

# Abraham: Go and bless

Genesis 12:1-9, Romans 4:1-4, 13-17, John 3:1-17

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## Intro

The story of God calling Abraham, and Abraham then faithfully and obediently doing what God told him to do, is one of the most crucial events in the Bible.

God's plan of redeeming this world hinges on this particular moment in history. It begins with Abraham and it ends with our Lord Jesus Christ – and we cannot understand one without the other.

They together, more than anyone else in the Bible, make up the story of how God saves the world.

Can anyone argue that we do not need salvation? We go through chaotic days here in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain. We need to be saved from evil people and evil regimes.

We also need salvation from the horrors of nature. Sickness and death, earthquakes and tsunamis.

Mankind is terrifyingly good at messing up and needs help. Each individual is part of this mess, not just as a victim but also as an offender. We all add, at times, to the unhappiness of others.

We need to be saved from the mess of the world, and we need salvation from our own inner tendency to add to the mess. We ought to confess: we do not perfectly love God and our neighbors.

## 1. Abraham lost in Babylonian life

Abraham was called by God from the city of Haran, in Northern Iraq. Before Abraham was called, we read in the Bible in Genesis 11 about Babylon in southern Iraq.

After mankind had sinned against God in the Garden of Eden, God dispersed them over the world. His plan was for mankind to go into the world, populate it and develop it for his glory. From the very start of human history, God shows an interest in the concrete affairs of man and all things of our world.

Immediately things went wrong. We read of murder, pride, marriage problems, wickedness all around.

So what did the people in Babel do? God had said: go into the world, multiply and fill it, develop it. But they decided to do the opposite and to stick together in a strong monumental city with a high tower.

Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us

make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."

Jewish Bible commentators stress this decision to not spread over the earth as Babylon's crucial act of disobedience to God. The builders of the city and the tower of Babel wanted to gather the people in one central location exactly in opposition to the expressed will of God.

But was this Babylonian attitude not logical, natural? We also would love to hide from the chaos in the world. We do not want to be scattered. Scattered means disunited, and weak, vulnerable.

Being in one place is nicer. Safer. Outside there are too many dangers. Being all united in one city is better. So away with God and his commands. No interest in lifting up the name of God; Babylon cared more about creating a great name for itself.

The people in Iraq in those days had done away with God their creator, but they were still very religious, worshipping a host of gods. The most important of these was called Sien, the moon God.

20 years ago I visited Babylon, and of the city and its tower just potsherds and broken tiles were left on the empty hills.

In the National Museum in Baghdad I saw the beautiful leftovers of that culture; I was amazed how developed those people were. They were at that time far ahead of Egypt, with amazingly beautiful jewelry, statues and utensils.

In their efforts to keep evil out, they had built a beautiful cultural life around themselves. But evil also entered into the city, into the group.

Because our human problem is not only something on the outside, but in our hearts as well.

How in the world could God redeem this world full of disobedience, worship of idols, human pride?

He did something only he could have thought of... he saw this elderly couple, Abraham and Sarah. They were to become the launch pad of God's mission of global redemption.

Abraham was part of that sinful world of Babylon. He was a rather wealthy man; he was not doing bad at all. But Abraham was also lost. We do not have any information about his life in Iraq but I think it is fair to assume that he also worshipped the gods of that land, and he also desired to be strong and have a great name.

In Haran we meet with Abraham in his weakness. He had no son of his own; he and his wife were childless. This was disastrous. It meant no future. No one to maintain the name of the family. No one who would later say, "I have been born from the family of Abraham."

How often Abraham must have sat on the roof of his house in Haran, staring at the moon at night. Wondering why the gods had not blessed him... Why is my life as it is? Why am I not like the other people, with children?

Is that how you feel today? What is wrong with me? Why has God not given me a better life? Why so much misery around me? I try my best to create a perfect life but I continue to mess up?

But God is not far way from people who feel lost personally, and who feel weak in the midst of their societies.

## 2. Plan of God for Abraham

God spoke to Abraham. He first spoke this one important word: Go. Abraham was to do the opposite of what Babylon did. Do not stay together but leave. Go.

The Moon god had not spoken to Abraham... The moon-gods of this world are manmade and tell people what they want to hear.

But God said to Abraham: Leave your country, leave your nation, and leave your family. This was so totally counter-cultural. Do what no one in your society would do. And in this context of complete sacrificial obedience, God also said:

Go [and] 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. [...] all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

Babylon wanted to be a great nation, to have a great name, so it did not go into the world, but it cocooned within its secure city walls to not be affected by the outside world.

But God calls us to go into that world, that messy world, to develop it, to bring his light, his name, his blessings to all mankind.

I think that in our time, this command for Abraham teaches us to not respond as Babylon did to the problems around us.

We must not curl up within the secure walls of our 'safe' countries, our churches, our homes. God calls you also to go out into the world – to be Gods blessing to the world.

If in the midst of the turmoil of our time, the pattern of God is not for us to sit tight and wait till the storms are over – he calls us to leave our comfort zone, and face the storm, and obey his command to be with the people, and develop the earth. Those people who do so deserve a great name.

For Christians, the arena of economy, politics, social life, agriculture, factories, law, university is where we must be. To be Gods blessing to this world.

It is sad that in our churches we so often focus on the inner life only, and too frequently we have forgotten that the Gospel is a message for us personally and for the societies we are part of.

I was therefore extremely glad with the common statement of the Egyptian Church leaders, including our own bishop Mouneer, of 24 February. In this statement beside many others things they said:

We urge the great people of Egypt to fulfill their national duty through active and positive participation in the political life and their contribution in rebuilding Egypt of the future which embraces all the children of this dear country.

If we hide inside our pleasant social life of church, with each other and with God, we may be building a new Babylon of false security. We are called to go out and fulfill our Christian role by preaching the Gospel in its fullness and this in conjunction with our positive participation in society, in political life, in building this nation.

That sounds scary – the present chaos can seem so frightening. But if we desire salvation, we have no option: salvation begins with trusting in God and then going out and being his servant in this world.

Obedience to God is central. This is true for us personally just as much as it was true for Abraham. Just as later, Jesus, the greatest offspring of Abraham was "made obedient, unto death, even unto death on a cross." (Phil 2:8)

Abraham's obedience was crucial for us. "In you all families of earth shall be blessed", God told him. This promise means that in one way or another, Abraham plays a role in our salvation.

His blessing is intended for the whole world. This is the key element in the promise of God to Abraham.

## 3. The son of Abraham

It is interesting that in the stories of Abraham, we notice the presence of his brother's son, Lot. Abraham's nephew. Lot's father had died and he now lived with the family of Abraham.

Was this how in Babylon they solved the problem of losing your name and fame in case of being childless? If you could not have a child, you could formally adopt one to continue your family name.

This was a man-made solution of Abraham; God had other, better plans. To this old man and his wife he promised, after they had obediently gone to Canaan:

"To your offspring I will give this land". What a great promise to an old man with an old wife who had never been able to have children. God's salvation is

definitely not man-made. It is 100% Gods gift. No wonder Abraham immediately worshipped God.

A great and strong nation, Israel, grew up as the offspring of Abraham. God created a whole new family, a new nation that served and worshipped Him.

A nation of people called to reject the Moon god and all other gods, and to worship the creator of the world only, Yahweh.

But the promise received a much more superior fulfillment. From the family of Abraham the supreme offspring was born, our Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, goes so far as to suggest that the promise of God to Abraham was really first and foremost about Jesus Christ. Listen to what the apostle writes:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring – his seed. It does not say, "And to offsprings – your seeds," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring – your seed", who is Christ.

The promise of salvation that God made to Abraham, that the whole world through him would be blessed, and that he would live in a new land, has been in the fullest possible sense fulfilled when Jesus Christ came. He is the one who effectively brings this blessing of Abraham to the nations and to us. The blessing of the presence of God now and unto eternity.

In his letter to the Church in Rome Paul says that Abraham is the father of us all, not just of Israel alone. (Rom 4:11). He is the father of all who believe.

The apostle also specifies that this belief is not some general belief that there is a God somewhere. He speaks very concretely of faith in Jesus Christ as presented in the Biblical Gospel.

## **Conclusion**

If our faith is focused on Jesus Christ and obeying him, we become so much part of Jesus Christ, so attached to him, that with him, in him, we become offspring of Abraham – part of his family.

Through the obedience of faith we are part of the covenant relationship that God created with Abraham.

And with Abraham, through Jesus Christ, we inherit all the great blessings and promises of God.

Faith in Jesus Christ is letting go of the false securities of the cocooning life of Babylon. This process of letting go is painful.

But it also means being born again into a new family and into a new land, the eternal kingdom of God. And we receive the great name promised to Abraham. We have the name of the Son of God stamped on our life.

You are part of God's redeemed nation – and you are called to not hide from the chaos around us.

Let us, as God's redeemed community, stand in the midst of our world so full of pain and problems and participate fully in it, for being Gods mouth and hand for the good of all an for the glory of his name.

**+ Amen**