have the promises. You'll remember that Abraham journeyed from Ur in the Chaldees, the region that is South Iraq, south of ancient Babylon. He went under the leadership of his father, Terah, and the Terah clan to Haran, which is in Southeast Turkey.

The travel from Ur to Haran, which is also very close to the border of Syria, is about 600 miles. And that's the context then for understanding this commissioning of Abraham, the promises and this covenant commitment that God has made to Abraham. The travels that we will find from Haran into the central portion of Canaan, ancient Canaan, is about 400 miles.

So, let's remember now that as we're tracing the journeys of Abram, we start in chapter 12, verse one, where it says, "Leave your country, your people, " and your

father's household, " and go to the land I will show you." On an earlier occasion, I mentioned how we have the culmination of Abraham's spiritual journey in chapter 22, where similarly, you have the language of God instructing Abraham to sojourn, sojourn, to go to the land of Moriah and there offer up his son, his only son of promise, and that he will show him where to go. So that's the language of chapter 12, verse one. And those are the bookends of the Abraham journey spiritually.

So, let's look then at the promises. First, we have, "Leave your country to the land." That is the first promise. He's going to provide for him a land.

Abraham does not know where he is going. Abraham, just by faith, relies upon the spoken word of God. He really doesn't have a map other than this very important point, and that is the map that God will show him.

And notice the loss, the movement away from the backstop in his life, the comfort zone. First, he is to leave the land that he knows and has come to know in Haran. And then it speaks of your people.

That is a reference to his clan. And then your father's household. That would be the Tira family.

So, these three concentric circles, the wider one is the land, the next is the clan, and then third, the closest to him, his own immediate household. Then we have, I will, in verse two. There's a series of I will, I will emphasize that this is initiated by God, and he's the one who will carry this out.

So, it's a one-way promise. God is making these promises to Abraham. It's not dependent upon the promise, but rather Abraham, other than the fact that he responds, and by traveling to this unknown land, he shows that he has faith.

He has received the word from the Lord and has placed his faith in it. I will make you into a great nation. Now, that presupposes, of course, a population.

It doesn't sound very promising, does it? Given that his wife is barren and she had no children. So right there, we have to understand that God is making a promise of a land he doesn't see and of a progeny he has yet to see. He goes on to say in verse two, and I will bless you.

Blessing here in Genesis refers to a progeny and also prosperity or wealth. And while it's speaking of the actual physical material wealth of Abraham, it has a spiritual subtext because blessing has to do with God's favor. And Abraham will learn through the various ways that he encounters God that God has in mind for him a blessing that transcends time and space.

It's a spiritual blessing. This is spoken of in the New Testament in chapter 11, where it speaks of how Abraham believed God. And by faith, he was looking for a city not built with human hands but erected by God.

So we have these three promises: a land, a people, and then prosperity. The prosperity dimension must not be understood. If you're going to have a nation that's going to impact other nations, that nation must expand and grow in progeny and also in sufficient wealth to sustain a nation of people.

Then we see that in chapter, or rather verse two, God says, I will make your name great. What's in view here is that God, and again, the various ways that Abraham intersects with other people groups, will come to have an international reputation. The consequence of that is that he will be able to influence other people groups and show them the love of God and who is the one true God of Abraham and his family so that they too might enter into the blessing that God has promised for all peoples.

Continuing the last phrase, and you will be a blessing. Now, here we have a pivot on the part of the promises. We're moving from Abraham the man to the outside, turning himself outside to all people groups.

So that's how he's going to be a funnel, a means by which God will bring blessings to all people. Verse three explains that the way in which all peoples will enter into this blessing is dependent upon their relationship to Abraham, which is tantamount to saying their relationship to Abraham's God, the one true God of Israel. So, the first, I will bless those who bless you.

See, that is a right relationship with Abraham. That is someone who favors Abraham. That's someone who enters into a peaceful relationship with Abraham.

That's someone who enjoys the favor of Abraham's God. And it goes on to say in the opposite way, and whoever curses you, I will curse. Curse here does not have to do with a magical incantation; rather, curse here is the opposite of blessing.

And that is the rejection of Abraham. And in doing so, rejection of his God. In that ancient environment, if you have someone who is opposed to you, then it may well be, and typically was, a hostile relationship.

And then there is the conclusion. All people on earth will be blessed through you. This follows on the Table of Nations in chapter 10 and the Tower of Babel.

Babel, you recall, is the attempt on the part of the united gathered peoples to usurp the authority of God, to make a name for themselves, a reputation. And because of their fear of dispersal, they huddled together, championing their pride, their technological advancements, and building the Tower of Babel and the city of

Babylon. But God intervened because the promise has to do with spreading and exercising territory territorial and terrestrial rule over the earth.

So, they must spread in order to enter the blessing. So, he confuses their speech. They are dispersed.

And now we have a hurdle to be overcome by the peoples because of the confusion of their language. But God's antidote to this is to create a nation, a new nation by calling and enabling Abraham to create the nation of Israel. That is why Israel is going to be a blessing.

This is the way in which God will unfold his promissory purposes and blessings of salvation for all people. This then is setting us up for now the travels of Abraham and his journey. Verse four is really a striking verse that could be easily overlooked.

And that is because it just simply says, so Abraham left. But that is the same word in the Hebrew Bible that is found in chapter 12, verse one, where it says, leave, Abraham left. This immediately shows that Abraham exhibited a strong up-and-running faith in God's word.

In verse four, it says that he left as the Lord had told him and lot with him. Abram was 75 years old. Now, that's an important detail as well because we will learn that it will be another 25 years before he has his son named Isaac, who will be the legitimate recipient of the blessing that has been promised to Abraham.

So, during these 25 years, Abraham will see the years passing by, slipping by, and yet there is no promise seed in accord with God's will and purpose. Now, Abraham will have some suggestions on how to circumvent this original promise and blessing. And we will see how this works itself out.

Now, when Abram entered into the land, we have a description beginning in verse six at the various sites that he went to. Shechem, it's mentioned first. Shechem is about 35 miles north of Jerusalem.

There he built an altar to the Lord. It is highly suggested that wherever he went, this was his pattern. He would take up residence nearest cities.

He would then build an altar to the Lord and worship the Lord. Again, a sign of his faith and trust in God and that God is going to provide for him, that God is going to protect him in this hostile region. Then, we find that he goes to Bethel.

Bethel in Ai, we don't know where to identify Ai exactly, but it must be close to Bethel, which is about 10 miles north of Jerusalem. And there again, builds an altar,

worships the Lord. When we come to chapter 12, and we are looking at verse 10, notice that it says that there was a famine in the land.

This is the reason for his departure from the land of promise, going to Egypt. Egypt was the breadbasket of the ancient Near East. Egypt had a more predictable way through the law to produce foodstuffs.

So, we know that in Genesis, there are occasions when famine is found, and Israel's fathers just descended into Egypt. As they descended into Egypt, they would move through the Negev, which is mentioned in verse nine, which is a word for the South. This is a wilderness area.

Then they would enter into Egypt and buy food for them. Now, famine was not unusual in Canaan because of the many times small rain and also small amounts of rain. And also there would be pestilence and together there would be real challenge for peoples to sustain themselves in the land.

Now, notice it says that he went down to Egypt in verse 10. Chapter 13, verse one begins a new episode, and it says in verse one, so Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, and he's going to retrace his steps. When we look at Abram's travels in the event in Egypt, we will find a remarkable parallel, and this must be intentional on the part of the author of Hebrews that there is a famine also during the time of Jacob's family, the father of the 12 tribes of Israel.

There is Joseph, who is sold into slavery in Egypt, rises to a great influential position in Pharaoh's household, and is able to receive Jacob and his brothers and provide them a place. We are told in chapter 15 that some 400 years later, Jacob's descendants fell into slavery under the heavy hand of Pharaoh and that God sent Moses to bring them out and to deliver them. In doing so, the people of Egypt, after 10 plagues, want these Hebrew people to leave that they provide for them gold and silver.

And so we will find the same taking place here: when you have the departure of Abraham and his family, he will be empowered and enriched by the Pharaoh. My point is that when the people of Israel read these early stories about their ancestors, they could see themselves in these stories, that there is a connection between the God of their ancestors and their own God who is delivering them and enabling them to enter into the land of promise. Well, what's at work here is that there was in the ancient Near East a respect for a man's wife.

There was a moral code that a ruler or a man would not take the wife of another man illicitly. So, in order to remedy that problem, they would murder the husband, leaving the woman to be freed for marriage to take her as a wife. Now, Abraham knew this so very well.

And when we read chapter 20, where Abraham again commits the same strategy by claiming his wife, Sarah, to be his sister, we are told there, Abraham speaking to Abimelech, this time the king of the Philistines at Gerar, that this was his habit, this was his practice. So, we don't have just these two occasions in chapters 12 and 20, but out of pure fear for his life, he played the ruling monarch of the area, in this case, Pharaoh, by claiming that Sarah is his sister. Well, there's an attraction to Pharaoh by cause of her beauty.

And he adds her to his harem. Now, when it comes to a harem, we certainly think of many wives and many sexual partners. And in our culture today, we are often given to, well, this must be for sexual reasons preeminently.

Well, yes, there can be no question that there is a desire for sexual relations. A form of hedonism, but it was to build up the reputation and strength of the king's household by gathering in a harem and having many offspring through the women of the harem. Also, we know that there was a desire on the part of ruling figures to marry important daughters and others of those in the courts of other kings, other monarchs, and other wealthy noblemen.

So that is at work here. The threat immediately that comes to your mind is if Sarah in this harem becomes pregnant, then the question will be raised: who is the father? And it will compromise the promise that God has made to Abraham, which is we will come to see is a miraculous work on the part of God in the life of Abraham and Sarah in all is to be attributed to the power of God and his elective love for Abraham and beyond as we saw that Abraham is going to be a witness, a vehicle of God's blessing for all people groups. So, it threatened the promises that God had for Abraham and the plan that he had for seeing all peoples come to receive the blessing.

So, in order to prohibit this from taking place, verse 17, but the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh. Precisely what that is, we don't know. It is, in some way, interrupting the normal course of sexual relations.

This would have been true with Sarah in the harem of a Pharaoh. Of course, this would have been catastrophic because passing on a dynasty's legacy would be of central importance in the mind of the Pharaoh and for the nation of Egypt at large. Well, he learns of this deception, and so he challenges Abraham as to why he would deceive him in this way.

When we come to chapter 20, we will discover that in this parallel account, Abimelech, king of the Philistines at Gerar, has a dream, and God appears to him and forewarns him of taking Sarah into his harem. So, could this have happened to Egypt? We don't know with certainty, but it may well have been. Then the response of Pharaoh is to expel him.

Now, in the process of taking Sarah from Abram, he enriches Abram. He enriches him with monetary wealth and also with other things such as the cattle and such. And so, he's expelled.

Now what a sad commentary now on Abraham who had started so strongly in his faith, so strongly in his worship, so strongly resisting the past polytheism in Ur and Haran and all of the polytheism that characterized the ancient Near Eastern Canaan and also in Egypt, he resisted all of that. And yet here we have him stumbling because the promise says that whoever blesses you will be blessed. Whoever curses you will be cursed.

Well, transparently, this is a rejection of Abraham. It is a curse against Abraham and his God. Then, in chapter 13, we move to Abraham and Lot.

Lot accompanied Abraham and he too became a very wealthy person. Notice it says in verse two that Abraham had become very wealthy in livestock, silver and gold. I take it that is what he received from Pharaoh and also Lot becomes a very wealthy, but there is tension between the uncle and nephew relationship.

And this has to do with the abundance of the prosperity that each receives. And so there is a quarrel that ensues over rights of land and feeding their many multiplying flocks and cattle. And so we're told in verse seven of chapter 13 that quarreling arose between Abraham's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot.

Then we have this supplementary information. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time. We are told of this already in chapter 12, verse six.

At that time, the Canaanites were in the land. Why reference who is inhabiting the land? Well, because it is a hostile environment and there is a dependence on Abraham, by Abraham, on God to protect him. And so it is self-defeating for a family to split and have internal friction when there are them potential threats by the Canaanites and the Perizzites.

We know something about the Canaanites and the Perizzites; we know next to nothing. And there are a number of people groups that will be mentioned along the way. And some of them we know and others we don't.

The point is that they are depending upon the Lord to sustain them. Now, Abram, I think has learned something from his Egyptian experience because an act of great mercy and grace enlarges, he says to the younger Lot, he says, let's don't quarrel. You can have your choice of any section of land that you wish.

And so, we find that Lot contrasts with the gracious response of Abraham to the quarreling because he does take up Abraham's offer and chooses the best land for himself. And so, we begin to read in verse 10, Lot looked around, saw the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt toward Zoar. This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

We will learn of the details of God's destruction because of the iniquity, wickedness, and unbelievable wickedness. It will be reminiscent of what occurred that brought about the flood. In this case, it's going to be God raining down fire and destruction on the cities of the plain.

The cities of the plain were five cities closely connected, and two of these, Sodom and Gomorrah, were the most notable. Now, what we have here is a reference to the beauty and provision of God that took place in the garden. And also, how Egypt itself was a land of great prosperity and provision with its foodstuffs.

But the reference here to what is going to take place in Sodom and that Lot chose to live within their environment under their influence forewarns us as readers that Lot concerns himself with his own benefit and prosperity. When you read the Apostle Paul, who speaks of greed, he says in Colossians chapter three that those who have become Christians must put off the old lifestyle, the old man, and take up the new life, the new life in Christ Jesus, the new man. In describing the wickedness of the old man, he refers to greed and identifies it as idolatry.

Lot was a very greedy person who would fall somewhat under the spell of the great wealth and prosperity of the cities of the plain. And it is identified as idolatry. Who is the idol? Lot himself.

His idolatry is altogether selfish, self-serving, and self-centered. And horrors of horrors, when we consider that God has called Abraham and Abraham's legacy to worship God, not the idols, not the false gods, but the one true God who's promised blessing and protection. Here, Lot seizes upon the opportunity for self-aggrandizement.

As it turns out, God says to Abraham, now, Abraham, I want to assure you again that my promises are going to come to pass. So, he entreats Abraham to go on a walking tour of the land and see that this land will ultimately be his land as promised and his immediate descendants. So, he says, now, I'm going to bless you with a population that is so great that it's so great you can't count them.

And they will be like the dust of the soil. So, he says in 17, go walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you. This says to me, by virtue of this walking tour, that Abraham is symbolically taking into account by faith, a claim on the land.

So, we find that God will progressively reaffirm his promises as Abraham becomes closer and closer to God. He is in a school of spiritual training, learning to place his faith more certainly, more deeply, more devotedly.

Now, when we speak of Abraham and Lot, we see that there is a separation within the family of Abraham. Separations are an important idea, a motif that runs through all of Genesis. And for that matter, the whole Pentateuch.

It begins in the creation account, where divisions and separations occur between the heavens and the earth, and then, of course, the sky and the earth and the waters and the earth. Then, we find that there is a separation between Cain and his brother Seth.

There are the Cainites and the Sethites. Unfortunately, they intermingle and produce a most wicked generation. Noah and his three sons are preserved.

And then there's a separation of the three sons and their legacies described for us in chapter 10. Then we find in this case, a separation of Abraham from his clan and household, Tera. Lot accompanies him.

And then there's another separation taking place. Just like the genealogies in chapters 5 and 11 were designed to differentiate the righteous lineage, the lineage through whom would come the promises of a deliverer found in chapter 3, verse 15, made to Eve whose offspring will do battle and achieve victory over the offspring of the serpent. We find that these separations are narrowing the lineage that will produce the deliverer.

So now, if we think through Genesis, we will remember that there is a separation that takes place between the two sons of Abraham, Ishmael, born first, and then Isaac, the son of promise. Then the twins were born to Isaac, Esau, and Jacob. And there is a separation.

And then, when it comes to Joseph, he is for a season separated from his brothers because he's sold into slavery in Egypt. And there is, at this point, a uniting of the 12 for survival. That's the way Genesis ends.

But as you read through the remainder of the Torah, the people reading Genesis would understand this because, at their time, there would be opposition to them by people groups who emerged from Abraham's relatives, their own relatives. For example, with Ishmael, you have the Arab tribes. With Esau, you have the Edomites.

With Lot's two sons, you have the Ammonites and also the Moabites. So, this distinguishes the lineage of promise and the family through whom the promise

would come. And the people of Israel then, as I entered into Canaan, and as I came across the various sites, they are forewarned and instructed, beware of the idolatry, the polytheism, the wickedness, the sexual perversions that take place among the Canaanite people groups and remain holy, remain pure, remain devoted to God in order to maintain their livelihood in the land.

So that's what we have in mind of the separations that's beginning to take place very clearly in chapter 13. Now, we're going to turn to chapter 14. This is where Abraham truly becomes an international figure.

This is because of this story pertaining to two kings that are highlighted. There was an Eastern coalition of kings who raided the West, and its coalition in the West included the King of Sodom. The Eastern coalition overwhelmed the Southern, or rather Western, coalition and took the bounty of the peoples of the Western coalition.

And that included a lot in his family, all of his servants, his wealth, and all that pertaining to it. This is described then in detail because of the importance of what will occur. And it begins in verse one, runs all the way through verse 12, which reads in verse 12, they also carried off Abraham's nephew Lot and his possessions since he was living in Sodom.

Verse 13 distinguishes Abraham's ethnicity for the first time. Ethnicity is very important in this chapter. The various people groups associated with their nations and city states are showing us that Abraham, because of his role in rescuing Lot, his role in his relationship to the King of Sodom as an equal player on the international board, that he was a very important figure who will now become increasingly a figure of influence.

And he can exercise that influence for the purpose that God has enriched him to be. When it comes to the word Hebrew occurring here, we do not know exactly what the meaning of Hebrew is. There are two proposals.

One is the ancestor named in the Shemite genealogy of chapter 11 of Eber, E-B-E-R, Eber. No, you have a very close sound to the Hebrew word for Hebrew, Ivri, Eber, Ivri. And so some have thought that Abraham was named Ivri because of that connection with the ancestor Eber.

The other is that it comes from the root word meaning to cross over. And it has the idea of a traveler that's crossing boundaries. And we know that on future occasions, we'll recognize that in fact, Abraham identifies himself as a sojourner, a migrant.

Another use of the word Hebrew is not ethnicity, but it is used by non-Israelites non-Hebrew people in Genesis, non-Hebrew people. And refers, for example, to Joseph as

a Hebrew. And this is a usage that we find not only in Genesis, but also in the books of Samuel, having a social use.

So, it can refer to people who are on the outside of civil authorities, fugitives, and outlaws. Essentially, I think the idea is in terms of their economic and social status, as well as people who are outsiders. But the point is here that Abraham is ethnically differentiated from others who are in his own circle of camaraderie.

So, it does mention the Amorite named Mamre. But Abraham brings together his group, and they race after this Eastern coalition of kings, catching them in the far North in the city of Dan. And they recover, we're told in verse 16, that he recovered all the goods, brought back his relative Lot and his possessions together with the women and the other people.

Mention is made in verse 14, Dan. Now, actually Dan has not been born yet. This is one of the sons of Jacob and Jacob hasn't been born yet.

This is one of those pieces of evidence that an editor has updated place names so that people reading it later will have a better understanding of the various locations. Well, bursting onto the scene unexpectedly in the story of the kings, in addition to King Sodom, is the King of Jerusalem. And so, we learned that Melchizedek is the King of Salem, meaning Jerusalem.

He brought out bread and wine. I'm looking at verse 18. And he worshiped the God most high, El Elyon, the God most high.

And he blessed Abram. Now, of course, that's an immediate echo of what we found in chapter 12, where he blessed Abram. And we spoke of how this would then be an opportunity for Abram in turn to bless Melchizedek.

And so we read this blessing spoken over Abraham, but it is a blessing directed toward Abraham's God. And he's identified as the creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God most high again, El Elyon, who delivered your enemies into your hand.

Now, here is the blessing that Abram gives to him, that is Melchizedek, a 10th part to Melchizedek. This would have been readily recognized by the people in Mosaic times as giving a 10th part of their resources to the tabernacle priesthood for their use in carrying out worship. And so that in a foreshadowing way speaks of Abram who did the same, recognizing that Melchizedek is a king and also a priest.

We are told in verse 18, who worshiped the same God as Abram. This was not a Hebrew person. This was a person, probably a Canaanite, we can say, who is worshiping the one true God of Abraham.

What a happy moment it must have been in the life of Abraham to, in all of this paganism, sexual perversion, idolatry, and widespread wickedness, meet someone who has a genuine love and heart for the same God as Abram and has a love and a heart for Abraham. Now, notice that this is using a generic form of God, El, E-L, El-yon, E-L-Y-O-N. It's not the personal name of God, Yahweh, but it is. He is identified as Yahweh in verse 22.

When Abram meets the king of Sodom, Abram swears an oath. I have raised my hand to the Lord. See, that's Yahweh, who is God Most High, creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you.

Now, he received from Melchizedek the bread, the wine and the blessing. But when it came to the pagan Sodom, he resisted it. He would not accept and receive from the king of Sodom.

And why is this? He explains it in verse 23. That is, he would not have Sodom say, I have enriched Abraham. Rather, Abram is going to want it said that it is Abraham's God who has enriched him.

And so there is an acceptance of Melchizedek, but he refuses the booty and the bounty trusting God. Now, the men who were with him, named in the coalition that went with Abram, can receive their share as it should be, but not Abram. He rejects it.

When it comes to Melchizedek, the writer to the Hebrews seizes on the mysterious failure of Melchizedek. And this is described for us in Hebrews chapter seven, verses one through four. Next time, when we come together, we're going to be looking at the explanation and the development of the idea of covenant in chapters 15, 16, and 17.

This is really the heart of the Abraham story. And we will give focus attention in what occurs in chapters 15 and 17. But before we introduce that section, I'm going to pause and talk about this figure, Melchizedek, who is a very mysterious figure.

One that is mentioned in Psalm 110. And then the writer to Hebrews in the New Testament speaks of him, Melchizedek, and speaks of him in the context of our Lord Jesus Christ. And we can learn much about Christ through a focused study on Melchizedek, found in chapters five, six, and seven.

But especially, we'll want to look at Hebrews chapter seven, verses one through four.