

June 8, 2014

## The Call of God

Genesis 11:27 – 12:9

This morning we come to the story of the call of God to Abraham – or Abram as we read here in chapter 12. I'll probably mess up and call him Abraham more often than not, but that shouldn't throw you. Abram means exalted father and Abraham means father of a multitude. Or you could say Abram means Daddy and Abraham means Big Daddy. But what is really important is that Abram was just another name in another genealogical list until God called him. We don't read about any particular accomplishments or distinguishing actions in Abram's life. Until the call of God comes on his life he's as memorable as Shelah or Arpachshad. What made his life special, what makes him a father figure to the three most influential religions in the world, is the call of God on his life. And what makes your life special, what makes your life distinctive, the thing that gives it meaning and purpose is the call of God. In fact, I think we can safely say that you're not a Christian **until** you've heard and responded to the call of God.

And our text this morning shows us at least three things about the call of God. It shows us the power of the call; it shows us the nature of the call; and it shows us how to receive the call. The power of the call, the nature of the call, how we receive the call. First of all let's look at **the power of the call**. Here's the situation. Things are hopeless. Genesis 11:27-32 brings us to that conclusion. Things look hopeless. Chapters 1 – 11 have shown us a downward spiral of the human race. People becoming more and more corrupt, more and more evil, more and more violent and oppressed and broken.

At the same time, there seems to be a thin ray of hope running through all of this. There is a single generational line, Seth's line, that runs from Adam to Abram. This is the line of men and women who called upon the name of the Lord. This is the line of Noah, the line of people who knew the true God and worshiped Him and they passed that knowledge on to successive generations, all the way down to Terah and Abram. But chapter 11 ends by saying – '**Terah died in Haran**'. It is almost as if the writer were saying – 'It's the end of the line folks'. Why would I say that? Well, first of all, the name Terah means moon, and Ur of the Chaldees was the center of lunar worship. These people were moon-worshippers. And Terah is named for the moon god.

But more than owning a coincidental name, the book of Joshua tells us that Terah, although he came from a godly family, **was an idolator**. In Joshua's farewell speech to Israel, he said: '*Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.*' This godly family, knowing who God is and knowing who created the world, knowing what we were built for had gone over to idol worship. **Spiritually the last little candle has almost flickered out**. And not only that, physically the line of Seth is about to end. This text tells us that Abram's wife, Sarai is barren – she can't have children. They've not only lost it spiritually, they're about to wink out of existence – no heir for Abram. One commentator wrote: "**The barrenness of Sarai is an effective metaphor for hopelessness**" What this text tells us that there is no foreseeable future. There's no human power to invent a future. Human history has just hit a dead end. It's over.

And then God speaks again. This is the power of the call – it is powerful because it is **relentless, essential and gracious**. It is **relentless**. If we read Stephen's account of this in Acts 7 we can see this. Stephen, before the courts said: "*Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.'*" Evidently, God first speaks to Abram in Ur of the Chaldees and we see in verse 31 that Abram and his father Terah respond by getting out. moving to Haran – with what is left of his family. And it tells us that they set out for Canaan, but they settled for Haran. We don't know why they settled for Haran – maybe they were tired – it's a long way from Ur of the Chaldees. Or maybe they stopped for a rest and then just never got started again. But God doesn't leave it there. He comes again. The call of God is relentless – He goes after us. And what God wants – God always gets. He wants Abram – and so at the beginning of chapter twelve the call comes again. *Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.*

In my own life I know that God called me early on. It wasn't a call to be a pastor, or a call to full-time ministry as such – it was simply a call to follow Him. And I ran from that call for many years. But God didn't stop – He hounded me, waking and sleeping, until one day I couldn't run anymore. The call is relentless – it won't let you go. In writing of his own conversion, John Stott says: ***Why I am a Christian is due ultimately neither to the influence of my parents and teachers, nor to my own personal decision for Christ, but to "the Hound of Heaven."*** *That is, it is due to Jesus Christ Himself, who pursued me relentlessly even when I was running away from Him in order to go my own way. And if it were not for the gracious pursuit of the Hound of Heaven I would today be on the scrapheap of wasted and discarded lives.* The call is relentless.

The call of God is **essential**. Abram comes from the best family – he's in direct descent from Seth, the son of Adam – but spiritually he's an idolator and if it wasn't for the call of God he'd still be there. You know, my girls come from a pretty good family – there's a legacy of God followers in their line. But it doesn't translate genetically to them. Unless my kids hear the call of God for themselves – **personally** – unless God comes in and convicts them, humbles them, shakes them up and they embrace Him, they will just be nice little idolators just like Abram. They may end up nice and moral and religious, but they are going to be idolators – they're going to live for their careers; they'll live for their families, or money, or power, or position. They're going to live for something else unless the call of God comes into their lives. I think though I can say with a fair amount of confidence that my girls have responded personally to the call – you don't have to send them a link to this message.

The call of God is essential – it doesn't matter if your family looks like the line of Cain or the line of Seth. Unless the call of God comes in and disturbs you, disrupts your plans for yourself – you'll find yourself settling for Haran. The power of the call of God is not only relentless; it is not only essential – it is absolutely **gracious**. Look at Abram. He's unqualified – he's an idolator – he's not a good guy – he only obeys part-way. His name means exalted father, but he can't even be that, much less father of a multitude. He's not really qualified. But ***the call of God is never to the qualified; rather it is the call that qualifies you.*** It is absolutely God's grace.

Isaac was a day dreamer, Jacob was a cheat, Peter had a temper problem and Thomas doubted everything. Martha was a worrier; Timothy had a dicey stomach; and Paul persecuted the church. Noah got drunk. Elisha was suicidal, and Jonah ran from God. David had an affair and tried to cover it up with murder. Gideon was insecure, Miriam was a gossiper, Elijah was moody. Rehab was a prostitute and Samson – he liked prostitutes. Isaiah preached naked for three years, and nobody listened, John the Baptist ate bugs and had second thoughts about his cousin. Moses stuttered, Jeremiah was way too emotional. Zacheus was too short, Sarah was too old and Lazarus was too dead. ***God doesn't call the qualified, He qualifies the called!*** The call of God will transform the best and the worst of us. It doesn't matter who we are – God is not a respecter of persons – He doesn't call us because we come from the best families, and He doesn't ignore us because we come from the worst families. He calls us because He wants us. And He's relentless; and His call is essential, we have to hear it for ourselves; and His call doesn't come to us because of who we are. It always comes to us by His grace.

The second thing we learn is the **nature of this call**. What is it? What is the content of the call? If we look at the first three verses of chapter 12 we see it: *Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* This is a compelling call. First of all it's **personally compelling**. God tells Abram, 'Go'. In the old King James it is much more colorful – **'Get thee out!'** Literally, in Hebrew, God says, 'Get yourself out'.

You see, earlier we saw that Terah and all his family, including Abram, his wife and their family and Lot his nephew had heard the call to leave Ur, and they did. But they got to Haran and they stopped. They got about halfway to Canaan and they stopped. And they were content to go halfway. And Abram not doubt felt pretty good about getting out of Ur, but they had found a good place to stay in Haran, besides, his whole family is there and not inclined to move on. And God comes personally to Abram and says, 'Get out yourself'. It is as though Abram is having a conversation with God and saying, 'I know we're supposed to keep going, but this is my family and we've at least come halfway, and besides I can't get these guys moving'. And God says, **'Then get out yourself'**.

The nature of the call is that it is personally compelling. It is a personal call to place family, friends, culture and home second. Jesus exposed the nature of the call in Luke 14 when He told His disciples: *"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple."* What is Jesus saying? He's saying that a relationship with Him needs to be in a totally different category far above and beyond every other relational commitment we have. Jesus alone is worthy of full allegiance and devotion. No one can be as significant to us as him, no one. Darrell Bock, who wrote the gold standard commentary on Luke, he says it this way: ***"The call to hate simply means to love less. The image is strong, but it is not a call to be insensitive or to leave all feeling behind. Following Jesus is to be the disciple's first love. This pursuit is to have priority over family members and one's own life, which means that other concerns are to take second place to following Jesus."*** We need to hear this personally – otherwise we're just following the crowd.

The call is also **volitionally compelling**. What do I mean by volitional? Volition is the act of making a choice or making a decision; and at the heart of the call is the radical surrender of the will. And where we see that is in the first part of this call: *"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.* Where's that? 'Don't worry about it, Abram – I'll show you'. Notice that God doesn't give him any direction other than get up and get out. In fact, I believe that may be one of the reasons Terah stopped in Haran. God had not given a final destination and Terah got tired of traveling. Moses records that they set out to go to Canaan, but that comes after the fact. The call first comes to Abram in Ur, and God didn't give him a final destination.

But this is unsettling. We want to know when we've arrived. We want to know the parameters of the thing. But God doesn't give that to us in the call. He just says, 'Go'. You know, people often ask 'What do I have to do and what do I have to stop doing when I become a Christian?' I've talked to people who have asked things like, 'If I became a Christian, would I have to give up my boyfriend or my girlfriend? Will I have to give up the kind of lifestyle I have right now? Would I have to stop doing this or doing that?' And when you say, 'I'll get out if you show me where you're taking me and exactly what I have to do' you are not answering the call. You're keeping control of your life. You are not surrendering your volition, you're not giving up your will, your way. You are on the throne – not God. You're saying, ***'I'll only go if I know where this is going and if this makes sense to me'***.

But God says to Abram, 'Get out – leave your country, your family, your father's house'. Period. And Abram says, 'But where?' And God says, 'I'll show you later – trust Me'. And later God is going to say 'I'll give you a son'. And Abram says, 'How?' And God says, 'I'll show you later, trust Me'. And then still later God says, 'Give me your son, your only son'. And Abram says, 'Why?' And God says, 'I'll show you later – trust Me'. And that's what it means that the call is volitionally compelling. It causes you to surrender your will, your way, your plans, your dreams and hopes and aspirations to the God who says, ***'I'll show you later – just trust Me'***. You cannot call yourself a follower of Jesus if you have not surrendered your will to His. If the call does not compel you to give up what you would like in favor of what God would like, you cannot say that you've answered the call.

You see, if you do not surrender your will, God cannot do great things in your life. Look at what He tells Abram: ***'I will make of you a great nation'***. What a promise! What a prospect! But as we learned last week, God does not do that with those who seek to make themselves great. And God deliberately puts us in situations where we don't know where we're going, or even sometimes what is happening so that we won't try to say 'I did this'. You have not really embraced the call if you are saying, 'I will obey if...I'll follow You if...' ***You haven't really embraced the gospel until you've taken your hands off the control of your life.***

The third thing about the nature of the call is that it is **missionally compelling**. It's personally compelling, you have to meet Him yourself; it's volitionally compelling, you have to surrender your will to His; and it is also missionally compelling. Look at what God says: 'I will bless you, ***so that*** you will be a blessing'. *And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.* To follow Christ is to be so changed that you are not making your decisions based on what is the most conducive situation for me – where is the best place to live for my security and comfort – what is the best job to enhance my lifestyle and make the most money – what is best for me. The call of God is so compelling, so transforming, that you instead ask the question, ***'How can I be a blessing? Where can I be a blessing? What is the best thing I can do to bless the nations? How can my life point others to the glory of God?'*** In other words, ***'How can I fulfill the mission?'***

The call of God breaks down like this: If you seek to be blessed – you'll be empty. If you seek to bless others, God says, 'I'll bless you'. 'If you live for the blessing of others, if you live to fill others up, I'll fill you'. Psalm 67, Scriptural inspiration for our mission statement here at Summit puts it like this: *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make His face to shine upon us, that Your way may be known on earth, Your saving power among all nations...God blesses us, that all the ends of the earth may fear Him. God only blesses that we may be a blessing.*

And the reality is that we have to get out to be a blessing. Abram was not going to be a blessing to the nations by staying in Haran. He had to get out. The call of God pulls us into His purpose and plan. **But God never pulls you in without sending you out. You've got to get out.** What does it mean to get out of your country, get out of your family, get out of your home? It means to get out of your security zone. Get out of your comfort zone. Get out of the familiar. Enter the company of strangers. It means that you don't spend your hours and your days building your own thing, feathering your own nest, working for your own interests. The call of God is missionally compelling – it's meant to be.

In John 17 Jesus is praying for His disciples – and all who would follow them. And at one point He prays, **'Father, as you sent Me into the world, so now I am sending them into the world'**. The call of God is a sending call. The call of God does two things – it calls us out of something and it calls us into something. Just before that Jesus tells the Father that He is praying all these things so that our joy would be full. No one has joy like someone who knows they have something that will change the world. You'll never find real joy until you finally serve something bigger than your own little interests, until your heart is filled with something bigger than your own career opportunities, until your dreams are bigger than your own comfort and security. You can't be a blessing until you get out. **And the call of God comes to call you out.**

God says, 'If you're willing to get out, I'll bless you and make you a blessing'. If you want to keep a tidy, manageable, comfortable little life, you won't be of much use to anyone. Right now, there are people around you that need you to talk to them about God, about important, eternal things, but you're afraid, you don't want to look bad or risk offending them, or you're too busy with your own life, you don't want to get out. And so you can't bless them. **To the degree that you're willing to get out of the safe, get out of the familiar, get out of the comfortable, to that degree God says, 'I will bless you so that you will bless them'.**

So we've seen the power of the call and the nature of the call, but **how do we receive the call of God?** Look at verse four of chapter twelve: *So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.* First of all, Abram went out – just like God told him to do. But Hebrews 11 tells us what was behind the whole thing. *By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.* The key to receiving the call is to **respond in faith**. So what is faith? Faith is knowing that God is real and that you can trust in His promises. You can't trust someone who isn't there, and you can't rely on someone whose promises are not reliable. *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* Faith is talked about as the **substance** of things hoped for and as the **evidence** of things not seen. Both words carry with them a sense of reality. Our hope is not wishful thinking. Faith does not make God real. On the contrary, faith is the response to a real God who wants to be known to us.

The call has always been the same: 'Come, believe in Jesus, believe in the Light of the world.' It does not call us to take a flying leap off a dark ledge; no such invitation is found anywhere in Scripture. Instead, we are called to step into the light. The Christian gospel is not a message that revels in ignorance. It is the revelation of God in the person of Christ. The Christian is called to see things as they *really are*, and not as they would simply like them to be. We trust in a God who has been revealed to us in the Son. We believe because God is real. There is a God who is real and true; there is a God who is near and longing to gather you nearer; there is a God who promises to bless and make you a blessing; there is a God who promises full joy. The great joy of the Christian faith is found in the person of Christ who invites us to trust and believe – to respond in faith.

Notice the promise of God to Abraham in verse seven: *Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.* Actually when God says '**To your offspring**', the word He uses is **seed** – '**To your seed**' – a singular noun. You see Abram was given all these promises, But there was one promise that was underneath all the promises – God was going to give him a seed – a son. God was going to make him a great nation – but he needed a son; he was going to be the father of multitudes – but he needed a son; God was going to make his name great – but he needed a son; he would be blessed and be a blessing to all the families of the earth – but he needed a son. All the promises rested on this one promise.

But Abram was old and Sarah was barren, and for him to have a son would be an act of miraculous grace. And God was saying, 'Abram, you can't do this by yourself – you can't qualify for this – **you're just going to have to live by faith in the promise of a son**'. This was the promise of Genesis 3:15 again restated for Abram of the seed of the woman, Christ, who would come through his barren wife. All of the Old Testament points ahead in time by faith to the appearance of this Christ and His death on the cross and the redemption and restoration of all things. And all of the New Testament points us back to that same cross and to Jesus, the seed of Abraham. Then Genesis records that Abram responds by pitching his tent in the land of promise and worshiping God. *From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD.* We respond to the call by **pitching our tent**, so to speak, on the promises of God. That is we stake our lives on what He has called us to. **We stake our lives on God.**

Finally we see that Abram responds to the call by faith, staking his future on the promises of God, and **living as an alien** the rest of his life. *And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.* Abram journeyed on, never settling down in one place for long, living as a stranger in the land of promise. Again, Hebrews 11 paints the picture: *By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.* This is the Christian life. We are called to live as foreigners here. We've been called to be a blessing to a world that is ultimately not our home. Peter call us 'aliens, strangers, sojourners' and 'exiles' – pilgrims. God does not intend for us to settle down here – to get comfortable here – or to live as though this were our home.

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote, '**I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others do the same.**' So what about you? Have you responded to the call? Has the call of God gripped your soul? Have you felt the relentless, essential, gracious power of this call? Has it captured you personally? Has it gotten hold of your will? Has it compelled you to go out? Have you staked everything on Him? Are you living like this is not your home? This is the call of God. Hear the call this morning and surrender to it.

*Our gracious Father and God,  
How we thank You for Your relentless, gracious call – calling us out of darkness and into the light – calling us away from mere earthly comforts and security – calling us to greater joy and greater things than anything this world offers – calling us to Your Son. Holy Spirit, help us to respond by faith to get up and get out, to stake our lives and futures on all the promises of God and the work of Jesus Christ. Grant us to live not to make our name great but to make Your name great – to live not to be blessed, but to be a blessing, and to live as exiles and sojourners here, pressing on to that other country, helping all we can to do the same, we pray in the precious, saving name of Jesus Christ, Amen.*