



# The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> April 2004  
by Mark Ashton

10p

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Genesis 11:27 – 12:20

## A Stranger in a Strange Land

### Introduction – one of the great hinge passages of the Bible

We are starting a new series in the Book of Genesis, and we're starting with one of the great hinge passages of the Bible.

So far, the Book of Genesis has travelled at a breathless pace through its first 11 chapters, from the very beginning of time (in chapter 1, verse 1); telescoping thousands of millions of years of the earth's history into a few pages (suggesting the comparative insignificance, in God's eyes, of that primeval pre-history as compared with the story that is now going to follow). And up till now it has been a story, as far as the human race is concerned, of sin and of judgement. We've had God's judgement on Adam at the Fall; on Cain for the murder of his brother Abel; on the earth's population at the time of Noah by the great flood; and on the builders of the Tower of Babel in the previous chapter, chapter 11. But now the pace slows and we are going to hear of a new start, which is going to be described in much greater detail than the first start; and it will ultimately reverse that judgement of God on human sin. It will present us with the life of faith as a model for human existence on this planet.

So Abraham is actually a more central figure in the Bible story than any other person between Adam and Jesus. His name comes more often in the New Testament than any other Old Testament name. He was in fact the quintessential believer, as is made clear in Hebrews 11:8-12: the first man of whom it was said that he was justified by faith. The Bible holds Abraham up to you and me as a pattern to all of us who would believe in God. All believers are 'children of Abraham.'

It all began in Ur of the Chaldeans, which was roughly the area we call Iraq today, where Abraham's father Terah set out with his family for Canaan: *'Terah took his son Abram [later God is going to change his name to Abraham], his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. <sup>32</sup>Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran'* (Genesis 11: 31-32).

It started there, and it started with the call of God: *'The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"'* (12:1-3).

### 1) The Promise-making God (12:1-3)

#### God's gracious initiative

We know from a little later in the Bible (Joshua 24:2) that Abram's family worshipped other gods back in Mesopotamia, in Ur; and there is nothing to tell us that Abram in any sense deserved God's call. In the story of Noah we are told that Noah was righteous. But there is nothing to tell us that Abram was righteous: it was entirely God's gracious initiative to call Abram out of his country and away from his kinfolk. We talk of 'unsolicited mail' – when you get those advertising circulars arriving through your letterbox. We have not done anything to cause them to arrive: they just appear without any warning. Well, Abram's call was in that sense unsolicited. It did not come because Abram

in any way had caused it to come: it just ‘arrived’. Now, those mail-shots when they reach you and me are not always entirely welcome to us! And we don’t know how welcome this call was to Abram when it came. It was certainly unsettling. To leave country, race and family was to abandon all normal security in the ancient world. To be a stranger in a strange land was to make yourself dangerously vulnerable.

But along with the command to leave all that was familiar and to go to the land that God would show him, notice, there came to Abram the promise of God’s six-fold blessing: *“Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. 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. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”* (12:1b-3). “Leave ... go ... I will ... I will ... I will ... I will ... I will ...” But the trouble is, of course, that “leave” and “go” are in the present tense, while “I will ...” is in the future. And those promises that God made to Abram were not believable in themselves. When God tells him he is going to become a great nation, Abram is already 75 years old, childless and married to a barren woman. The promise was not believable in itself. When he reached the land that God had told him to go to, it was already fully occupied. It wasn’t some paradise waiting to be occupied, it was full of Canaanites – with whom Abram was to spend the rest of his life having dealings of various sorts. In fact, he died owning no more of it than just one cave, in which he buried his wife. All he left behind at the end of his life was one son and one cave.

### **We trust the Promiser rather than the promise**

But Abram’s faith did not falter. It did not waver, because (the New Testament tells us) he looked not to the promises (which were not believable in themselves) but to the Promiser. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that Abraham *‘considered him faithful who had made the promise’* (Heb. 11:11). One of the intriguing things about this story is how little we are told about Abram. We are not told how Abram had developed that knowledge of God. But to trust such outrageous promises, he must have felt able to trust the One Who made them. We need to learn this: faith is not thinking that God’s promises are believable – it is reckoning that the Promiser is trustworthy, and can therefore be taken at His word.

Yesterday, in this very building, I asked a question I’ve asked a great many men in the last 30 years: “Sujit, will you take Caroline to be your wife? Will you love her, comfort her, honour and protect her, and, forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?” And the bridegroom replied, “I will.” (Not as one bridegroom apparently said in reply to that question, “I wilt.”) Looking back over all those weddings that I’ve taken during the last 30 years, I realise that the overwhelming majority of the men to whom I’ve asked that question have kept the promise contained in those two monosyllables: “I will.” But some haven’t. And the difference between those who have and those who have not was not in the nature of the promise itself (that it was too high a promise for some of them to keep), nor in the degree of love they felt at the time, nor in any lack of sentiment or emotion on the occasion of the wedding. It was in the man himself. It was his faithfulness that was at stake. Was he a man of his word?

It is like that with the promises of God. It is not the promise itself that matters; it is the Promiser. Can you believe that you’re going to get to heaven? If you are an honest person, your answer is, “No!” Does this surprise you? You thought this was a Christian gathering and we were all confident that we are going to get to heaven. I look at you: I don’t know some of you, but I am confident that none of you can get to heaven. Does this come as a surprise to you? I look into myself – I am confident that I cannot get to heaven. I cannot believe that promise – as a promise. But I can believe the One Who has made that promise to me.

Do you begin to see what faith is? It is not faith in the promise: it is to consider faithful the One Who has said to us that His Son has died for our sins, and that for His sake He will take you and me to be with Him for ever in heaven. The Christian faith begins with a promise from God. Not with a nice fellowship in a building like this. Not in an attempt to be better people, ‘let’s all live a good life together’. Not some happy singing of some lovely modern or ancient songs, or whatever it might be. The Christian faith begins with a promise from the living God to you – and your acceptance of that promise (unless you reject it). All of us look much the same in this building, all of us sing together and pray together – but there is a line that goes right through this gathering: it’s those who have accepted that promise, and those who have not yet accepted it.

You may be somebody who is considering the Christian life: you are thinking it through, and as I say this now you are thinking *Well, I’m not so sure which side of that line I am on actually*. Can I encourage you very much indeed to come back next week? We’re going to come back to this passage again and we’re going to look in more detail at these promises. And we are going to think of the challenge that they are to us today – to do what Abram did then.

That’s the Promise maker. We’re going to return to Him next week; and it’s the greatest subject in the world.

## **2) Abraham's response** (12:4-20)

### **a) to obey** (vv. 4-5)

*'So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there'* (vv. 4, 5). *'So Abram left'* – it doesn't sound very much in those 3 short words. But it contains the reason why so many never embark on the life of faith. To go to Canaan, Abram had to leave; first Ur, then Haran. In order to take hold of what God had promised him, he had to let go of what he had already gained for himself. A tightly clenched hand cannot receive. Is that true of some of our lives, in terms of our relationship with God? We hold so tightly to what we have managed to acquire or to achieve (I don't know what it might be: a reputation; independence; self-respect; control over our lives perhaps?) It may be a record of achievement of which we are quite proud: we built something up by our own efforts and it pleases us to see it, and it means a great deal to us. And for God to ask us to release it is an awfully big ask. I don't think we should minimise what it meant for Abram to leave; and I don't think we should minimise what it means for you and I to respond in obedience to God. A closed hand cannot receive. And we need to ask ourselves: Is that what we are offering to God – a hand that is closed? We need to present all our lives to God in an open hand – resting there on an open palm – for Him to take from us what He chooses (however cherished it may be: a loved one, a family, a child, a PhD: something that means so much to us). The more tightly you and I hold things in life the less we are able to receive from God. The Christian life is lived with an open palm before the living God, in trust and faith. And He may take from you the thing you love most. We're going to see that in the life of Abraham as we go on through Genesis. But to trust God is to live with an open palm so that He may take what He chooses to take, and so that He may give us what He chooses to give.

Abram left – that was what it meant for him to obey. But he was also patient.

### **(b) to be patient**

His response was to obey, but also to be patient. And we must not miss this because very much of the chapter is given to it. First, verses 6-9, which I have called,

(i) *'Awaiting God's fulfilment'*.

*'Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he went on towards the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. Then Abram set out and continued towards the Negev.'*

God was to confirm His promises to Abram in a variety of ways in the years to come. In the next chapter (chapter 13) God is going to invite Abram to view the land of Canaan; in chapter 15 He's going to show him all the stars in the heavens; in chapter 17 He's going to give him the covenant of circumcision; in chapter 22 God is going to swear a solemn oath to support His promises. In a variety of different ways God sought to confirm the promises. But above all, God confirmed His promise to Abram by repetition. Nine times in the next few chapters (that's what one commentary says, but I think it is many more than that if you get down to reading them) the promise is repeated. It is repeated for the first time in verse 7: *'The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land.'* But how long it was going to take for that promise to be fulfilled!

John Calvin commented: 'God gave him a bare word.' But God kept repeating that word; and somehow it was that repetition that sustained Abram's faith. We need to keep hearing God's word to us. We learn about God by hearing from Him, not by dreaming about Him (not by sitting back and meditating in an empty vacuum). Because God is beyond your and my knowledge, if we are to know anything about Him at all, He has to tell us (it's called 'revelation'). So if we are going to know about Him, we have got to be listening to Him speaking to us. Imagine a lover who ignored her sweetheart's letters and emails and 'phone calls because she preferred to dream about him. There are plenty of blokes like that, too, who prefer their own imaginary picture of the beloved to the real voice and the real words. We are like that when we try to go on believing in God without listening to God and taking His word seriously. There may be some of us who struggle to believe and are worried about that fact, but we will not read His word! He has spoken to you about Himself. And our faith will grow strong as we listen to Him.

So He keeps repeating His word to Abram: "I will give you the land. I will make you a great nation. I will bless you. I will bless the whole human race through you." And faith is fed by God's word. We believe the promises of God as we

get to know more and more about Him and realise just how faithful is the Promiser.

God's word certainly fed Abram's faith: *'The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.* <sup>8</sup>*From there he went on towards the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.* <sup>9</sup>*Then Abram set out and continued towards the Negev'* (vv. 7-9). All Abram left behind in Canaan at this stage were altars, built in response to the grace of God. The altar and the tent sum up the believer's life. They are a marvellous picture of the life of faith, as Abram criss-crossed the ancient Near East in his endless journeyings, always believing, but never receiving the complete fulfilment of those promises. The 'when' of the promises of God is not given to us. Faith believes God's promises; but genuine faith always has within it a strong element of humility. We don't instruct God as to the when and the how of His promises' fulfilment. No promise of God has ever failed. But it is by faith and by patience that we inherit them – in His timing and not when we decide; deliverance from pain and suffering; social justice on this earth, many of the things for which we long, they await His perfect timing – not when we dictate that they should happen. And, if we need patience, we also need perseverance.

(ii) *Persevering through failure (12:10-20)*

It is a strangely disappointing end to the chapter after such a wonderful beginning: *'Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.* <sup>11</sup>*As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are.* <sup>12</sup>*When the Egyptians see you, they will say, "This is his wife." Then they will kill me but will let you live.* <sup>13</sup>*Say you are my sister [she was actually a half-sister, we later discover; but nevertheless it is clearly a lie in order to save his skin], so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."*

<sup>14</sup>*When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman.* <sup>15</sup>*And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace.* <sup>16</sup>*He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels.*

<sup>17</sup>*But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai.* <sup>18</sup>*So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? <sup>19</sup>Why did you say, "She is my sister", so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!"* <sup>20</sup>*Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had'* (vv. 10-20).

Well, it's a sordid, sorry little incident, isn't it? God didn't tell Abram to leave the promised land for Egypt, and God certainly didn't tell Abram to pass his wife Sarai off as his sister: trying to save his own skin at the price of his wife's sexual integrity. Abram may have flourished materially in Egypt, we're told, with sheep and cattle, donkeys, menservants, maidservants, camels (all too often material prosperity goes with spiritual decline, and it certainly did here). His cowardice and his deceit were worthy of an unbeliever, while the pagan Pharaoh acts with greater virtue than the hero of faith.

Nor was this to prove an isolated incident in Abram's biography. Such episodes were to recur, reminding us that God keeps His promises even though our faith is weak. He keeps them in His own time and in His own way: but He keeps them because of His faithfulness. It was not Abram's virtue that kept him going, as a stranger in a strange land. It was not even the strength of his faith. It was the strength of his God.

And so it will be for us. Sometimes in a difficult situation in life you find yourself saying, "I don't think we'll make it" – perhaps in a gridlock on the M25 when your flight is being called in Terminal 4 at Heathrow. But you just get there by the skin of your teeth. "I never thought we would make it!" you say. Well, the Christian believer's journey to heaven is like that. We look at our sin and failure, we look at the difficulties, at the stationary traffic, and we're bound to say "I don't think I'll make it." But we look at the word of God and we realise He has promised. And there will come a day when we'll say, "We never thought we'd make it, but God brought us through."

We don't know the when. We don't know the how. But we know we can trust the Promise-making God.

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*