

## Lesson 9

# Genesis Chapter 12

### The call of Abram

In our previous lesson, we observed that men in the city of Babel desired to use their unity for the wrong reasons. As they consolidated their power, they refused to spread out over the earth in a way that might dilute it. They experienced a heady kind of autonomy in their intention to "make a name" for themselves. They even planned to build a tower to heaven, a flagrant demonstration of pride and arrogance.

God was not pleased with human unity created this way, for these purposes. He confused the language men spoke, making it impossible for them to proceed with their plans. They were then forced to move on and create many nations over the earth, as a result of the many languages they spoke. Yet the idea of human unity was not lost. In fact, God showed, in His call to Abram, that He intended to use human unity, in the form of a nation, to reverse the devastating effects of the fall from grace of our first parents. This nation was to exist not through the will of men, but through the will of God. By His promises and His power, a human community on earth would be a source of blessing to all families everywhere.

This plan began with a call to Abram, a Shemite, to leave everything and follow God's directions.

### **Read Genesis 11:10-32**

These verses give the genealogy of Shem, Noah's righteous firstborn son. See that Shem lived a very long time, long enough to be alive when Abram was born. That would have made Shem the great patriarch of Noah's family and the one on whom the blessing of God rested.

This genealogy leads up to one family, Terah, and his sons, Abram and Nahor. They lived in Ur, a large city of Mesopotamia. **Read Joshua 24:2-4.** What had become of Shem's "family religion" by this time?

Terah and his family worshipped "other gods," according to the passage in Joshua. What does that mean? It is simply evidence that even in families that issue from a righteous man, there is always the possibility of confusion and contamination in their understanding and practice of the covenant. As we saw early in the history of man, intermarriage between cultures of different religious beliefs always presents problems to those whose heritage it is to live within the covenant. As the Catechism says, "The covenant with Noah after the flood gives expression to the principle of the divine economy toward the 'nations,' ... toward men grouped 'in their lands, each with [its] own language, by their families, in their nations. ... But, because of sin, both polytheism and the idolatry of a nation and of its rulers constantly threaten this provisional economy with the perversion of paganism." (56-57)

### **Let's read Genesis Chapter 12.**

**1. The Lord speaks to Abram (who lived about 2000 B.C.), about whom we know very little, except that he is a Shemite, a member of the family destined to have a covenant relationship with God (because of Noah's blessing in Gen. 9:26-27). What is the first thing God requires of him? What is the significance of that requirement?**

God tells Abram to leave everything and go to a place unknown to him. He has to make a clean break with what is familiar and dear to him. Inevitably, this will mean a break with the customs and religious practices of his father's house. Abram perhaps doesn't realize it, but he is on the threshold of a magnificent and enduring revelation of the One, True God. Everything that came before must now be released. It is a dramatic call to a turning away from one way of life to embrace something very new. It is the very first glimpse we have in Scripture of what conversion looks like.

**2. In just three verses, the word "bless" (or some form of it) appears five times. Think back to Eden (Gen. 1:28) and back to Noah as he got off the Ark (Gen. 9:1). What does this profusion of references to blessing suggest to us about what God is set to do?**

We know that God's original blessing on man consisted in the fact that man was pleasing in God's sight. When He looked upon all that He had created, He saw that it was "very good." That blessing was later replaced by a curse, as man

fell from grace and from favor in God's eyes. Noah and his family also received God's blessing on the first day of life on the renewed earth. Noah passed on the blessing to Shem, but Ham, his dishonorable son, incurred a curse. Here in these verses there is such an explosion of blessing that we can only draw one conclusion: whatever it is that God is about to begin with Abram must be His plan to counter any sabotage of His deep and abiding intention to bless His creatures by once again making them pleasing in His sight. The blessing on Abram will be so far reaching that generations yet unborn will experience it. It is a promise that looks forward, but it also looks backward.

Remember that when Adam and Eve left Eden, they took two problems with them. The first was the presence of an enemy who hated them. God promised to send "the woman and her seed" to address that problem. The other was the change that had taken place inside of them, a change so radical they had to be expelled from Eden. How would this problem ever be reversed? The answer lies here in God's promise to Abram. It will take centuries for all the details to get worked out, but there is no missing the fact that God wants to restore humanity to its original blessedness. He has a plan to do it that involves a nation with a unique relationship with Him. Somehow this nation will provide an open door for all men everywhere to be blessed. Is that the door back to the Garden? Yes. As we saw in Lesson Four on Jesus as "The Seed" of the woman in Gen. 3:15, it was Jesus, a descendant of Abram through the royal line of King David, Who became the door of blessing for all men. He was the perfect, righteous, firstborn Son of God, Who made a way for men to be free of the tyranny of sin and to be pleasing in God's sight. This promise to Abram is not just about a new place for him to live. It is a promise that will regain Paradise, for him and all who come after him.

The promise that God makes to Abram has three parts. First, God will make Abram the father of a great nation. That nation was the nation of Israel, which did not exist before Abram. Second, God will make his "name great," which, in that day, meant not that he would be famous but that he would father a dynasty of kings. Third, God promises that all families on the earth will be able to bless themselves through Abram. This means that through Abram's descendants, God will open a door of blessing for men, reversing the curse pronounced in Eden. During the course of Abram's life, all these promises will be transformed by God into covenants, which we will see in Genesis 15, 17, and 22. How were these covenant promises eventually fulfilled?

Abram's descendants became a "great nation" (and not just a collection of tribes) at about 1500 B.C., when Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt and back to their homeland, Canaan. God established a covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai, giving them a liturgical and civil code to live by. This distinguished them from all other nations on earth. They agreed to be His people by keeping that covenant.

Abram's name became "great" in about 1000 B.C., when God made David king over Israel. This was a wonderful time in the history of Israel, when their enemies had been defeated, the land had been secured, and David sat on the royal throne in Jerusalem. God made a solemn promise to him that one of his descendants would always sit on that throne. In other words, David began a royal line of kings.

"All families" could bless themselves through Abram when, in about 4 B.C., Jesus, who was a Son of David and thus of Abram, was born. Jesus came to make universal blessing once again possible for humanity. Jesus established His Church before He left, which would perpetually offer blessing to the world, until His return.

### **3. Contrast Gen. 11:4 and 12:4. What kind of man does Abram seem to be?**

Abram was willing to leave his earthly security and whatever power was his as Terah's firstborn son to obey the voice of God (Whom he barely knew). He set out for a land he'd never seen and knew nothing about. In other words, his trust in God put him in a position of complete dependence. That dependency is a sharp contrast to the builders of Babel. They refused to be scattered over the earth, choosing instead to consolidate their technology and power. Their intention to make a name for themselves and to build a tower to heaven showed them to be unwilling to live in humility, without knowing what comes next. The irony is that Abram, who was willing to leave behind his comfortable place on earth in order to obey God, received a promise of unthinkable power and influence. He was to become the father of a great nation, Israel. It would be a descendant of his, Jesus, Who would bring heaven to earth in the Incarnation. Abram lost everything to obey; in obeying, he gained more than everything back.

**4. We learn from vs. 6 that the Canaanites were in the land that God intended to give Abram, the Shemite. Remembering the curse of Noah on Canaan (see Gen. 9:24-27), what can we expect from the encounter of these two tribes of people?**

Noah had declared that Canaan, the son of Ham, would be a servant to Shem. If God intended to give the land of the Canaanites to the Shemites, perhaps the Shemites had an original rightful claim to it. As the history of Israel unfolded, it took many battles with the Canaanites (as well as other tribes who lived on the land) and hundreds of years for Abram's descendants to finally take possession of all the land. Yet Noah's word was eventually fulfilled.

**6. Abram was faced with a famine in the land that he had left everything for. What do you think this did to his faith? What was his response to the crisis?**

Abram must have had wonderful expectations about what God was about to do for him. Although it must have been difficult to leave the known for the unknown, the promise of God to abundantly bless him surely gave Abram some confidence that it would all work out. A famine would have put that confidence to the test. He may have experienced disturbing doubts: "What am I doing here? Why did I ever leave the security of my father's house? If I had stayed there, I probably wouldn't be facing starvation." He responded by going down to Egypt, where he expected food to be more plentiful. This was not necessarily a bad thing in itself. In fact, the history of Israel would later be characterized by two other flights into Egypt for safety—one by the brothers of Joseph and their families when they were faced with famine. The other was the flight of another Joseph, the husband of Mary, when he took his family there to escape Herod's murderous rage against the newborn King of Israel.

**7. For Abram to tell the Pharaoh that Sarai was his sister was half-true—she was his half-sister—but what was the intention of this deception? What was God's response to Abram's weakness? Why do you suppose God didn't just start over with someone more reliable?**

Abram feared for his life, so he urged Sarai to cooperate in a deception of the Pharaoh. This was certainly wrong of him to do. Even the Pharaoh recognized that. God prevented further damage by afflicting Pharaoh's household with plagues (the judgment of God is always a sign of His mercy). It seems that God did what was necessary to convince Abram to live righteously. He shows great patience with Abram's weakness. He understood the fear that prompted the sin and so sets Abram back on the path to restoration. In addition, for Abram to see God at work in Egypt, following him wherever he went, would have taught him a profoundly new lesson. This God is not like pagan deities, who were associated with specific locations. This God is everywhere. God did not want to start over with someone more reliable; He wanted to make Abram into a more reliable man. Will Abram cooperate with God? This is the question God had put to Cain: "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" (Gen. 4:7). It is the question He asks each one of us. He shows Himself willing to work with us in our weakness; it is rebellion and turning away from Him that will exclude Him from our lives.

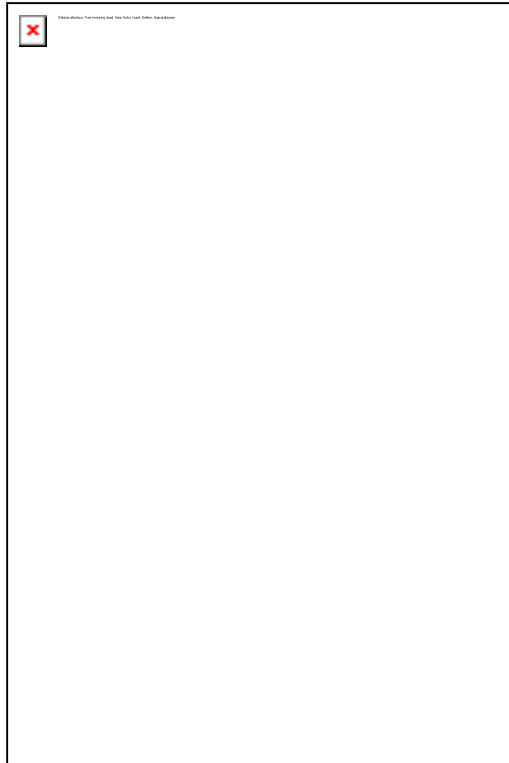
## **Summary**

As we reach chapter 12 of Genesis, we find that we are about to become deeply acquainted with the lives of two human beings, Abram and Sarai. They are the first people in Scripture who are followed this closely in the narrative. This in itself should serve as a sign to us: "These are important people. Watch them." From the first verse of Genesis, God has been revealing Himself to us in His relationship with His creation. Yet now we will have an extended opportunity to see God at work in very human situations as He moves along His plan to win the world back to Himself.

Abram, whose name will later be changed to Abraham, becomes the Father of Israel. He is the first Jew. In him we ought to be able to see what God intended when He created a nation for Himself. He was, of course, a real human being in real history, but he is also one of God's works of human art. The rest of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, constantly look back to this great patriarch. If we are attentive, his life will serve as a window into life with God—what it means to be chosen, called, and equipped to live in the blessedness of God. This is knowledge most precious to every baptized believer, since it is what we have committed ourselves to in our baptismal vows.

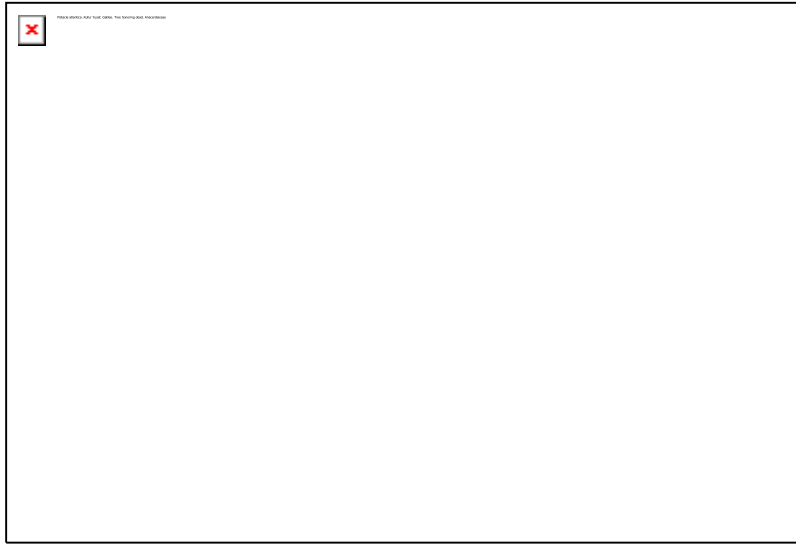
Sarai, whose name is later changed to Sarah, is included in this examination of the life of faith, although her part is not as detailed as that of Abraham. Nevertheless, the New Testament says about Sarah, among other things, that "by faith, Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered Him faithful Who had promised" (Heb. 11:11). The miracle that began God's plan took place in Sarah's body. Hers is a life worth watching.

The story of Abram and Sarai will be one that is human and divine. Are you ready for that? It will cause some wincing, just as the episode of Abram's lying to the Pharaoh created a ripple of disappointment. Yet if we are willing to open our hearts to these human beings, as God did, they will help us to see the gold that God purifies out of vessels of clay like us.



## **Terebinth**

TEREBINTH [terebinth] or turpentine tree, small deciduous tree ( *Pistacia terebinthus* ) of the family Anacardiaceae ( sumac family), native to the Mediterranean region. It yielded probably the earliest-known form of turpentine, said to have been used in medicine by the ancient Greeks. The yield of the terebinth is now called Chian, Scio, or Cyprian turpentine. The terebinth is classified in the division Magnoliophyta , class Magnoliopsida, order Sapindales, family Anacardiaceae.



It is unfortunate that the word for this tree is translated in so many different ways. For example, the tree under which King Saul was buried (I Chronicles 10:12) is termed "the great tree" (NIV), "oak" (KJV and NASB), and "terebinth" (JND). Of these three terms, terebinth is the more accurate as one of the species of pistacia, although a species that does not occur in the Middle East, is frequently called terebinth. In I Chronicles 14:14, the same tree is called "balsam" (NIV), and "mulberry" (KJV and JND). The tree in which Absalom caught his head, not his hair as if often misquoted, (II Samuel 18:9) is a "large oak" (NIV), "great oak" (KJV), and "great terebinth" (JND). Balsam may be used as a name because of a resin extracted from the tree. Several plants with a fragrant resin are referred to as balsam. Balsam, oak, mulberry, and terebinth are not even superficially similar and are unrelated.

So what is a terebinth or, more correctly, pistacia? Two species occur in the Middle East, the Atlantic pistacia, *Pistacia atlantica* and the Palestine pistacia, *P. palaestina*. Atlantic pistacia is the larger of the two and therefore assumed to be the one referred to in the Scriptures although it is not possible to precisely label the species. When undisturbed (a rare occurrence in the Middle East) the trees reach a very large size and can live up to one thousand years. The Atlantic pistacia is recorded as the largest tree in Israel in recent history. Pistacia develops a very deep and extensive root system and therefore remains green even in years of drought. It often sprouts from the stump after being cut, as noted in Isaiah 6:13.

Additional references to pistacia are found in Genesis 35:4, Judges 6:11, I Chronicles 10:12, Isaiah 6:13 and 44:14. Because of its large size and great age, pistacia trees were well-known landmarks and were used as memorials for the dead, a practice followed until recently in some Arab villages. But the pistacia trees also became the object of idolatry (Hosea 4:13). Did Jacob bury the idols under the "oak" of Shechem because the tree was an object of veneration in itself?

As often in Scripture, great trees are associated with great men. Gideon was by a large pistacia when he was called by God (Judges 6:11). David faced Goliath in the Valley of the Pistacias (I Samuel 17:2) (*elah* in Hebrew). Absalom, great in his own eyes, was trapped in a large pistacia.

The small, hard fruits of the *P. palaestina* are sold in Arab markets as a condiment. They have a somewhat resinous taste and are known as *butim* in Arabic.