

Study 2: Abraham – God Lays a Foundation

Introduction. One of the key things we learn from the Bible is that God is not remote. He shares in our activities, our problems, our dreams. From Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians we learned that God has worked out a plan for our happiness, a plan that’s being carried out all around us in our world today. But in implementing this plan, God had to start somewhere; He had to lay the foundation.

In this session we will find that God invites us to work with Him. He invites us as we are – with all our great qualities of soul, with our visions and ambitions, and with our faults.

God began almost 4,000 years ago with Abram, a nomad sheik who was later renamed Abraham. His story is related in the Book of Genesis, chapters 12 to 25.

(Note: For the time being, we will set aside the first 11 chapters of Genesis which form a little book in themselves. It’s a very important book, but one with special problems. We will look at it later, after we have a better understanding of the people for whom it was written.)

These chapters of Genesis on Abraham are easy reading and relate the beginnings of God’s plan that will reach fulfillment in Christ and the Church. It’s the story of God’s search for humanity. Although there were countless generations of people before Abraham, the Bible dates the history of God’s people from the day when Abraham heard God’s call and responded with trusting faith. On that day the cornerstone of the Church was laid.

Reading. Now open your Bible and read: Genesis, chapters 12 through 25.

Background. “Ur of the Chaldees,” Abraham’s original home, was a thriving commercial center at the head of the Persian Gulf. It commanded the mouth of one of the great shipping channels which made Babylonia an important commercial power. Ur had a great temple dedicated to Nannar, the moon-god.

Abraham was a man of his times, a worshipper of the gods of the “Fertile Crescent.” *[Note: If we draw a line from Egypt through Palestine and Syria and follow the Tigris River from the Euphrates valley to the Persian Gulf, we’ve covered just about all the fertile land in the Middle East. The result is an unmistakable crescent-shaped line.]* This little sliver of land had been a center of civilization from the Stone Age and would remain so through the days of the Greeks and Romans. In Abraham’s time it was home to a number of civilizations living side by side.

As fertile land it was also a tempting target for the barbarian tribes of the mountains. When the valley civilization was strong, it could keep the barbarians at bay; but when it grew soft and weak, as it had in Abraham’s time (c. 2,000 B.C.), the invaders poured in and put everyone on the move.

After leaving Ur, Abraham became a nomad, and he and his tribe lived on the fringe of the desert. They hired out as migratory workers in time of peace and as paid soldiers in time of war.

Key Passages. Highlight these key passages in your Bible by writing key words in the margins.

✠ **Gn 12-13.** *God calls.* God separates His chosen one from the pagan surroundings of his first home. This takes place in three phases: (1) Abraham leaves Ur with his father and nephew (Gn 12:1-3); (2) Abraham leaves his father’s people in Haran (Gn 12:4-5); (3) Abraham and Lot part company (Gn 13:5-13).

✠ **Gn 12.** *God promises.* God’s great promise to Abraham -- first mentioned in Gn 12:2-3 and repeated in Gn 18:18 and Gn 22:16-18 – can be summed up: (1) He will have descendants more numerous than the stars; (2) They will possess a kingdom; (3) This kingdom will be the source of all good things for the whole of mankind.

- † **Gn 12:12-20.** *Abraham's moral failure.* This incident in Egypt reminds us that God takes us as we are – with all our faults – and gradually brings us to a state of full and perfect cooperation. Meanwhile, our faults may hinder the working out of God's plan, but only temporarily. Note that the Bible never shies away from pointing out the faults of even God's most trusted servants.
- † **Gn 15:7.** *Abraham's covenant vision.* The vision of the burning furnace: (1) Fire, the least material of the "elements", is God's spiritual nature; (2) Smoke, because of its impenetrability, represents the mystery of divinity. God condescends to adopt the ritual common among men. The ceremony for making the Covenant (Gn 15:9-21) was for the parties to pass through the divided part of an animal. ("Let what has happened to this animal happen to the first man who breaks this agreement.") And so the divine promises as they affected Israel directly were conditional upon fidelity to the Covenant.
- † **Gn 22.** *Faith.* With the command to sacrifice Isaac, God shows His supreme dominion over all life, but by revoking the command, He shows that He doesn't want us to express our recognition of this dominion by human sacrifice. This was an important lesson in Abraham's day when human sacrifice was common. The test was especially difficult since it was through Isaac that God's promises were to be carried out (Gn 22:15-18). The Church has always seen this event as an image – as a foreshadowing or *type* – of Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross. (See Heb 11:17-19; Rom 8:32)

We have grouped our readings in this study around three key words that sum up how God deals with us, how He works out His plan for our happiness, not only in ancient history, but right here and now:

- † **Call.** The whole of sacred history and our life with God depends entirely on God's initiative.
- † **Faith.** God wills that His actions in human history have consequences in our lives. He throws down repeated challenges to which we must respond.
- † **Covenant.** The intimacy of God's activity is first expressed through a covenant. Later He will typify His dealings with us by a nuptial image, the image of bride and bridegroom.

Throughout the New Testament we are shown how the promises made to Abraham are fulfilled in Christ:

- † **John 8:51-59.** Abraham's call by God to be the Father of a chosen race is confirmed, but now it's clear that it points to Christ and His work.
- † **Rom 4:1-25.** Abraham entered into friendship with God through the gift of faith. We, too, can enter into God's friendship through faith in His divine Son.
- † **Mt 16:18.** The covenant which rests on the "rock" Abraham (See also Is 51:1-2) is replaced by a New Covenant which rests on the "rock" Peter.
- † **Gal 3:7-29.** The promises made to Abraham are actually worldwide in their fulfillment in Christ.

Questions:

1. Do you think God's command to sacrifice Isaac made sense to Abraham? Is it unusual for God to ask us to do things that seem to make no sense when judged by our standards? Any examples?
2. In what sense is it true to say that Abraham consented to the destruction of all his hope? (See Gen 15:1-6 and Gen 22:2)
3. The command to sacrifice Isaac was a great test of Abraham's faith in God's promise. How had this marked an improvement in the quality and depth of Abraham's faith?
4. What do we learn about the virtue of faith from Abraham's life?
5. In what sense are we children of Abraham?