

Abraham: When God Calls Out

SCOTT HOEZEE

Someone once observed that, in theory, you would think that getting tapped by Almighty God to play a special role in His plan of salvation would be a great thing; but in the Bible, the people who get called upon to play key parts in God's unfolding drama of redemption, they often end up leading hard lives. Today on Groundwork, we begin a series on some of the key figures from the book of Genesis. These are the first people who moved God's covenant promises forward in history; but as we will see, doing that sometimes led to a lot of trials and testing. We begin with Abraham.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are going to start – I think it is going to be a six-part series on some of the great stories – the classic stories from the book of Genesis.

DAVE BAST

Right; and we are going to begin, though, with Genesis 12. There are a lot of great stories in Genesis 1 through 11. It is the prehistory of the Bible; creation, and Noah, and so on; but we really want to start with the first great event that gets salvation history going, and that is the call of Abraham that comes at Genesis 12:1.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so the stage has been set. We know that God created a good world; we know it fell into sin; we have seen the stories about Noah, the flood, the tower of Babel; so we know it is a needy world, and God now is – having set that stage of a fallen creation with a lot of problems, but to which after the flood God said: I am going to stay true. I am not going to let it slide into oblivion. And the first step He takes to do that is getting at this man called Abraham or Abram, as he is known in the earliest stories.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes. He is first called Abram before God changes his name; and I think we will probably just use Abraham throughout for convenience; but it is so interesting thinking just a little bit about this seminal figure. He is the original man of faith, and the things that the Bible says about him, and even historically... You know, all three of the great monotheistic religions in the world: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all trace their origin back to Abraham. The Bible itself describes Abraham in one amazing verse as the friend of God – that is in Isaiah; and even in later generations, God will associate Himself with Abraham. He will be known as the God of Abraham, or sometimes the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whose stories we are going to look at.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is a towering figure. A few years ago, I think it was National Geographic did a cover story on Abraham and his world because he is the patriarch – the towering figure – for most of the world's religious people. You take Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – there are people of other faiths, but you add up all of the people

who adhere to those three alone, it is a big chunk of the world's population.

DAVE BAST

Right; and I love this line, too, from James Denney, a great Scottish biblical scholar of one hundred years ago. He says that later on throughout the course of scripture, and especially in the New Testament, whenever anybody of the writers wanted to make a point about faith, they would say: Look at Abraham.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Look at Abraham.

DAVE BAST

Yes, he is the example.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what is amazing, as we are going to see in just a moment – we will read just the first few verses of Genesis 12 – but, how does the whole thing get started? What is the first thing that happens to somebody who becomes that kind of a towering figure? God comes and says – and here is the first thing He said to Abraham – God comes to Abraham and says: Leave. Just get out. Call the movers. You have to hit the road. I am not even going to tell you where, just leave. What an opening! What a way to start. It is startling to just all of a sudden be told to get out, but that is what it says.

DAVE BAST

Well, here it is. Genesis 12:1: The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. ²I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is a big promise. Not just, “you are going to be blessed,” not just your family, your clan, everybody...

DAVE BAST

All the nations, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is the beginning of God's grand vision for the whole world. Cosmic salvation. Global salvation. And it is all going to start through this man; and it begins with what must have been terrifying because scholars tell us that in the ancient Near East, in the ancient world, one big fear people had was that they would die while they were away from home. That was a fear because they wanted to be at home when they died.

Well, Abraham is 75, and now God is saying not only are you going to die away from home, you are never going to come back to the only home you have ever had. You are going to hit the road. You are going to be a refugee, a wanderer, a home-less person for the rest of your life.

DAVE BAST

Well, and what a home it was. We learn, actually, a little bit earlier, at the end of Genesis 11, a little something about Abram's family and background, and we learn that he was from Ur of the Chaldees, I think that is how it used to be known; and actually archeologists tell us a little bit about what Ur was like. It was in Mesopotamia. It was the center of Sumerian civilization; and that was the world's oldest and greatest ancient civilization. It was the first great civilization, as far as we know, and it actually was the birthplace of human culture. So, this was like New York or London or Paris...

SCOTT HOEZEE

A good place.

DAVE BAST

This is where writing was developed first. This was where the arts were practiced – architecture, great buildings – and all of a sudden God says: Wait a minute; I want you to leave all of this. Oh, and where am I going? Well, I will show you when you get there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I will tell you later, but it could be the middle of nowhere; and this begins, actually, Dave, a theme that runs all the way through the Bible, and it really runs all the way to the birth of Jesus and the incarnation of the Son of God, and that is that God seemed to want His people Israel to identify with what later in the Bible would be called in earlier, older versions, the alien within your gates, or the stranger within your gates. Israel eventually will be told again and again and again by God: Please be nice to strangers. Be nice to people who are foreigners who are out of their own country; and the reason God always gives them is: Remember that is what happened to Abraham. That is how you got started. Remember, you were in Egypt and I called you out of there. So, the people of God are to have an openness to those from the outside; and again, it goes all the way to John 1 when John says Jesus became the ultimate exile. He left His home in heaven. He left His home with the Trinity to come here, and that is how we get saved.

DAVE BAST

Yes, there is a wonderful phrase from later in the Bible – I think it is from Deuteronomy – a wandering Aramean was your father; and that is Abraham. He is this wandering pilgrim figure. It is so easy for us as human beings... We are locked into our cultures and most people have a natural distrust, or even fear or hatred for the stranger, for the foreigner. The Greeks had a word for it. They called aliens *xenos* or *xenoi*. It gives us our word, *xenophobia*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, the fear of strangers.

DAVE BAST

The fear of strangers; and God is absolutely the reverse. He wants us all to welcome the stranger and remember that, in a sense, we are all strangers. None of us has a place where we can belong permanently. We are passing through the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, we are resident aliens, as they say, and as the New Testament says: In the world, but not of the world. It all goes all the way back to Abraham.

DAVE BAST

He is the first, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, God has promised us. You just read, Dave, a moment ago these promises that God gives to Abraham are for the whole earth, so God's vision for salvation is huge. God wants to catch up as many people, as many kinds of people, as many types of people as He possibly can. Israel would forget this eventually. They would ignore those laws that were supposed to extend extra courtesy to strangers. They had become insular, and unfortunately, sometimes we in the Church forget that, too; that we have to be open to people who are not like us; who do not speak like us; who do not earn as much money. We have to be open to all because God's plan right from Genesis 12 on was to save *all* people; to be the God of His whole creation, and that is the promise that comes through Abraham.

DAVE BAST

Well, and as Abraham left, he did not go alone. He had a wife, Sarah, and again, she underwent a name change. She was originally called Sarai, and later Sarah; so, Abraham kind of collects her, and one wonders what her reaction must have been when he informed her; but it is a family deal, and actually, others of their

relatives start out at least with them. They do not all make the whole trip; but the question is, why? Why those two?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And God is promising to make a great nation out of them. They are old. They are senior citizens. They never could have a kid even when they were young, and God says: I am going to make a nation out of you. Why start with those two? We will think about that in a moment.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for your lives. Along with Scott Hoezee, I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are looking today at some of the earliest stories about Abraham, and also his wife, Sarah, and we said just a moment ago, Dave, that if God wanted to build a nation, why start with a childless couple of seniors, and I always chuckle about a line Frederick Buechner, the writer and pastor and author – years ago, Frederick Buechner said – he described God’s strategy for how He was going to build a nation by imagining Sarah asking this question: Shall a baby be born in the geriatric ward? Shall Medicare pick up the tab? Why not choose a couple in their 20s? Young, fertile, full of promise... You want a couple to have kids of which to make a nation. Choose the young. God goes the other way. He chooses a 75-year-old and a 65-year-old and says: Build a nursery. You are having a kid.

DAVE BAST

Yes. I love a line from Walter Brueggemann. He is a great - as you know, Scott – a great Old Testament scholar, and especially a commentator on Genesis. He says basically there are only three miracles in the whole of the Bible: Creation out of nothing; justification by faith; and resurrection from the dead; and all three of them are on display in the story of Abraham and Sarah.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, exactly.

DAVE BAST

So, God is going to create a baby out of nothingness and the death of Sarah’s barren womb and Abraham’s old age impotence – they are completely, humanly speaking, unable to bring forth the promise that God has made; and He is going to just make it happen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Years ago some listeners will probably remember on The Today Show there was that weatherman named Willard Scott – he is retired now – but he used to always wish people – older folks – happy birthdays if they were in their 80s and 90s, and sometimes he would have couples on their 50th anniversary – their 60th wedding anniversary – and you would see the pictures of these people. They did not look like a baby was on the horizon, but that is what God does. But here is something we forget often, Dave; when God made that promise, Abraham was 75 and Sarah was 65, and it would be 25 years before Isaac was actually born; another quarter century. So, now Abraham is 100 and she is 90! Why would God do that? Maybe as a reminder just as the plan of salvation gets rolling here, that it is all grace. It is God’s power.

DAVE BAST

You know, you have just made me think of that story from I Kings, the story about Elijah and the contest with the prophets of Baal; you know, where they are praying for fire to come down and consume the sacrifice. So, the prophets of Baal fail; so Elijah puts the sacrificial animal on the altar and then he pours water over it... Seven great big jugs of...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Less likely...

DAVE BAST

Yes, just to underscore the fact that this is not going to be any kind of natural event; and so, God waits another whole generation until they are absolutely one foot in the grave before the promise is fulfilled.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, if we flash forward now to Genesis 18, there is that great story where these three mysterious visitors – we believe that was God in some sense – who come to visit them, and it has been almost a quarter century now. It is like 24 years or so, and we read this in Genesis 18, starting at the 9th verse, where one of the visitors asks Abraham:

Where is your wife, Sarah? “In the tent,” he said. ¹⁰The Lord said, “I will surely return to you this time next year and Sarah your wife will have a son.” (Now, Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him). ¹¹Abraham and Sarah were already very old and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?”

God goes on to say, “Why did she laugh?” and then she lies and says, “No, I did not laugh,” and God said, “No, but you did laugh.” And so, there is this laughter going on here, which is totally understandable.

DAVE BAST

Right; it is a comic story, really. Somebody once asked an old black preacher if Jesus ever laughed, and he replied, “Well, I don’t know about that, but he sure fixed me so I could laugh.” Here is a story that makes us laugh. It makes Sarah laugh and it makes Abraham laugh, and it makes us laugh in the end; laughter, really, at the amazing grace of God – the God who brings life out of death, calls the things that are not into being; that was Paul’s comment on this very story in Romans Chapter 4. He refers back to this. Abraham and Sarah were dead as far as procreation was concerned; and yet God – the same God who brought the world into being out of nothing – brings His covenant promises to pass out of the deadness of Abraham and Sarah’s bodies.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, the story begins with Abraham living in Ur of the Chaldees. He is a well established man. He might have even been considered a wealthy man; and God says: Okay, you have done a great job building a life. Leave. Get out. My salvation is going to come, not because you are rich or because you built a good estate. You are going to become homeless; and so, that is a reminder of grace. It is all God. And now, an old couple who was really unlikely when God first promised them a kid, now 25 years later it is exceedingly unlikely, and it is all grace. There is a hilarity to grace.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is funny. It is not fair, but when you realize that you have gotten the greatest gift in the world, you are going to kind of laugh. Totally undeserved.

It reminds me of that parable of the laborers in the vineyard where some people worked 12 hours and then the last chosen work a measly hour and they all get paid the same; and I remember Barbara Brown-Taylor’s sermon on that where she envisions those guys who only worked an hour and they got 12 hours of pay. She says: Can you imagine them slapping each other on the back and saying, ‘Ain’t we the lucky ones? Look at that!’ But that is grace. We are the chosen ones. It does not reckon with merit or strength or anything. It is all grace, and we get those notes sounding already in these early chapters of Genesis.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is a wonderful line tucked away here in Genesis 18, as Sarah is processing this, and of course, she laughs and then she is called out on it, and the angel – or it is actually the Angel of the Lord – it is the Lord Himself, we believe – and just as a side note, interestingly, this incident in ancient Christian art is used as an illustration of the Trinity.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, often it is, yes.

DAVE BAST

There is a belief that this is somehow a physical manifestation of the Triune God. And then the Lord says to Sarah: Is anything too hard for the Lord? That great line that we are invited to ponder, and it is repeated or it is echoed in a way much later with Mary...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right.

DAVE BAST

That nothing is impossible with God; and so, thus grace – the grace that comes from a God who can do the impossible. You know, I sometimes think of how Abraham and Sarah must have struggled during all of those years. How in the world is God going to keep His promise? God has forgotten us. Nothing has happened.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have skipped a number of the chapters for the sake of time on this program, of course, but in between Genesis 12 and the time when Isaac is born, and we will look at that in the next segment, but in between that they had a lot of what we would call the dark night of the soul. There were 25 years they had doubts, they had struggles. They both failed. Abraham eventually tries to do an end-run, saying: Look, it is not going to happen with Sarah, so he tries it with this servant named Hagar, and God says: No, no, no, no, no. It is going to be Sarah. But it is tough. We said at the outset, getting called upon to play a key role in God's salvation can make your life hard, and I think a lot of people know that. We have the promises of God in our lives – as Christians in the Church yet today we have the promises of God – we believe God is going to be faithful, but we have long stretches where we do not have a lot to go on.

DAVE BAST

But this story, and our stories, we believe, end in joyful laughter; and we are going to look at the great conclusion to it in just a moment.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork.

DAVE BAST

So, let's jump right to the climax of this story in Genesis 21:

¹Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah, as He had said. (There is the fulfillment of the promise.) And the Lord did for Sarah what He had promised. ²Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age at the very time God had promised him. ³Abraham gave him the name Isaac, a name that means...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Laughter, yes.

DAVE BAST

Or as you like to say: Giggles.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he named the kid Giggles. And then Sarah will go on to say in the 6th verse: God has brought me laughter and everybody who hears this story is going to laugh, too. So, there is some of that hilarity of grace that we were talking about just a moment ago. When it is all grace and when it is all the mighty power of God, it is awesome. You are awestruck. But there is also something so amazing, you break out in laughter. How amazing!

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; you get the feeling, too, that Sarah's laughter changed in its character. You know, I think in the earlier story it is very bitter. There is a very bitter edge to her laughter. It is sarcastic laughter; but here it is just pure, bubbling forth – giddiness almost – you cannot help but: Come on; this is the craziest thing. A 90-year-old woman giving birth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I remember when I was in my first congregation as a pastor and I preached on this story once, and I had some line in the sermon – I cannot remember what it was – but I said, “You know, God had promised – Sarah laughed – but God promised them that,” and then I had some line, and, “Sarah laughed all the way through the birth,” and after the service, woman after woman came out of the church saying: No. Nobody laughs at childbirth.

DAVE BAST

Yes, only a man would describe it that way, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they were right; but, when the pain of the childbirth was over, she just could not believe that it was all true; and so, just to show that they got the joke and God got the joke, they named the kid Giggles – they named him Laughter; and he is now the next one through whom this nation would be built, and yet, even after that and after all the joy and the hilarity here in Genesis 21, that promise of a mighty nation – stars in the sky – sand on the seashore – one kid?! It is going to come through that? It is still just the three of them. It is an amazing birth, but how is this going to go?

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is still a pretty small beginning, isn't it? I like to call this story surprise by joy, but even after all the joy and everything has been celebrated, we still are not very far along the way toward the fulfillment of the promises.

You know, there were actually two promises that were given to Abraham. The one was the promise of a land, and the other was the promise of the child and then the offspring; and as far as the land was concerned, Abraham never really did own any of Canaan apart from the cave that he bought when Sarah died as a family cemetery.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Isn't that something when you think about it. That is a chapter later in Genesis that we do not usually preach on or hear talked about, but when Sarah dies some years later, he has no place even to bury her. So, he started out a wealthy man with lots of land. God said leave, and all those years later, he still has no land. He has to negotiate and parlay and bargain with some local tribes-people to buy enough land for a little 6 x 6 plot to bury the love of his life. Again, those who get tapped to play a key role, they often lead a hard life.

DAVE BAST

Right; as far as the offspring like the sands of the sea and the stars of the sky, that is what God had told him as he renewed the promise during those years of waiting – those 25 years – as far as that was concerned, here is one little baby, and a precarious life at that, and the whole covenant is hanging by a thread. That is why Hebrews says – you know, they went out – Abraham and Sarah – and they never did really receive what was promised.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They saw it from a distance.

DAVE BAST

But they saw it from a distance and they kept going. And as it is, says the writer to the Hebrews, they were looking for a better country; a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The preacher, Fred Craddock had a wonderful scene in one of his sermons once in which he imagined – so, he updated the imagery, obviously – but he imagined Abraham and Sarah sitting in the kitchen and little Isaac – baby Isaac – maybe he is 1-1/2 years old; he is in a highchair, and Abraham and Sarah look at this oatmeal-covered little kid and then they look back at each other and they are both thinking the same thing: Stars in the sky, sands on the seashore from him?! How can this be? But they went on by faith, and that is one of the great things that they get credit for all throughout scripture.

DAVE BAST

You know, the lesson for us is pretty clear and pretty obvious from this. God has promised great things to those who will leave and follow Him. The command and the promises are inseparable. There is a tendency to want the promises without obeying the command – without giving up your old life. Jesus said, “If anyone wants to be My follower, let him deny himself and take up his cross and come after Me.” So, first the command and then the promises, but we may not see them all. We nevertheless need to keep going. We walk by faith not by sight.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We mentioned Frederick Buechner earlier, and we will conclude with this little portrait he once had, also updating the imagery. Buechner said: Just imagine Abraham at a family reunion years later. Isaac is grown up and maybe has gotten married himself now, but imagine a photo – if such a thing had been possible – a photo taken at a family reunion and they are still not a mighty nation by a long shot. It is just a little group of people. A mighty nation they aren't, but Buechner said: If you look at that photo of the family reunion, look closely in Abraham's eye and there is a twinkle in his eye that says: Do not worry. Someday they are going to be talking about my great, great, great, great, great grandchild, the light of the world. And that is the promise he went on.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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