

# The Roots of Abraham



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Genesis 12; Isa. 48:20; Isa. 36:6, 9; Jer. 2:18; Genesis 13; Genesis 14; Heb. 7:1–10.*

**Memory Text:** “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going” (*Hebrews 11:8, NKJV*).

We have now reached the center of the book of Genesis. This central section (*Genesis 12–22*) will cover the journey of Abraham, from God's first call, *lekh lekha*, “Go!” (*Gen. 12:1*), which leads Abraham to leave his past, to God's second call, *lekh lekha*, “Go!” (*Gen. 22:2*), which leads Abraham to leave his future (as it would exist in his son). As a result, Abraham always is on the move, always a migrant, which is why he also is called a “stranger” (*Gen. 17:8*).

In his journeying, Abraham is suspended in the void—without his past, which he has lost, and without his future, which he does not see. Between these two calls, which frame Abraham's journey of faith, Abraham hears God's voice, which reassures him: “ ‘Do not be afraid’ ” (*Gen. 15:1, NKJV*). These words of God mark the three sections of Abraham's journey, which will be studied in weeks 6, 7, and 8.

Abraham exemplifies faith (*Gen. 15:6*) and is remembered in the Hebrew Scriptures as the man of faith (*Neh. 9:7, 8*). In the New Testament, Abraham is one of the most mentioned figures from the Old Testament, and this week we will start to see why.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 7.

## Abram's Departure

**Read** Genesis 12:1–9. Why did God call Abram to leave his country and family? How did Abram respond?

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The last time that God had spoken with a person, at least as recorded in Scripture, it was with Noah, to reassure him after the Flood that He would establish a covenant with all flesh (*Gen. 9:15–17*) and that another worldwide flood would never come. God's new word, now to Abram, reconnects with that promise: all the nations of the earth will be blessed through Abram.

The fulfillment of that prophecy begins with leaving the past. Abram leaves all that is familiar to him, his family, his country, even a part of himself. The intensity of this going is reflected in the repetition of the keyword “go,” which occurs seven times in this context. Abram has first to leave his country, “Ur of the Chaldeans,” which also is Babylonia (*Gen. 11:31, NKJV; Isa. 13:19*). The call to “go out of Babylon” has a long history among the biblical prophets (*Isa. 48:20, Rev. 18:4*).

Abram's departure also concerns his family. Abram must leave his heritage and much of what he learned and acquired through heredity, education, and influence.

Yet, God's call to go involves even more. The Hebrew phrase *lekh lekha*, “go,” translated literally, means “go yourself” or “go for yourself.” Abram's departure from Babylon concerns more than his environment, or even his family. The Hebrew phrase suggests an emphasis on *himself*. Abram has to leave *himself*, to get rid of the part of himself that contains his Babylonian past.

The goal of this abandonment is “a land” that God will show him. The same language will be used again in the context of the sacrifice of Isaac (*Gen. 22:2*) to refer to the mount of Moriah, where Isaac will be offered and where the Jerusalem temple will be built (*2 Chron. 3:1*). God's promise is not just about a physical homeland but about the salvation of the world. This idea is reaffirmed in God's promise of the blessing for all nations (*Gen. 12:2, 3*). The verb *barakh*, “bless,” appears five times in this passage. This universal blessing for all people will come through the “seed” of Abram (*Gen. 22:18, Gen. 26:4, Gen. 28:14*). The text refers here to the “seed” that will ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus Christ (*Acts 3:25*).

**What might God be calling you to leave behind? That is, what part of your life might you have to abandon in order to heed the call of God?**

## The Temptation of Egypt

**Read** Genesis 12:10–20. Why did Abram leave the Promised Land to go to Egypt? How did the pharaoh behave in comparison to Abram?

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Ironically, Abram, who has just arrived in the Promised Land, decides to leave it for Egypt because “there was a famine in the land” (*Gen. 12:10, NKJV*). Evidence of people from Canaan going into Egypt in times of famine is well attested in ancient Egyptian texts. In the Egyptian teaching of Merikare, a text composed during the period of the Middle Kingdom (2060–1700 B.C.), people coming from Canaan are identified as “miserable Asiatic” (*aamu*) and described as “wretched . . . short of water . . . he does not dwell on one place, food propels his legs.”—Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 103, 104.

The temptation of Egypt was often a problem for the ancient Israelites (*Num. 14:3, Jer. 2:18*). Egypt, thus, became a symbol of humans trusting in humans rather than in God (*2 Kings 18:21; Isa. 36:6, 9*). In Egypt, where water could be seen on a daily basis, faith was not necessary, for the promise of the land was immediately visible. Compared to the land of famine, Egypt sounded like a good place to be, despite what God had said to Abram.

The Abram who now leaves Canaan contrasts with the Abram who left Ur. Before, Abram was portrayed as a man of faith who left Ur in response to God’s call; now, Abram leaves the Promised Land by himself, of his own volition. Before, Abram relied on God; now he behaves like a manipulative and unethical politician who counts only on himself. “During his stay in Egypt, Abraham gave evidence that he was not free from human weakness and imperfection. In concealing the fact that Sarah was his wife, he betrayed a distrust of the divine care, a lack of that lofty faith and courage so often and nobly exemplified in his life.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 130.

What we see here, then, is how even a great man of God can make a mistake and yet not be forsaken by God. When the New Testament talks about Abraham as an example of salvation by grace, it means just that—grace. Because, if it weren’t by grace, Abraham, like all of us, would have had no hope.

**What should this story teach us about how easy it is, even for faithful Christians, to stray from the correct path? Why is disobedience never a good choice?**

## Abram and Lot

**Read** Genesis 13:1–18. What does this story teach us about the importance of character?

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Abram returns to where he was before, as if his trip to Egypt were a mere unfortunate detour. God’s history with Abram starts again, where it had stopped since his first trip to the Promised Land. Abram’s first station is Bethel (*Gen. 13:3*), just as in his first trip to the land (*Gen. 12:3–6*). Abram has repented and is back to “himself”: Abram, the man of faith.

Abram’s reconnection with God already shows in his relationship with people, in the way that he handles the problem with Lot, his nephew, concerning the use of the land. It is Abram himself who proposes a peaceful agreement and allows Lot to choose first (*Gen. 13:9, 10*), an act of generosity and kindness indicative of the kind of man Abram was.

The fact that Lot chose the easiest and best part for himself—the well-watered plain (*Gen. 13:10, 11*)—without any concern about the wickedness of his future neighbors (*Gen. 13:13*) reveals something about his greediness and character. The phrase “for himself” reminds us of the antediluvians, who also chose “for themselves” (*see Gen. 6:2*).

In contrast, Abram’s move was an act of faith. Abram did not choose the land; it was given to him by God’s grace. Unlike Lot, Abram looked at the land only at God’s injunction (*Gen. 13:14*). It is only when Abram separates from Lot that God speaks to him again (*Gen. 13:14*). In fact, this is the first recorded time in the Bible that God speaks to Abram since his call at Ur. “ ‘Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are—northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever’ ” (*Gen. 13:14, 15, NKJV*). God, then, invites Abram to “ ‘walk’ ” on this land as an act of appropriation. “ ‘Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you’ ” (*Gen. 13:17, NKJV*).

The Lord, though, makes it very clear that He, God, is giving it to Abram. It is a gift, a gift of grace, which Abram must appropriate by faith, a faith that leads to obedience. It is the work of God alone that will bring about all that He has promised to Abram here (*see Gen. 13:14–17*).

**How can we learn to be kind and generous to others, even when they aren’t that way to us?**

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## The Babel Coalition

**Read** Genesis 14:1–17. What is significant about this war taking place just after the gift of the Promised Land? What does this story teach us about Abram?

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This is the first war narrated in the Scriptures (*Gen. 14:2*). The coalition of four armies from Mesopotamia and Persia against the other coalition of five Canaanite armies, including the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah (*Gen. 14:8*), suggest a large conflict (*Gen. 14:9*). The reason for this military operation has to do with the fact that the Canaanite peoples had rebelled against their Babylonian suzerains (*Gen. 14:4, 5*). Although this story refers to a specific historical conflict, the timing of this “global” war, just after God’s gift of the Promised Land to Abram, gives this event a particular spiritual significance.

The involvement of so many peoples from the country of Canaan suggests that the issue at stake in this conflict was sovereignty over the land. Ironically, the camp of Abram, the truly interested party, because he is the only true owner of the land, is the only force that remains outside of the conflict, at least at first.

The reason for Abram’s neutrality is that for Abram, the Promised Land was not acquired through the force of arms or through the wisdom of political strategies. Abram’s kingdom was God’s gift. The only reason Abram will intervene is the fate of his nephew Lot, who was taken prisoner in the course of the battles (*Gen. 14:12, 13*).

“Abraham, dwelling in peace in the oak groves at Mamre, learned from one of the fugitives the story of the battle and the calamity that had befallen his nephew. He had cherished no unkind memory of Lot’s ingratitude. All his affection for him was awakened, and he determined that he should be rescued. Seeking, first of all, divine counsel, Abraham prepared for war.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 135.

But Abram does not confront the whole coalition. In what must have been a quick and nocturnal commando operation, he attacks only the camp where Lot was held prisoner. Lot is saved. Thus, this faithful man of God also showed great courage and fortitude. No doubt his influence in the region grew, and people saw the kind of man he was and learned something more of the God whom he served.

**What kind of influence do our actions have on others? What kind of message are we sending about our faith by our actions?**

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## The Tithe of Melchizedek

**Read** Genesis 14:18–24 and Hebrews 7:1–10. Who was Melchizedek? Why did Abram give his tithe to this priest who seems to appear out of nowhere?

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The sudden appearance of the mysterious Melchizedek is not out of place. After Abram has been thanked by the Canaanite kings, he now thanks this priest, a thankfulness revealed by his paying his tithe to him.

Melchizedek comes from the city of Salem, which means “peace,” an appropriate message after the turmoil of war.

The component *tsedek*, “justice,” in the name of Melchizedek, appears in contrast to the name of the king of Sodom, *Bera* (“in evil”), and Gomorrah, *Birsha* (“in wickedness”), probably surnames for what they represent (*Gen. 14:2*).

Melchizedek appears after the reversal of the violence and evil represented by the other Canaanite kings. This passage also contains the first biblical reference to the word “priest” (*Gen. 14:18*). The association of Melchizedek with “God Most High” (*Gen. 14:18, NKJV*), whom Abram calls his own God (*Gen. 14:22*), clearly indicates that Abram saw him as priest of the God Abram served. Melchizedek is, however, not to be identified with Christ. He was God’s representative among the people of that time (see Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, pp. 1092, 1093).

Melchizedek officiates, indeed, as a priest. He serves “bread and wine,” an association that often implies the use of fresh-pressed grape juice (*Deut. 7:13, 2 Chron. 31:5*), which reappears in the context of the giving of the tithes (*Deut. 14:23*). In addition, he extends blessing to Abram (*Gen. 14:19*).

Abram, meanwhile, “gave him a tithe of all” (*Gen. 14:20, NKJV*) as a response to God the Creator, the “Possessor of heaven and earth” (*Gen. 14:19, NKJV*). This title alludes to the introduction of the Creation story (*Gen. 1:1, NKJV*), where the phrase “heavens and earth” means totality or “all.” As such, the tithe is understood as an expression of gratitude to the Creator, who owns everything (*Heb. 7:2–6; compare with Gen. 28:22*). Paradoxically, the tithe is understood by the worshiper not as a gift to God, but as a gift from God, because God gives us everything to begin with.

**Why is the act of returning tithe a powerful indicator of faith, as well as a great faith-building act?**

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**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “Abraham in Canaan,” pp. 134–136, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“Christ’s church is to be a blessing, and its members are to be blessed as they bless others. The object of God in choosing a people before all the world was not only that He might adopt them as His sons and daughters, but that through them He might confer on the world the benefits of divine illumination. When the Lord chose Abraham it was not simply to be the special friend of God, but to be a medium of the precious and peculiar privileges the Lord desired to bestow upon the nations. He was to be a light amid the moral darkness of his surroundings.

“Whenever God blesses His children with light and truth, it is not only that they may have the gift of eternal life, but that those around them may also be spiritually enlightened. . . . ‘Ye are the salt of the earth.’ And when God makes His children salt, it is not only for their own preservation, but that they may be agents in preserving others. . . .

“Do you shine as living stones in God’s building? . . . We have not the genuine religion, unless it exerts a controlling influence upon us in every business transaction. We should have practical godliness to weave into our lifework. We should have the transforming grace of Christ upon our hearts. We need a great deal less of self, and more of Jesus.”—Ellen G. White, *Reflecting Christ*, p. 205.

### Discussion Questions:

- ① In light of the blessing of Abram, “ ‘I will bless you . . . and you shall be a blessing’ ” (*Gen. 12:2, NKJV*), what does it mean to be blessed? How can we, as people who serve the same God as did Abram, be a blessing to others?
- ② What was wrong in Abram’s half lie regarding his sister-wife? What is worse: lying or saying some truth while still, at the same time, technically lying?
- ③ Read again Genesis 14:21–23, Abram’s response to the offer of the king of Sodom. Why did he respond as he did, and what important lesson can we take from this story? Would not Abram have been justified had he decided to take what the king had offered him?