

September 4 Lesson 1 (NIV)

## The Call of Abram

Devotional Reading: Hebrews 11:8-19

Background Scripture: Genesis 12:1-7; 15:1-7

Genesis 12:1-5, 7

<sup>1</sup> The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

<sup>2</sup> “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.

<sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you.”

<sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. <sup>5</sup> He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

<sup>7</sup> The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

Genesis 15:1-7

<sup>1</sup> After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.  
I am your shield,  
your very great reward.”

<sup>2</sup> But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” <sup>3</sup> And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

<sup>4</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” <sup>5</sup> He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

<sup>6</sup> Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

<sup>7</sup> He also said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”

## Key Text

*The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.*

—Genesis 12:7

# God’s Exceptional Choice

## Unit 1: God Calls Abraham’s Family

Lessons 1–4

### Lesson Outline

#### Introduction

- A. Answering the Call
- B. Lesson Context

#### I. The Call Announced (Genesis 12:1–5, 7)

- A. God’s Declaration, Part 1 (vv. 1–3)  
*Grieving and Going*
- B. Abram’s Response (vv. 4–5)
- C. God’s Declaration, Part 2 (v. 7)

#### II. The Call Affirmed (Genesis 15:1–7)

- A. Protection Pledged (v. 1)  
*“But Jesus Is with You!”*
- B. Challenge Offered (vv. 2–3)
- C. Promise Confirmed (vv. 4–5)
- D. Righteousness Reckoned (vv. 6–7)

#### Conclusion

- A. Abram Answered. Will You?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Chaldeans *Kal-dee-unz*.

Eliezer *El-ih-ee-zer*.

Harran *Hair-un*.

Moreh *Moe-reh*.

Nahor *Nay-hor*.

Shechem *Shee-kem* or *Shek-em*.

Terah *Tair-uh*.

## Introduction

### A. Answering the Call

“When ‘the Mouse’ offers you a job, you say yes,” an executive chef on a Disney cruise declared. Prior to his work with Disney, the chef had worked in an executive capacity at several successful restaurants. He enjoyed the line of work but had not considered doing so on the seas.

However, his name was suggested to the cruise line for a position. Eventually someone from the company called him, conducted an interview, and made an offer. The chef accepted, and for over a decade he has served in several upscale restaurants at sea. The chef answered the call, and the decision changed his life forever.

How much more so with God! When he calls, he expects a faith-filled response. His call may feel rather demanding, even overwhelming. In today’s lesson, God called someone to a new context so that God’s promises could be fulfilled.

### B. Lesson Context

The first 11 chapters of Genesis look at humanity broadly—from their creation and fall (Genesis 1–3), to their acts of violence (4:2–12) and wickedness (6:5–6, 11–12), to their judgment and rescue (6:7–9:17). Despite all this, people still made vain attempts to focus attention on themselves (11:1–9).

As Genesis is the first book of the Old Testament, such a broad focus is understandable. This prepares readers of all eras to hear how God worked through humanity generally and specifically through one family.

After the flood narrative (Genesis 6–10), the text lists the descendants of Noah’s son Shem (11:10–25). This genealogy culminated with Terah, the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran (11:26).

Terah outlived Haran, the father of Lot (Genesis 11:27–28). Terah’s other sons, Abram and Nahor, were both married. However, Abram and his wife Sarai were unable to conceive (11:29–30).

The family lived in Ur of the Chaldeans (Genesis 11:31). This ancient Mesopotamian city was located on the banks of the Euphrates River. Modern archaeological discoveries have provided insight into the city's wealth, culture, and pagan religious practices. The family's connections to the city likely ran deep, and at one time they took part in the city's pagan religious practices (see Joshua 24:2).

However, the family did not stay in Ur. Terah led Abram, Sarai, and Lot toward Canaan, a land bordering the western edges of the Mediterranean Sea (see Genesis 10:19). But Terah did not complete the journey. He settled and died in Harran (11:31b–32), an important city on a major trade route between Mesopotamia and Canaan.

Today's Scripture text continues narrowing the focus as it highlights the family of Abram. (Note that Abram is the same man who later had his name changed to Abraham; see Genesis 17:5.)

## I. The Call Announced (Genesis 12:1–5, 7)

### A. God's Declaration, Part 1 (vv. 1–3)

**1. The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you."**

As *the Lord* addressed *Abram*, the focus of the text turns to the life of this man. The text gives no clues regarding the way through which God spoke. All that is noted is that God called to Abram.

That God told Abram to *go* emphasized that God expected his imperative to be followed. Toward the end of Abram's narrative, God would show similar urgency by telling Abram to "go to" a certain place to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22:2).

If Abram had stayed in Harran, the livelihood of his *people* could have been jeopardized. In a culture of polytheism (meaning "many gods"), the act of worshipping the one true God could have required Abram to detach from the larger community. This may be part of the reason that God ordered Abram to leave everything behind and proceed to a new *country*.

In the ancient world, a person's identity and social standing were attached to family and ancestry. For this reason, genealogies and ancestral records were of great importance (examples: Genesis 5; 11:10–32; Nehemiah 7:6–64). Additionally, inheritance claims and family responsibilities were tied to a person's family lineage.

By calling Abram to leave his *father's household*, God called him to a new identity. As he followed God's imperative, Abram would demonstrate trust, even if uncertainties remained (see Hebrews 11:8).

## Grieving and Going

As the child of a military service member, I learned to relocate every few years. This constant churn is one reason why moving to a new country sounded appealing. I didn't have a strong attachment to any particular "home"—or so I thought.

Recently, I found myself weeping at my parents' house. My wife and I were staying with my parents before leaving to become missionaries abroad. I was emotional because I realized that my nuclear family—regardless of their location—had always been my “home.” They were a stabilizing force during every move. As I prepared to move abroad, I felt the significance of not living near my family.

Perhaps Abram experienced similar grief as he left his family to follow God's call. He might have never seen them again. When God calls you to follow him, will you go no matter the cost?

—N. G.

**2. “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.**

Blessing would result if Abram obeyed God: the childless Abram would become *a great nation*. Nothing from this promise indicated human power. Abram's descendants would become great only because of the Lord's steadfast love and promises (Deuteronomy 7:7–8).

His descendants were not to be like other nations. Instead, they were to be “a people holy to the Lord” and “his treasured possession” (Deuteronomy 14:2; compare Leviticus 20:26). Their unique establishment would cause God's name to be glorified and made great among the peoples of the earth (see Isaiah 29:23; 60:21–22; Ezekiel 36:23).

Abram and his descendants were tasked with living among other nations in a manner that would result in the *blessing* of both groups. In a way, Abram's descendants were to serve as a “kingdom of priests” for the whole world (Exodus 19:5–6).

**3. “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”**

Abram would not have to face trials alone—God would give protection as he would *curse* all people that cursed Abram. As a result, God's blessing would continue for generations (compare Exodus 23:22).

God's choice was not to the exclusion and rejection of other people. The apostle Paul interpreted God's promise of blessing to apply also to people who expressed faith in Jesus Christ (see Romans 4; Galatians 3:7–9, 14). Further, this blessing included making salvation available to all people, regardless of ancestry, through Abram's seed (see 3:26–29).

As Abram followed God, he would be a witness of God's grace and mercy to the world. As *all peoples on earth* saw how Abram's descendants obeyed God and saw the blessings that resulted, they would want to follow the same God and *be blessed* themselves (Acts 3:25).

## **B. Abram's Response (vv. 4–5)**

**4. So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.**

One might expect *Abram* to have discussed the issue with God or provided pushback. (Compare Abraham's discussion with God regarding Sodom's pending judgment, Genesis 18:16–33.) But there is no record that Abram did so. He obeyed and *set out from Harran*. Abram showed faith in God and trusted that God would not renounce his promises.

By allowing *Lot* to go *with him*, Abram acted honorably by caring for his nephew (see Genesis 11:27–28). Given this act, combined with Abram’s advanced age (*seventy-five years old*) and his childless reality (11:30), one might expect the promised blessing to come through Lot. However, that was not the case (see 17:19). In fact, the inclusion of Lot would cause great difficulty and heartache for Abram (see 13:2–13; 14:1–16).

**5. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.**

While God called Abram specifically, the call apparently included more than him alone. Thus we see him taking his wealth (Genesis 13:2) and extended household on the trip.

Abram’s journey *for the land of Canaan* brought the travelers to Moreh at Shechem (Genesis 12:6, not in our printed text). This region would become a significant place for Abram’s descendants (see 35:4; Joshua 24:25). Its importance among Abram’s descendants resulted from his obedience.

### **C. God’s Declaration, Part 2 (v. 7)**

#### **7a. The LORD appeared to Abram**

Abram’s obedience brought him to a new land and to a new interaction with *the Lord*. Several other times he experienced God’s self-disclosure (see Genesis 17:1; 18:1). Other patriarchs had similar experiences (see 26:2; 35:1; 46:2; 48:3). The means by which God appeared is not the most important aspect. Instead, most important is his desire to reveal and the content of his words.

#### **7b. and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.”**

The content of God’s declaration reveals a new aspect of the previously given promises. The manner through which Abram would become “a great nation” (Genesis 12:2, above) would be through his descendants (*his offspring*) and *this land* of Canaan. These two are often mentioned in discussion of God’s promises to his Old Testament people (see Genesis 13:15; 15:18; 17:8; 24:7; 48:4; Exodus 32:13; 33:1; etc.).

#### **7c. So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.**

Abram’s act of building *an altar* in response to God’s words was of significance. Other cultures built altars to their pagan gods (see Deuteronomy 12:2–3). But Abram did not reuse a pagan altar.

Instead, Abram built a new altar *to the Lord*. By doing so, Abram announced the focus of his worship to the one true God. This altar served as a tangible reminder of God’s faithfulness and presence (compare Genesis 8:18–20; 13:14–18; 35:7; Exodus 17:15; 24:3–4; etc.).

## **II. The Call Affirmed (Genesis 15:1–7)**

### **A. Protection Pledged (v. 1)**

**1. After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”**

Abram’s first interactions in the land were challenging. For a time, Abram and Lot lived separately (Genesis 13:10–18). Eventually, the two were reunited when Abram saved Lot from captivity (14:11–16). Additionally, Abram met with a mysterious king and offered him a tithe (14:18–20; Hebrews 7:1–10). It was *after this* that *the Lord* appeared again to Abram.

The underlying Hebrew translated here as *vision* occurs only three other times in the Old Testament. The word’s stress is not necessarily on the revelation’s visual component, but that a specific utterance from God had arrived (see Numbers 24:4; 24:16).

It was the vision’s content that was most important for Abram. That God promised to be Abram’s *shield* is indicative of God’s care and protection for his people (see Deuteronomy 33:29; 2 Samuel 22:3, 31; Psalms 3:3; 28:7; 84:11; 115:9–11). In a dangerous new land, Abram could take comfort in God’s protection.

During an encounter with the king of Sodom, Abram refused riches and financial gain from the king (Genesis 14:22–24). Abram did not want to depend on the wealth of others. Instead, he trusted that the Lord himself would be a *very great reward*.

## **“But Jesus Is with You!”**

“Come see this really cool thing!” I heard my 8-year-old implore his 4-year-old brother. The older son is frequently afraid to go upstairs by himself. He often comes up with creative ruses to entice his younger brother to accompany him up the stairs. Most of the time the ruses work, and the younger brother happily complies.

However, if my older son revealed his fear, the younger son would answer, “But Jesus is with you!” The 4-year-old is unwavering on this point. He explains he isn’t afraid because “Jesus is with me!”

Our youngest seems to grasp the truth of God’s exhortation to Abram: “Do not be afraid” (Genesis 15:1). What are you most afraid of right now? Can you say with confidence “Jesus is with me”—and let him be your shield?

—N. G.

## **B. Challenge Offered (vv. 2–3)**

**2. But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?”**

For the first time, we have a record of *Abram* responding directly to the *Lord*. The response was filled with concern. God’s promises would not come to fruition unless Abram had a child of his own. His words reflected an awareness of the Lord’s promise to make of him “a great nation” (Genesis 12:2). Yet at this point Abram remained *childless*, and his wife was past the age of childbearing (see 12:4; 17:17). How could God truly be Abram’s “very great reward” (15:1) under these circumstances?

The act of transferring the heir’s rights to a servant in Abram’s *estate* would have been a last resort to ensure Abram’s legacy. The transference of an heir’s blessing from a firstborn to another

person was not unusual in the narrative of Abram's descendants (see Genesis 25:31–33; 48:13–14; 49:3–4).

*Eliezer* may have joined the journey during travel from Harran to Canaan (Genesis 12:4–5) since *Damascus* is situated between the two locations.

**3. And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”**

Ancient adoption practices allowed for a childless couple to adopt another man as household *servant*. This person would then care for the couple in their old age and provide a proper burial when they died. As a result, this person would then inherit the family property. This allowed for an *heir* and continuation of the family line.

Familial love and care, while possible, were not the primary reason for many ancient adoptions. Instead, this relationship was more like a business contract between adults. Considering the likelihood of this result, Abram vented his frustrations to God. How could the God who promised so much also provide *no children* to Abram?

### C. Promise Confirmed (vv. 4–5)

**4. Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.”**

In response to Abram's frustration, *the Lord* spoke to him with assurance. God's promises would not be diverted—*this man*, *Eliezer*, would *not* become Abram's *heir*. God declared that a child from Abram's *own flesh and blood* would instead be his heir. When God makes a promise, he will keep it, although its fulfillment may not align with earthly expectations. This heir would be the first of many “children of promise” (see Galatians 4:28).

**5. He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”**

God had previously compared the number of Abram's descendants to “the dust of the earth” (Genesis 13:16). The numerous *stars* in *the sky* also served to illustrate God's promise. The assertion that Abram's descendants would be as numerous as the stars is one of the most prevalent promises in Scripture (see Genesis 22:17; 26:4; Exodus 32:13; Deuteronomy 1:10; 10:22; 28:62; 1 Chronicles 27:23; Nehemiah 9:23; Hebrews 11:12).

God did not dismiss Abram's frustration, nor did he give an explanation. Instead, God merely reaffirmed his promises. If God had kept his promises thus far, Abram could trust that God would keep his promises in full.

### D. Righteousness Reckoned (vv. 6–7)

**6a. Abram believed the LORD,**

That Abram *believed* did not simply mean he felt good about his relationship with God. Rather Abram demonstrated faith when he trusted that these promises would come to pass; he trusted in the guarantor of those promises. Abram knew what his descendants would someday find out: *the Lord* is faithful and keeps his promises (Deuteronomy 7:9).

**6b. and he credited it to him as righteousness.**

Abram's belief did not go unnoticed—it would become the model for all others who believe (see Hebrews 11:8–10, 12). His belief led to his being *credited ... as righteousness*—being viewed in right standing with God.

Because God's own nature is righteous and perfect (see Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 103:6, 17; Zephaniah 3:5; Zechariah 8:8; etc.), he desires that his people be righteous as well. They could live righteously and justly, with God and with others, as they did “what is just and right” (Ezekiel 18:5).

The text utilizes an accounting metaphor: God counted Abram's faith as the foundation for righteousness. The underlying Hebrew verb gets at the idea of regarding something or someone as having a certain characteristic, although that thing or person may not actually have that characteristic (compare Genesis 31:15; Numbers 18:27; Job 18:3; Proverbs 17:28; etc.). Abram's faith was enough for God to consider Abram in right standing with him.

For the apostle Paul, this verse provided background on the nature of salvation. As righteousness came to Abraham (Abram's later name) through his faith, all people who follow his example and demonstrate faith will be counted as righteous (Romans 4:1–8, 13–15, 22). People who demonstrate faith in God are considered “children of Abraham” (Galatians 3:7) regardless of their ancestry (3:8–9).

The apostle James furthers the narrative regarding the faith of Abram. Not only was he counted righteous, but “he was called God's friend” (James 2:23). His words and deeds exhibited the presence of his faith.

**7. He also said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”**

*The Lord* brought Abram from his homeland in *Ur* to the *land* that he promised. Abram could be encouraged because the one who would declare himself “*I am*” (Exodus 3:14) was guiding him.

## Conclusion

### A. Abram Answered. Will You?

Abram had to answer a difficult call with boldness, courage, and faith. God had placed the call, and Abram answered by way of relocating his family. This decision would radically change his life and the lives of others for centuries.

There will be times in the life of a believer when the challenge is not to *find* God's will but to *follow* God's call. This call may lead to a different job, a new neighborhood, or even to an unknown land. Yet if we remain faithful to God and trust in his steadfast promises, he will bless us deeply.

### B. Prayer

God, throughout history you have shown yourself to be faithful. Give us faith to follow your call and patience to trust you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

God calls us—we only need to follow his directions!<sup>1</sup>

---