

“ABRAM’S CALL AND OURS”

The text before us tonight is one of the greatest and most important texts in the entire Bible. The call of Abram is the beginning of the nation of Israel, and it is therefore the foundation upon which the rest of the Old Testament is built. From the moment of Abram’s call up until the birth of the New Testament church, God’s redemptive purposes will be carried out in the history of the people of Israel, the nation that he formed from Abram’s descendants. But God’s purpose for Israel extended far beyond the fortunes of that one nation. As our text says, the Lord made a nation out of Abram so that all the families of the earth might be blessed in him. Through that nation, God sent the One in whom his promise to Abraham would find its ultimate fulfillment. Jesus Christ was a descendant of Abraham, and his gospel is being preached to the ends of the earth. So we can see that this passage is central for our understanding of the outworking of God’s plan of redemption within history. And it is also central to the lives of everyone who shares in that redemption. As the New Testament tells us, all of those who have the faith of Abraham are children of Abraham. For this reason, the story of God’s call of Abram teaches us about God’s call on our lives. It provides us with a foundational picture of what the life of faith looks like. This is summed up by one commentator in these words: “Those who truly believe the Word of the Lord will forsake all else to become worshippers of the Lord and to serve in his program to bring blessing to the world.” [Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 268]

We begin to see the theme of forsaking all else to follow the Lord in the opening verse of the passage, where God commands Abram to leave his country, his people, and his family and go to a new land. Such a move called for bold trust in God, as Abram was being called to abandon all other sources of security. In this sense, God's call of Abram is very similar to Jesus' call of his first disciples. Jesus even went so far as to say that a person cannot be his disciple unless he hates his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, and even his own life. [see Lk. 14:26] Of course, Jesus was speaking with hyperbole when he said that. He wasn't actually commanding us to hate our relatives. Instead, as the larger context of that passage makes clear, Jesus was saying that we need to realize that his claim upon our lives is greater than anyone else's claim upon our lives, even the claims of our dearest loved ones. Once we respond to the call to follow him, we must not allow anything else to cause us to turn aside from that path.

This is vividly illustrated in the story of Christian in Bunyan's classic allegory *Pilgrim's Progress*. At the beginning of the story, Christian, burdened as he is with his sins upon his back, is told by Evangelist to go directly to the Wicket Gate and he immediately sets off in that direction. Here is how Bunyan expresses it:

“So I saw in my dream that the Man began to run: Now he had not run far from his own door, but his Wife and Children perceiving it, began to cry after him to return; but the Man put his fingers in his ears, and ran on

crying, *Life! Life! Eternal Life!* So he looked not behind him, but fled towards the middle of the Plain.”

Some people have trouble with this part of Bunyan’s allegory. I remember once when a pastor of mine told me that he did not like *Pilgrim’s Progress* because it uses the image of abandoning one’s family in a positive sense. It was something that he found too difficult to get past. Now as someone who places a very high value upon my own family, I can relate to that. But we need to remember, after all, that Bunyan’s story is an allegory. And on top of that, Jesus himself used the very same image. Bunyan didn’t come up with it; he got it from Jesus. And he used it to convey the same point for which Jesus used it. Christian will not allow anything or anyone to divert him from the path that has been set before him as the only way to eternal life.

We can see the same thing in the life of Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian pastor who founded the Voice of the Martyrs, a ministry to persecuted Christians throughout the world. For many years, Wurmbrand himself was imprisoned and tortured in communist Romania because of his loyalty to Jesus Christ. At one point while he was in prison, a top official brought him into a prison office and offered him his freedom if he would agree to renounce the “superstitious” views of Christianity and teach what was in accord with the ideals of communism. At first, Wurmbrand asked for time to consider the offer. He desperately missed his wife and son, and his love for them made this offer very appealing. But with God’s help he rejected it and remained loyal to Christ. Some time

later, when he was finally released and returned home to his family, he said to them: “I must tell you something...Don’t think that I have come from misery to happiness. I’ve come from the joy of being with Christ in prison to the joy of being with Him in my family.” The thing that mattered most to Richard Wurmbrand was being with Christ. He loved his wife and his son, but his love for God was greater. [Hannula, *Trial and Triumph*, 285-7]

This is something that is fundamental to the life of discipleship. How often do we see that people are held back from embracing the gospel because of their relationships, or because of other things in which they find their security? When God called Abram to leave his country and his family, he was calling him to do the very same thing that Christian did in Bunyan’s allegory: to plug up his ears and follow the path that God set before him. And God requires the same thing of all who share Abraham’s faith. He calls us to abandon all other sources of security and entrust ourselves entirely to him.

Verses 2-3 contain the promises that God will confer upon Abram if he responds to this call in faith and obedience. It is important for us to pay attention to the fact that the blessings that God holds out to Abraham are conditional. They will only be received if Abram believes God and obeys him. This doesn’t mean that he earns the blessings. It simply means that the things that God promises to his people in the gospel can only be received through faith, and the only genuine faith is faith that bears the fruit of obedience.

God says that he will make Abram into a great nation and make his name great. Even though Abram is leaving his own family and his own people, and even though his wife

Sarai is barren, God will make a new people out of him. Furthermore, he says that the reason why he is blessing Abram in this way is so that he will be a blessing to others. The ESV captures this well when it translates the last phrase of verse 2 as “so that you will be a blessing.” God blessed Abram so that he would be a means by which God would bless others. This too is a key feature of the Christian life. God does not save us from our sins and grant us new life in Christ simply for our own sake. He redeems us and makes us his people so that he might work through us to extend the blessings of the gospel to others. You and I have been blessed in order that we might be made a source of blessing to others. The Lord wants you to pursue the blessings of salvation not just for yourself, but for other people as well. You have been blessed to be a blessing.

In verse 3, God says that those who bless Abram will be blessed, and those who dishonor him will be cursed. This promise shows that God mediates the blessings of his grace through his covenant community. In the Old Testament, the only way to receive the blessings that God promised to Abram was to become a part of the people who called Abraham their father, the nation of Israel. And from the New Testament onward, the only way to receive the blessings held forth in the gospel is to become a part of the people who share the faith of Abraham, the Christian church. Of course, this does not mean that people are saved by becoming Israelites or joining a church. The only way of salvation, from the days of Adam until the Second Coming, is by trusting the Lord to provide atonement for your sins. But in both the Old and New Testaments, God mediates that provision of atonement through his church, whether through the sacrificial system under

the Mosaic law or through the proclamation of the gospel in the Christian church. Only those who acknowledge the church as the covenant community of the true and living God can share in the blessings that the Lord pours out on his people. In short, you cannot be a Christian and be against Christ's church.

For this reason, whenever someone sets himself against God's covenant people, he is setting himself against God. This is the key to understanding those portions of the psalms that we can find so troubling, those verses in which the psalmist calls down God's judgment and wrath against his enemies. Such passages are to be understood not as cries for personal vengeance but for the Lord to vindicate the people that he has taken to be his very own. When the Lord enters into a covenant with a people, he binds himself to those people, so that those who oppose them as they seek to live for God are actually opposing the Lord himself.

Though there is no explicit mention of Abram's faith in this passage, we can certainly see his faith in action. He demonstrates his faith by obeying what the Lord commanded him to do. Here is yet another feature of the life of faith: true faith bears the fruit of obedience. Abram left everything and went to the land that God showed him, the land of Canaan, and he did so because he believed the Lord.

Canaan was an interesting choice. The land of Canaan was filled with people who knew absolutely nothing about the Lord, a people who were idolatrous and exceedingly wicked, as we see in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. The name Moreh in v. 6 means "teaching" in Hebrew, and this has led many scholars to believe that the oak of Moreh

was probably a place where the Canaanites received oracles from the prophets of their false gods. There was nothing in the people of Canaan that was commendable to God. God's choice of the land of Canaan further emphasized his insistence in building his covenant people out of nothing.

It is also interesting to consider the choice of Canaan in light of how God's plan of redemption unfolded over the course of history. Canaan is located right at the point where the continents of Asia and Africa meet, and it also has easy access to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea. This is significant because, as this passage makes so clear, God's purpose for Israel was never limited to Israel. His plan was to extend his grace to all peoples through them. God clearly chose Canaan with this purpose in mind. In the words of one theologian, "In the fullness of time [Canaan's] strategic position proved of supreme importance for the spreading abroad of the Gospel unto the whole earth." [Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 77]

Once Abram arrived in Canaan, the Lord appeared to him there in some kind of visible form, what biblical scholars refer to as a theophany. Imagine how comforting and reassuring this would have been for Abram. He had left his family and his country; he had travelled many miles; and he was now in a strange land. The Lord knew how hard it would have been for Abram to keep on believing, so he confirmed his promise to him by appearing to him. God did not have to do this. He is the Lord. He could have spoken just that one time to Abram and expected him to keep on trusting him for the rest of his life. But he didn't do that. He appeared to Abram in a visible form. And God does

something like this for us. He provides props to support our weak faith. We do not receive theophanies, but we have been given the sacraments, which serve as a tangible way of assuring us of God's promises and of his presence with us. God knows how weak our faith is, and he provides in this way for the ongoing renewal of his covenant with us so that our faith may be strengthened.

Abram responded to God's appearance to him by worshipping him in this new land. He built altars, houses for God, places of worship. This is the beginning of how he would come to be a blessing to others. Abram entered into a land of idolatry and he proclaimed the name of the Lord in it. Even though this land would not be given to his descendants for many generations to come, Abram symbolically claimed it for the Lord by setting up houses of worship in it. It was as though he was planting flags for God's kingdom there. The Lord calls us to do the very same thing. We too must proclaim our faith in our idolatrous land by establishing worshipping communities in it. This is one of the reasons why church planting is at the heart of our missionary endeavors as a church, as a presbytery and as a denomination.

The call of Abram is a picture of God's call in our lives as well. We too are called to forsake all else to worship the Lord amidst an idolatrous world. We too are called to serve God by bringing the blessings of the gospel to all the peoples of the earth. May God grant us the grace to do so, even as he did for our father Abraham. Amen.