

3-2-25

## Camping with Abe

### Genesis 12: 1 - 9

There are some activities that have become synonymous with a person's name. For example, if I say ...

Cooking, you say \_\_\_\_\_.

Quarterback? \_\_\_\_\_.

How about favorite alien? \_\_\_\_\_.

Let's do a couple more...

Basketball? \_\_\_\_\_.

Evil Star Wars character? \_\_\_\_\_.

And finally, famous wanderer? \_\_\_\_\_.

(OK, so maybe Abraham didn't immediately come to your mind.)

But when you think about it, Abraham is probably the most famous vagabond in all the Bible except for maybe the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness forty years before entering the Promised Land.

Because of all his travelling, I suspect that Abraham became an experienced camper. In the course of Genesis chapters 12 and 13, we read that Abraham moved his family at least seven times! Only Laura Ingalls Wilder moved more often!

Here are the places Abram and his family lived: Haran, Shechem, between Bethel and Ai, Egypt, the Negev, returned to Bethel and Ai, and Hebron. Why did he move so often?

The Bible gives us various reasons. Sometimes he received a direct call from God as was the case at the beginning of chapter 12: "The Lord said to Abram, *"Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."*

The Bible seems to suggest that on one occasion he camped at a particular place because the place he thought about going was already occupied. Genesis 12:6: *"At that time the Canaanites were in the land."*

Another time Abram was forced to move just to survive: *"Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for awhile because the famine was severe."*

Later on, they had to move out of Egypt because the king discovered that Abram lied about his wife: *"So Pharaoh summoned Abram. 'What have you done to me? Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? 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!' Then the Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife, and everything he had."*

Earlier I used the word vagabond to describe Abram which may not be very accurate since the word could imply that he was poor which was hardly the case for Abram. Genesis 13: 2: *"Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold."*

And yet, Abram, with all his accumulated wealth, with all his physical needs taken care of, still had a deep desire to seek the Lord. Genesis 13:4: *"There Abram called on the name of the LORD."*

Let this be an important reminder to us as we seek to engage others with the gospel: Financial security does not equate to eternal security.

I think Christians sometimes get duped into thinking that so and so won't be interested in hearing the gospel because they are well off financially, when in fact, the exact opposite could be true. Why? Because the wealthy have experienced firsthand the headaches and false promises that often accompany great wealth which in turn can cause a person to start asking the all important question, "What exactly is life's purpose?"

This actually happened to Abram. He and his brother Lot had so much livestock that they didn't have enough land to support all the herds. The situation became so bad that Abram's herdsmen were having fights with Lot's herdsmen. In the end they agree to part ways. Lot pitches his tents near Sodom while Abram goes to Hebron.

Notice that Abraham lets Lot have first choice of the land. Lot, if you go right, I'll go left. If you go left, I'll go right. There is a lesson in here for us: People of faith need not demand their rights.

Abraham surely had first rights. After all, he was Lot's uncle. Instead, he let God choose for him, trusting that God would lead him to exactly where he needed to be. Maybe King David had Abraham in mind when he wrote Psalm 16. *"Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance."* Pray to God that He would give us this type of faith.

But as wonderful as these Biblical principles are, they are not the main focus of my message today.

My main focus is worship: Our proper, (and quite frankly) only legitimate response to God's character/nature. (Repeat)

How does this Biblical principle play out in Abraham's life? I'll show you.

Along time ago when I was in high school, I played in the band. I played the trombone. Anyway, our director was quite an accomplished musician. In fact, when he wasn't directing the band, he was going around the countryside playing in an orchestra that he formed. (This was back in the days when live bands played at proms and dances. Not dj's and smart phones like they have today.)

Anyway, I confess that I retained very little of what my band director tried to teach me, but I do remember one thing he taught me: He asked the question, "How do you make the whitewalls of a car's tire look even whiter?" Simple, he said. Make the black portion of the tire even blacker. My teacher was obviously referring to contrasts in music – slower / faster, louder / softer.

The same principle can be used in writing. The account of Abram and Lot is a study of contrasts - Lot was selfish and coveted the best land. Abraham was faithful and was blessed by God. Sometimes the most effective way to highlight the difference between two competing worldviews is to let something go unsaid.

This is exactly what Moses, the author of Genesis did. Do you see it? Here's your hint: What's the first thing Abraham always did after pitching his tent? We read about it in Genesis 12:8, 13:4, and 13:18.

Genesis 12:8: *"From there he went on to the hills 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.**"*

Genesis 13: 3 – 4: *“From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier and **where he had first built an altar**. There Abram called on the name of the Lord.”*

Genesis 13:18: *“So Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, **where he built an altar to the Lord.**”*

Now compare this to Lot’s actions in Genesis 13: 11 – 12: *“So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company: Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom.”*

Did you catch it? There is completely no mention of any altar building on the part of Lot. There is no record of Lot calling on the name of the LORD. In fact Moses makes a point of describing the character and actions of Lot’s new neighbors: *“Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord.”*

Is it possible to get a clearer picture of the contrasting worldviews held by Abram and his nephew Lot? If there is, I fail to see one. Genesis 13 is like a large billboard placed in front of our face that reads: “Choose you this day whom you shall serve – Almighty God or your own worldly cravings.” I can almost hear this story echoing in the minds of Jesus’ listeners as he preaches the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew 7: *“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or What shall we wear?’ for the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

The point in all this is to say that there is good worship and there is bad worship. There is a correct response to God's nature / character and there is a wrong response. If we, as a church want to be a worshipful church, which is what I tried to emphasize in last week's message, then we need to know the difference between the two so we can reject the wrong and embrace the right. The best way to do this is to study examples of both.

Examples of good and bad worship come very early in the Bible. In Genesis chapter 4 where we are introduced to Adam and Eve's first two sons, Cain and Able. The Bible tells us that both Cain and Able brought offerings to the Lord. In the case of Cain, the Bible says that he *"brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD."*

Able, on the other hand, *"brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock."* The Bible also teaches us that the LORD looked with favor upon Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering, he did not.

At first glance we might be tempted to cry "Unfair!" – That's what my kids typically do whenever they feel they've been slighted – but we would be wrong in doing so.

Some might even argue that Cain shouldn't be held responsible for presenting a supposedly inferior offering to the LORD. After all, he was only giving out of what he learned to produce. The Bible makes a point to tell us that he was a *"worker of the soil"*, so naturally Cain gave God some fruits or grain. Likewise Able, being a herdsman or *"keeper of flocks"* offered God an animal sacrifice.

Why should the one be rejected while the other accepted?

The answer is that God's judgment had nothing to do with whether the offering was an animal, vegetable, or mineral, but everything to do with how it was given. In other words, God saw the heart – attitude and motivation of the giver.

Even we, as readers of the text, can pick up clues as to Cain and Able's motivations: Cain *"brought **some** of the fruits of the soil as an offering."* The key word here is "some". Can't you almost feel the thoughtlessness and carelessness that went into Cain's selection of the offering? It reminds me of a teenager who quickly grabs a half-eaten sandwich off the kitchen table for his lunch as he heads off to school. But in this case, Cain is offering this stale sandwich to God! How rude!

As Christians, we owe God everything, from our physical existence to our eternal destiny and everything in between, how can we be so flippant with our worship like Cain was? It's offensive to God. God withholds no good thing from us, and yet we offer him crumbs in return?

Able, on the other hand, offered God the choice fat portions of the animal, and not just any animal, but the firstborn animal from his very own flock. We don't even know if the fruits of the soil that Cain brought to God were from his own fields! He could have stolen them from someone else for all we know.

The point is that Able worshipped God according to what he knew about God: generous, abundant, giving of the best, withholding no good thing.

The book of Hebrews 11:4 also teaches us that Able was a man of faith: *“By faith Able offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings.”*

The importance of faith can never be underestimated. It was actually Able’s faith that allowed him to know God. Hebrews 11:6: *“Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”*

Prayer:

Lord, help us to worship you as Able worshipped you. Help us to know you as Able knew you. You withheld no good thing from your servant Able. Help us to withhold no good thing from you so that your name might be glorified. We confess that we cling so tightly to the gifts you have given us. Remind us that everything belongs to you. Give us faith that will make us pleasing in your sight.

Like Cain’s example, here’s another example of bad worship:

Genesis 11 recounts the story of the Tower of Babel: *“Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, ‘Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly. They used brick instead of stone and tar for mortar. Then they said, Come, let’s build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we can make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’”*



In building the tower, mankind was simply doubling down on the lie Adam and Eve had already bought into at the Garden of Eden: We don't need God. Our destiny, our glory, our immortality are all ours for the taking.

Remember how I described good worship? Man's proper response to God's character. Do you see how far man has already drifted away from the desired response God seeks from us? And we're only two chapters removed from the flood!

Mankind's egotistical, proud and rebellious heart is the driving force behind this human enterprise of seizing the reigns of history and attempting to take destiny into their own hands without any regard for their Maker. To build a stairway to heaven is tantamount to saying, "Away with you God! We will achieve glory, fame and immortality on our own!"

No wonder God was so quick in responding by confusing our languages. Without His direct intervention, man's rebellion against his Creator would have gone unchecked for thousands of years. I know it's difficult to see, but God's wise and merciful intervention has actually decelerated mankind's inevitable plunge off the proverbial cliff!

Can't you hear the echoes of the Tower of Babel in Romans 1 where Paul writes, *"For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their **thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened?** Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory for the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles."*

So where do we go from here?

## A couple thoughts:

- 1 God's diagnosis of mankind's spiritual condition is conclusive and without refute. We have no need for a second opinion: As for our minds, all systems are corrupt. Our hard drive has crashed, and without God's help, all vital information is lost. At the very core of who we are, evil exists and darkness rules. Romans 3:10: *"As it is written: There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."*
- 2 Let's accept the diagnosis and take our medicine: We need to do what Abraham did: Romans 4 beginning in verse 18 says, *"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him. Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised."*  
In short, Abraham believed God. He knew the very nature of God, and acted accordingly by building an altar.

- 3 Abraham called on the name of the LORD. Do you know that in Jewish culture, it is unthinkable to separate a person's name from their nature /character? To speak aloud one's name is to reference the very nature of who they are. How did this come to be? It's obvious: The Jewish people served a God who is always true to his name. So when Abraham called on God's name, he was proclaiming God's character to the world! This is in fact worship: our proper response to God!
- 4 Finally, and this may sound strange to your ears, but it is no less true - Let us climb upon the altar we've made to God. God's desire and plan for us is to transform us into the likeness of his Son, to mold our lives into the vessels he wants us to be so that we carry his goodness to the world **to the praise of his glory**. But this necessary and miraculous work can't happen if we're constantly running from him. Romans 12:1: *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship."* – **This is Good worship – This is our proper response to God.**

May the Lord give us the faith, the desire, and the courage to do it! Let us claim God's promise as found in Philippians 2:13: *"For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."* Amen.