

The Call of Abraham

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[0 : 00] I'll return to the book of Acts, chapter 7, and reading at verse 2. And Stephen said, And brothers and fathers, hear me.

The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Chana. And said to him, Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.

In the passage that we read, the writer Luke informs us of the ministry of this man Stephen.

Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people, he writes. His preaching aroused opposition and hostility.

There were those who were zealously opposed to the ministry of this man Stephen. They accused him of being teaching against Moses and the writings of the Old Testament.

[1 : 26] And the campaign aroused against Stephen resulted in his being arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin to face charges.

And they set up, he says, false witnesses who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law.

For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.

And we are told how they stared at Stephen. As if they were seeking to intimidate this servant of God.

And the high priest asks him if the accusations that are made are true. You cannot say that Stephen stood in front of an unbiased jury.

[2 : 32] That's the background to chapter 7. Which sets before us in some 53 verses the response of Stephen to these false charges.

Notice how he begins his response. Brothers and fathers, hear me. In other words, Stephen is appealing to their minds.

To their powers of reason. He's asking for total attention to what he has to say.

They were a group of people who prided themselves on the knowledge of their past history. And he is asking them, when he is saying, brothers and fathers, hear me.

I believe he is asking them to jettison their prejudices. To let their minds be open to what he has to say. Maybe we too like to think of ourselves as being unbiased.

[3 : 46] Unprejudiced. When faced with the challenge and demand of the gospel. But we have to recognize that we also have our prejudices.

We too are biased. Can you say today that you will give truth a fair hearing? Stephen begins with a history lesson.

But notice, he does not begin with their great patriarch. He begins with God. And surely that is very significant.

He begins this address. The God of glory. The God of greatness, wonder, amazement and power.

The God of transcendent glory. He dwells in light. God is light. Bible says. In him is no darkness at all. He is not confined to temple buildings.

[4 : 47] And for those accustomed to temple worship. Must have been a startling statement. When Stephen began his defense in this way.

The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia. In other words, he appeared to him in a place of idolatrous worship.

Where there was no tabernacle and no temple. He did not appear in Jerusalem. Or even within the borders of Israel. But in idolatrous Mesopotamia.

And for those who placed such great emphasis on their cultural background. And on temple worship.

Must have been a most unwelcome reminder. Further on in this marvelous speech. You find him reinforcing the message of the transcendent God.

[5 : 50] Yet the most high, he says. Does not dwell in houses made by hands. Down in the chapter. As the prophet says. Heaven is my throne.

And the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? Says the Lord. Or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?

And the outcome of Stephen's address was. That these people were absolutely incensed. By the tone and the content of his address.

It cut across all their prejudices. And despite Stephen's plea for an open mind to what he had to say. All their prejudices come strongly to the fore.

You remember the reaction as detailed follows by Luke. Now when they heard these things towards the end of the chapter. Chapter 7. They were enraged.

[6 : 55] And ground their teeth at him. Their minds were close to the truth. They preferred to remain in their ignorance. Misunderstanding and prejudice.

And not to hear. What the Bible actually teaches. Does that not sound familiar? Is that not often how we behave too?

They refused to listen further to this man. They wanted not just to suppress the message. But they wanted to suppress the messenger.

And they ordered that he be stoned to death. Well that's the background in which we find our text. And I'd like to look with you today at the call of Abraham.

He is one of the notable men in all of the history of the world. Three of the world's major religions for example.

[7 : 59] The Bible gives a place to this man Abraham. Through him God reveals his purpose and plan for the universe.

In the promises made to him God. The God of glory reveals that he has a plan. His life is a life of faith. In the God of glory.

And his life demonstrates how God glorifies himself in the life of a man. Paul writing to the Romans says, No unbelief made him waver.

That's Abraham waver. Concerning the promise of God. But he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God. Fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

Fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That's the summary that Paul gives of the life of this man Abraham.

[9 : 02] The glory of God of paramount importance in the life of this man Abraham. So I'd like to look at three thoughts on the call of Abraham.

First of all, a surprising choice. Second, a saving call. And thirdly, a staggering promise.

A surprising choice, a saving call, and a staggering promise. A surprising choice. In the Old Testament narrative in the book of Genesis, we are introduced to this man Abraham after the judgmental act of God regarding the building of the Tower of Babel and the dispersion of those who were engaged in that building.

Now in my view, this alludes to the rejection of the knowledge of the true God and is an attempt to create another religion.

I don't believe it refers to a literal physical building trying to be erected between earth and heaven. But it is speaking metaphorically of the way that these people rejected the teachings of the true and the living God and were in effect seeking to set out a different type of religion that is man-orientated.

[10 : 34] The national picture is one of spiritual darkness. That is set before us by the writer of Genesis. You remember, the intention of man was the pride and glory of man.

Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens and let us make a name for ourselves. That was the express purpose of the buildings.

To make a name for man. Not to glorify God. Run in counter to what God teaches. To enhance the reputation of the citizens in that area.

And you remember, God intervenes and by a divine act forestalls and prevents human planning from being implemented. It's an act of divine judgment.

Come, let us go down and there confuse their language so that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth and they left off building the city.

[11 : 44] Now, it's not just against the backdrop of national spiritual darkness that this man is called, but against the backdrop of a family who are in spiritual darkness.

The family to which he belonged were also idol worshippers. The book of Joshua tells us, Thus says the Lord God, the God of Israel, Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Ephratus, Terah, the father of Abraham and Nechor, and they served other gods.

And so, there is not only spiritual darkness nationally, but he is called out of a family who are in spiritual darkness.

The God of glory appears to this man in a place of idol worship. And does that not set before us the amazing grace, the marvelous mercy, and the loving kindness of the God of glory?

We are taught, among other things, of the sovereignty of the God of glory in his effectual call of this man, Abraham, out of an idolatrous family.

[13 : 00] And although this man goes on to earn a place in the life history of man, a great man, I think what is far more obvious is what a great God.

Abraham would be nothing without God. He would have in all probability remained an idolatrous worshipper, a stranger to grace and to God, living in virtual obscurity.

And in some ways, it seems to me with the call of Abraham, it's as if God is beginning again. Adam, the first man, had failed.

Noah, after the flood, despite his reputation, had also failed. And now God calls this man. And what is on the one hand so amazing, on the other hand, is so encouraging.

He comes to Mesopotamia. There is nothing there to attract the goodness of divine grace. Nothing in this man's life to draw the grace of God.

[14 : 14] Yet it is this man that he chooses to be the father of nations. This man he chooses to be the vehicle through whom covenantal blessings come to be enjoyed.

That's why I say a surprising choice. And perhaps even more amazing, when you remember that there was another man, a contemporary of Abraham, who lived at this time, a man by the name of Melchizedek.

Do you remember how the Bible speaks of him? King of Salem, priest of the Most High God. You find that description in the letter to the Hebrews. The writer of that letter goes on to give us an analysis of his titles.

He is first, by translation of his name, King of Righteousness. He is also King of Salem, that is, King of Peace. A man who in the Old Testament is portrayed as a type of Christ.

A man who was a faithful servant of Most High God. A man who was a contemporary of Abraham, yet it is not that man, though highly honored.

[15 : 26] Faithful as he was, it was not that man that God called to be the father of the faithful, but a man from a background of spiritual darkness, who belonged to a family who were in spiritual darkness.

God states, this is the man I have chosen, this is the man I will use to fulfill my purpose. And the psalmist reminds us in the words that we have sung today, blessed is the man you choose.

Now does this surprise you? Could I suggest there is much to encourage us in this choice that is made by God? Some, and you may be here today, you've enjoyed the privilege of being brought up in a Christian home, of hearing the gospel from your earliest years.

It is a privilege, although I grant you it is not always a privilege that everyone values in a state of unconvincing. God draws near to others who didn't enjoy these privileges, where no prayer or Bible reading is set before them.

yet, from such homes and families, there are those who are brought into the kingdom of Christ. What might we conclude from this?

[16 : 53] Well, we can conclude this anyway, that we can have the privileges of Christian influence and despise the privilege, and on the other hand not have the privileges and experience the power of saving grace.

in the Old Testament narrative from which Stephen takes the information that is given here in Acts, we are told also that Abraham was one of three brothers, and I think this adds to the fact that it's a surprising choice.

The other two brothers were Nahor and Haran. Haran, we are told, died in the presence of his father, Terah, in the land of his kindred, in the land of his birth, in Ar of the Chaldeans.

It was obviously a difficult time for Terah, as it is for any parent when a member of the family is taken from them.

And it may account for Terah's willingness to leave his native land and strike out for Haran along with Abraham. Something else that is worth noting from the Old Testament narrative is that Abraham is mentioned first as if he were the oldest son.

[18 : 14] When Terah had lived 70 years, he fathered Abraham, Nahor, and Haran, you find in the book of Genesis. And that certainly gives the impression that Abraham was the oldest of the three.

But I'm not so sure. And you can say to me, well, minister, it's there in black and white. But it's not quite as simple as it appears on the surface. If you do your sums, you will discover it does not appear to be so.

In the book of Acts, after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. That's what Stephen says. In the book of Genesis, chapter 12, verse 4, tells us, Abraham was 75 years old when he departed from Haran.

We are also told in the genitive narrative, Genesis narrative, the days of Terah were 205 years. Terah died in Haran.

Let me now explain why we should do some mental arithmetic. When you subtract 75, the age of Abraham when he left Haran, subtract 75 from 205, the answer you get is 130.

[19 : 41] That would be the age of Terah when Abraham was born. What we are told is that when Terah had lived 70 years, he fathered Abraham, Neher, and Haran.

given what I have suggested with regard to doing your mental arithmetic, if Terah lived 70 years when he fathered the first child, it is very likely that Abraham was the youngest son.

But he is mentioned first in the book of Genesis as being the most important of the three. Why is he the most important of the three? because through him will come the seed of promise.

If that is correct, then not only is this man from a dark spiritual background an idolatrous family, but he is the youngest son, not the oldest.

And in those days, and I hope I am not trying to speak disparagingly of any sibling who may be the third member of our family here, in those days, in the eyes of man, the third son would be the least significant.

[20 : 57] But this was God's choice. That is why I say it is a surprising choice. You remember, you have other examples of it. When Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing, neither good or bad, either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works, but because of him who calls, we are told, the elder will serve the younger.

It's the reverse order. When Samuel was sent to choose and anoint another king in Israel, remember Saul was still king, he was still on the throne, Samuel was uneasy.

He was afraid that Saul would find out the purpose of his mission. And when he went to the house of Jesse as directed by God, he wanted to get the job done quickly.

And when the sons arrived, he looked on Eliab and he thought, surely the Lord's anointed is before him. And you remember the response of God to the thinking of Samuel.

Do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature because I have rejected him, for the Lord sees not as man sees. Man looks on the outward appearance but the Lord looks on the heart.

[22 : 19] And all of these sons of stature passed before elderly Samuel, but none were God's choice.

Remember that when you were thinking of your present circumstance and you were looking for a new pastor, remember God's choice is of ultra importance.

And so, Samuel said to him, and you can almost see Samuel scratching his head, he's saying to Jesse, are all your sons here? And Jesse says, well, there's just the youngest.

He's keeping the sheep. The youngest is looking after the sheep. That was the job that was given to the youngest because he was of no account.

Oh, remember, there are parallels there with the task that was given to the Lord Jesus Christ in becoming man. And David is sent for and when he arrives, the command is given.

[23 : 34] Anoint, arise, anoint him, for this is he. So that's why I say Abraham is a surprising choice. Out of darkness, a third son, place of idolatry, others more suitable, like Melchizedek, humanly speaking, but this is the one whom God chooses to be his servant.

That brings me to the second point, a saving call. Remember, as yet, there was no Bible. Remember, he was in a spiritually dark place and Stephen, in his address, states, the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia before he lived in Chena.

God revealed himself to this formerly idolatrous person before he left Mesopotamia, before he left out of the Chaldees.

Now, if you ask me, how did God reveal himself? I have to tell you, I don't know. Was it a vision or a dream?

Did Abraham hear a disembodied voice or was this a theophany? Did he appear, in other words, in the form of a man? I cannot tell you for the simple reason that I cannot find anything in the Bible apart from the information given by Stephen that the God of glory appeared to.

[25 : 09] The Old Testament simply tells us that the Lord spoke to Abraham. But in my own mind, the impression of this disclosure, the God of glory, seems to convey, in my own mind at any rate, an impressive appearance.

We know from other disclosures of God's character in the Bible that he has a knack for tailoring these disclosures to the various and particular needs of his people.

For example, you remember Joshua when he was contemplating going up against the city of Jericho. And the impression is given that Joshua was despondent.

Because the Bible tells us he lifted his eyes and when he lifted his eyes he saw a man with an unsheathed sword. Until then his eyes were facing the ground.

And gives the impression that he was despondent, downcast. Are you far as or against us? He asks this individual. that he sees with the unsheathed sword.

[26 : 40] He sees a warrior. And you remember how encouraging that was to Joshua as they prepared to against the city of Jericho.

God is the God of glory appears. Remember this was an area of idolatry. And however these idols were dressed up they could never compare to the majesty and the power that characterizes the God of glory.

glory. It's as if God is saying to this man look at the tremendous power and majesty that belongs to me.

And however he appeared I think we can safely assume that there was an authoritative note in the instruction that was communicated to this man to move out from where he resided.

Divine authority commands and demands a response. And the strange thing is this that he only moved part of the way.

[28 : 07] You know that's not what he was asked to do. And I think this could be used as an example of the gospel in the lives of those who hear it.

On the part of some there is partial obedience or reformation. Here in this man it is true.

He's no longer at home in earth or Mesopotamia but he failed to travel to Canaan. That's what was commanded. it seems to me that could be applied when the word of God has begun to watch in the life of a man or a woman or a boy or a girl.

Your life is like Abraham. Your life is not what it was. You've made partial reformation. You are no longer at home in the company of those who are unconverted.

but neither do you feel at home in the company of the converted. Oh yes, you would love to be in their fellowship but you are afraid of being rejected.

[29 : 27] And so you are in a position as it were of solitude. You desire to be in the company of believers but for some reason you feel shut out and excluded.

let me put it to you today that given you are uncomfortable in the company of the unconverted because it was not always so.

You felt quite at home there. Has it occurred to you that the reason is just this, that God is calling you to? That God wants you to join the company of those who are following the Lord.

Yes, the enemy of your soul will seek every way to discourage you, to insert in your mind the thought that you will be rejected.

Why did Abraham stop in here? Remember this man had left Mesopotamia. the land of his birth, the place where his relatives lived, the place where his brother had been buried, a place to which he had strong emotional family ties.

[30 : 50] He left a rich fertile area, but he had been given a command, get out from your land, set your face in the direction of the wilderness before arriving in the land promised to you.

from your kindred, go into the land that I will show you. It's not easy to leave your cultural heritage to go to a very different cultural area.

It's not easy to leave the place where you are felt secure among a people whom you know are going to mingle with peoples that are totally unknown to you.

but the unrelenting command issued with divine authority was this, get out, go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.

What was the command? Wouldn't allow him to rest. He had to separate from friends and perhaps some family members. if you read the Old Testament narrative you get the impression that God spoke to him in Chera.

[32 : 03] Now the Lord said to Abraham beginning of chapter 12 when he was in Chera. But I think many commentators would agree that it would be better translated now the Lord had said to Abraham.

But for the removal of any doubt as to when addressed by the Lord Stephen makes it very clear in his address the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia before he lived in Chera and said to go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.

And from the Old Testament you get the impression that he left immediately but that he stopped in Chera. Why didn't he continue on his journey? We know that his father Terah accompanied him whether because of the bitter memory of having buried one of his sons in Mesopotamia or did the change that occurred in the life of his son Abraham make such an impression?

The Bible doesn't say. What we are told is that Abraham was 75 years old when he departed from Chera and he took Sarah's wife Lot his brother's son and this is the important part I think all their possessions that they had gathered and the people they had acquired in Chera and they set out to go to the land of Canaan all the possessions they had gathered the people they had acquired in Chera and that would appear to suggest an element of worldliness creating an obstacle to obedience in his life of course that would be the influence of his elderly father and you know these two things can create tensions and be huge hurdles to overcome the influence of someone close to you in life or the attraction of the riches of this world which can also be a snare for a period it seems to me they received more attention more diligence than the unerring word of God and you know halfway obedience is never enough partial reformation is never enough what God says is this give me your heart give me your all step out in faith to Abraham the insistent voice was go out from your land and go into the land that I will show you oh my friend is there something like that in your life today keeping you from stepping out in faith our worldly affairs the obstacle do you think that to follow

Christ publicly might be a step a step too far you know worldly issues can be a huge deterrent to obedience well can I remind you of a business woman spoken of in the New Testament her name or at least the way in which she is known in the New Testament in Philippi is Lydia I don't believe that's her Christian name but it tells where she was from did she let worldly matters come between her and obeying the Lord she was a business lady did it occur to her that professing the Lord might affect her business and detract from the wealth that she enjoyed probably

[36 : 14] Satan told her that it would but you remember that woman professed Christ publicly friend of worldly matters and wealth are preventing you from submitting to the call remember what the scripture teaches what will it profit a man though he gain the whole world and forfeits his soul or what will a man give in return for his soul God says to Abraham as he says to you not far enough go out Abraham might say Lord I have gone out God says Abraham you haven't gone far enough go out and go into that's the call a saving call a surprising choice finally a staggering promise God promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him although he had no child there's a kind of irony in this promise why do

I say that because in Genesis 11 you find this snippet of information the name of Abraham's wife was Sarai and the writer in Genesis says now Sarai was barren she had no child well of course if she's barren she had no child the double emphasis there is emphatic and significant and yet God is saying to this man you shall have offspring how utterly unlikely that this should happen given that he had no family how can I believe this Abraham might be how can this be and you remember the discussion that he has with God Abraham said oh Lord God what will you give me for I continue childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus Abraham said behold you have given me no offspring and a member of my household will be my heir and behold the word of the

Lord comes to him this man shall not be your heir your very own son shall be your heir and you remember the confirmation that he gave to Abraham brought him outside and I don't know is that part of the vision or did it happen reality look towards the heaven he says to this man number the stars you are able to number them and you know we're still discovering stars in the 21st century number them God can number them and he says to this man number them if you are able to and then he says so shall your offspring be and he believed the Lord he believed the Lord and God counted to him as righteousness he believed the Lord the Bible doesn't say he believed and he did something but simply Abraham believed the

Lord that's the nature of faith he trusted in the promise of God and through faith he is brought into a right relationship with God faith faces the facts but it also faces the fact of God now this was the same Abraham who sinned the same Abraham who had failed the same Abraham who stumbled and you remember it is from that Old Testament Genesis passage that Paul goes on to prove the doctrine of justification by faith alone and Christ alone by grace alone how could sinful Abraham be accepted and justified by a holy God and the question is answered in Paul's letter to the Colossians now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring does not say to offsprings referring to many but referring to one and to your offspring who is

Christ Christ bore the sins of many sail on the cursed tree as he bears the weight of you sins and mine and the reason is given by Paul so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles today friend if you have trusted in Christ you have a right to share in the blessing of Abraham the blessings of the covenant but if you have not then you don't share in these promises a surprising choice a member of an idolatrous family dwelling in spiritually dark places contemporary of Merchizedek possibly the least expected member of the family a saving call get out and get into call the demanded obedience implicit obedience a staggering promise

[41 : 40] God promised a land to him and his offspring God is still calling sinners through the gospel and you know for every person who submits to the call and in whose life that call is made efficacious they see themselves as a surprising choice choice because they know themselves better than anyone else or they may not see others as a surprising choice but they certainly see themselves as a surprising choice and the promise is indeed staggering because the half has not yet been told let us pray