

Abraham: To Get Ready

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Date: 04 October 2026

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[0:00] Genesis 11 verse 10. These are the generations of Shem. When Shem was 100 years old, he fathered Arphaxad two years after the flood.

! And Shem lived after he fathered Arphaxad for 500 years and had other sons and daughters. And when Arphaxad had lived for 35 years, he fathered Shelah.

And Arphaxad lived after he fathered Shelah for 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Shelah had lived for 30 years, he fathered Eber.

And Shelah lived after he fathered Eber for 403 years and had other sons and daughters. When Eber had lived for 34 years, he fathered Peleg.

And Eber lived after he fathered Peleg for 430 years and had other sons and daughters. When Peleg had lived for 30 years, he fathered Rue.

[1:06] And Peleg lived after he fathered Rue for 209 years and had other sons and daughters. When Rue had lived for 32 years, he fathered Sirug.

And Rue lived after he fathered Sirug for 207 years and had other sons and daughters. When Sirug had lived for 30 years, he fathered Nahor.

And Sirug lived after he fathered Nahor for 200 years and had other sons and daughters. When Nahor had lived for 29 years, he fathered Terah. And Nahor lived after he fathered Terah for 119 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Terah had lived for 70 years, he fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haram. Now, these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

And Haran fathered Lot. Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred in Ur of the Chaldeans. And Abram and Nahor took wives.

[2:13] The name of Abram's wife was Sarai. And the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah.

Now, Sarai was barren. She had no child. Sarai took Abram, his son, and Lot, the son of Haran, his grandson. And Sarai, his daughter-in-law, his son, Abram's wife.

And they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were 205 years.

And Terah died in Haran. Amen. Amen. Now, when I go on holidays, I have a self-imposed ban on not reading any theological books apart from the Bible.

I'm not saying I keep that, but I try to do that. And my self-imposed ban gives me the opportunity to read one of my favorite types of literature.

[3:24] And that is biography, the story of people's lives. And I recently was on holiday in North East and discovered David Ferguson, the minister's wife, had lots of historical biography, my degrees in history.

So that was just a win-win situation for me. And I had a great time reading the lives of five ladies who ruled England before Queen Elizabeth.

Everybody thinks she was the first queen. But these five ladies were making a play that they were rulers, maybe not called queens. But it was very interesting.

Now, if you like biographies, you know that biographies basically follow the same pattern. The person's life story is told from chapters two through to the next to last chapter.

The final chapter is an assessment of his or her legacy. The first chapter is something about the person's family history before he or she was born, outlining the forces that shaped the person's life and character.

[4:44] Now, one of the characters that dominates the storyline of the Old Testament and maybe even the storyline of the whole Bible is Abraham.

And tonight I want to begin a series of sermons focusing on his life. I don't know when it will end. Maybe it won't. Maybe you think it'll go on forever until the Lord returns.

But that's the way it goes there. But my question tonight is, where does the Bible's account of Abraham's life begin? Now, most people vote for Genesis 12, verse 1, and the account of Abraham's call.

But I think that the Bible actually doesn't start there. It goes back a little bit further. Moses, the author of Genesis, takes us back from Genesis 12, verse 1, through to certainly at least Genesis 11, verse 27, and maybe even perhaps back to Genesis 11, verse 10.

Genesis 11, verse 10, and Genesis 11, 27, begin with the statement, these are the generations of Shem and Terah, or probably we would say this is the account of Terah and Shem's family line.

[6:06] Now, in Genesis, when you read through Genesis, there's lots of genealogies for family lines. That phrase, this is the account of so-and-so's family line, is used to highlight a new beginning in the storyline.

Okay, so when you come across it, you're saying there's a new beginning here. So Moses is telling us that the Abraham story actually begins, not in Genesis 12, verse 1, but certainly in 11, verse 27, and possibly even in 11, verse 10.

Now, you might be saying to yourself, and you probably were, when I was reading these chapters with their repetitive style and big names, isn't this just really quite boring?

You know, full of stuff that only interests Old Testament anoraks who need to get out a little bit more? Well, please don't think that way, because the opposite is very true.

In spite of being full of a family tree, full of obscure names and apparently incidental bits of information, although you'll discover as we read through that, I don't know if you discovered it, they got younger and younger when they had their first child.

[7:33] Those are things there. What's it all about? It's like a good biography. It's setting the scene for the Abraham story.

It's outlining the factors that shaped his life and prepared him to be the remarkable man that he turned out to be. So skipping over these names and rushing straightway into the seemingly good stuff of Genesis 12, verse 1, it wouldn't be a clever move.

You'll miss out on important lessons, and you'll miss out on two important lessons about the Christian life, two important lessons of the Christian life. So what are these two important lessons of the Christian life, especially highlighted in chapters 11, verses 27 to 32?

Here's the first one. Get it up on the screen. Sorry, I don't really have a very punchy title for it, but there it is. You'll get writer's cramp if you're taking notes.

As a Christian, everything that happens to you is designed to prepare you for future service.

Everything that happens to you is designed to prepare you for future service.

[8:49] Now, we get a huge hint that God is going, that God, that Abraham is going to be a major player in the future outworking of God's purposes for the world.

There's big hints in verses 10 to 26. Let me point them out to you. For starters, Abraham is one of Shem's descendants.

We would say today he's a Semite. He's one of Shem's descendants, the side of Noah family tree that God promised to bless.

You can read about that promise in chapter 9, verse 26. You remember Shem, Ham, and Japheth? God cursed Canaan. But promised to bless Shem.

And Abraham is part of that line that God promises to bless. And what's more, in the genealogy of the line of Adam, which is the first genealogy in Genesis, the person named Tenth in that line is of key significance.

[10:05] And that person was Noah. And you remember Noah was the one through whom the line of Adam, and therefore God's Genesis 3, 15 promise of a Savior who would be a descendant of Adam, Noah was preserved through at the end of the flood.

So the tenth person in the line of Adam was Noah's key player in the outworking of God's salvation. So ten is the important number when it comes to Adam's family.

And guess who is the person who's named tenth in the line of Shem? No prizes. It's Abraham. And that signals that through Abraham, God was going to set in motion the next phase of his plan to send a Savior into the world who would undo the catastrophic consequences of Adam's rebellion against God.

So Abraham has been flagged up to us as a major player in the future outworking of God's purposes for the world.

However, God doesn't just come and dump Abraham unannounced onto the stage of redemptive history. God prepares him for this future service to be a major player in the outworking of the plan of salvation.

[11:39] And from verses 27 to 32 of Genesis 11, we can see a couple of ways in which God does this. First of all, we're informed in verse 31 that Terah, who was Abraham's father, this is worse than an episode of Who Do You Think You Are?

But the Terah, who was Abraham's father, he decided to up sticks and head for Canaan, taking his family with him. That, by the way, was not something out of the ordinary at that point in world history.

Lots of people were emigrating from their homes and settling in new homes. And Canaan seemed to be the place of choice for many people to emigrate to for a better life for themselves and their family.

And Terah decided that he lived in Earth of Chaldeans in modern-day South Iraq. And he decided he would make the long trek up the river Euphrates and then across down into what we call today Syria, eastern Syria.

He came to a place called Haran and he stopped there. He never made it to Canaan. We don't know why, we're not told, but he never made it.

[13:04] He just reached Haran and decided, I'm going to settle here with my family. But do you not see that the idea of going to Canaan had been planted in Abraham's mind?

Going to Canaan was a kind of an unfinished journey for him. And the actual journey from Ur to Haran had given Abraham a kind of a preview of the nomadic lifestyle, which would become a feature of his later life in Canaan.

So through his experience of moving once from his hometown of Ur and been living on the road from place to place, God was preparing Abraham for his future life.

So when God's call came to Abraham to get up and go to Canaan to live as a nomad, Abraham was ready to go.

He was halfway there, his mind and Seth was thinking in that way. Through what was happening to him, God was preparing Abraham for future service.

[14:30] And Sarah, I'm calling them Abraham and Sarah. They weren't called that at this stage in the story. They got their names changed, but let's just call them the names that I can pronounce.

And Sarah, Abraham's wife, she was also being prepared for future service. And for a woman, Sarah's preparation was really, really tough.

Really tough. We're told there in verse 30 that Sarah was barren. And in case we didn't pick up what he was driving at the first time around, Moses adds, she had no children.

Now you need to remember that in the culture in which Sarah lived, the late Bronze Age, what about 3,000, maybe 3,500 years ago, that culture measured a woman's value in terms of how fertile she was and especially her ability to produce males.

That's the way it was. That's the way it was. Things have moved on from there, but that's the way it was there. So you can see that what was happening to Sarah was a very bitter pill for her to swallow.

[15:58] I'm sure Abraham reassured her that he loved her just the way she was. But I'm sure that Sarah cried herself to sleep many nights because of what was happening to her, her inability to have children.

And yet Sarah discovered decades later, decades later, that her infertility was crucial in God's preparation of her to be the mother of the child of promise.

It was necessary for her to be the mother of the child of the child of the child of the child of the child of the child of the child of the child. It was necessary for her to be unable to become pregnant except for God's intervention in the situation.

So you see how everything that was happening to Abraham and Sarah was preparing them for this future services, we'll see later on in the story. They were beginning to learn, for example, that the Christian life, the life walking with God was a pilgrim life.

They didn't settle down anywhere. They were constantly in the move. And because their world wasn't their home, as the old spiritual puts it, they were just passing through.

[17:28] They were constantly on the move, moving forward. Hebrews tells us that Abraham saw a city whose architect and builder was God, and he was moving towards that.

And their physical movement mirrored their spiritual journey as well. They were pilgrims. They were also learning that walking with God was a life of faith.

That they were not to live on the basis of what they could see. Their circumstances. How things appeared to them.

But instead, they were to live on the basis of what God had promised them in his word. Why is this happening to me?

You've asked that question, haven't you? And I've asked that question. I have. Why is what is happening to you happening to you?

[18:43] You've asked that question. And Abraham's story tells you that everything that is happening to you is designed to prepare you for future service.

Everything. So all the stuff that's going on in you young guys' lives is preparing you for future service. Many of you are at uni, you're preparing for your career.

But maybe God is using your uni career to prepare you for full-time Christian work. And some of us here are saying, well, hold on a minute, Roger.

Have you not seen my birth certificate? I'm well on in years. How's God preparing me for future service? Well, how about we look there at verse 4 of Genesis 12.

I know we didn't read it. So what age was Abraham when he set out on the service for which God was preparing him? 75.

[19:51] 75. He'd been collecting his pension for a decade and had been using his bus pass for even longer. He wasn't exactly in the first flush of youth.

And yet God had something new for him to do. There's no retirement in God's service, folks.

No retirement. Older Christians, we simply serve God in a different way than what we did want before.

But we continue to serve God. I know lots of older Christians who don't grasp this. They've maybe served God in a specific way for many, many years. And then they retire and they just stop.

And the church loses their wisdom, their experience. Stopping to serve God in one sphere is the door opening to serve God in another sphere.

[21:02] And especially for us oldies, the ministry of prayer. Us oldies, we have much more time on our hands to pray, don't we?

Even though we have to look after 10 million grandchildren and say to ourselves, I don't know how I ever... I thought I was busy when I was at work, but now I've retired.

We have plenty. We have time to pray. I wonder, older folk, are we walking through the door of service that God is giving to us?

Do some of us need to come out of retirement and start serving God again, especially in the ministry of prayer? And even when we get to heaven, you don't retire from serving God.

You know, heaven's not a place where you sit around twiddling your thumbs and chilling. Heaven is the sphere of ultimate service to God because Revelation 22, verse 3, reminds us that in heaven, in the New Jerusalem, in God's city, his servants will serve him.

[22:25] So everything that is happening to us, no matter what stage we're at in our Christian lives, everything that's happening to us is preparing us for that day when we will serve God in heaven.

When God will say to us, well done, good and faithful servant. You know, you've served me well. You've been faithful and... With five talents here, five more get on.

Keep serving. Everything that's happening to you is preparing you for future service. Some of you don't realize that there, but when you're old and wrinkled like me and look back in your life, you'll see God was preparing all the way through, even in bad experiences.

So that's the first thing this list tells us. As a Christian, everything that happens to you is designed to prepare you for future service. Here's the second thing that tells us, and again, it's short and snappy.

As a Christian, everything that happens to you is designed to prepare you to live by faith in God's promises. Since I've moved up to Paisley, I've been reintroduced to trains.

[23:45] Didn't have them out in Argyll. The Duke of Argyll wouldn't allow trains to come out into his land in the 19th century. But I've been introduced to trains, and if you travel in the trains, you'll know no matter where you are, it's on the platforms, it's on the announcements, getting in and off

the train.

Mind the gap. It's not a clever thing to fall between the gap between the train and the platform. But Christians live in a gap.

We live in a gap. We live in the gap between experience, what's going on in our lives, and promise. What God has said in his word. It's sometimes referred to as living in the already, but not yet. And God called Abraham to live in this gap between the already and not yet, between his experience and his promises.

Now let me give you, spoiler alert, a quick run through Abraham's life to point this out. Abraham, God had promised Abraham descendants.

[25 : 16] But what was the experience? Sarah was infertile. God had promised Abraham that he would be the head of a great nation.

But he would only have one son of promise. And that wasn't even close to being this great nation that no one could count. God had promised to give him the land of Canaan.

But the only bit he owned the title deeds to was a burial plot. God had promised to bless him and then sent him off to Canaan, the land God was under God's curse.

Abraham was on the receiving end of amazing promises. God had promised to be the Lord.

Abraham lived. Abraham lived. Not by sight. Not on the basis of what he saw and what he felt. But he lived by faith in what God had said to him and promised him.

[26 : 52] And everything that happened to Abraham was designed by God to prepare him to live this life of faith, to keep him in this life of faith, and to take him to the end of this life of faith.

And folks, that's true of us if we're Christians, because we live in exactly the same spiritual location as Abraham does, or Abraham did.

We live in this gap between experience and promise in the already but not yet. As a Christian, you've already experienced the saving impact of Jesus' life and death and resurrection.

As a Christian, you've been saved. As a Christian, you've been saved. Theologically, you've been justified.

And you are being saved. Theologically sanctified. But you're not saved yet.

[28 : 08] You are not glorified. As a Christian, you've been forgiven. But you still sin. As a Christian, you've been freed from sin's control over your life.

But you're often defeated by sin. As a Christian, you've been rescued from sin's oppressive tyranny. But you still give in to temptation.

As a Christian, you're a more than conqueror. But you still struggle and suffer. You have to live in this gap between experience and promise.

And how are you supposed to live there? You're supposed to live not by sight. Not on the basis of what you see and what you feel. That's the way non-Christians live.

But as a Christian, you are to live by faith in what God has said. What he has promised in his word. What is it that distinguishes you from your family members, your friends, your neighbors, your colleagues, your classmates who are not Christians?

[29 : 21] What is it that distinguishes you from them? I might just be speaking for myself and judging you by me. But it's probably not because you're smarter, richer, better looking and healthier than most of them.

So what is it that sets you apart from them? And the answer is only the promises of God. Only the promises of God.

We all face the same challenges as people who aren't Christians do. We struggle to make ends meet in the cost of living crisis just as they do.

We struggle with anxiety just as they do. We face the same challenges as they do.

What sets us apart from them? We live by the promises of God. That's what makes the difference. That's what makes the difference.

[30 : 31] And God is constantly working in us as Christians to achieve that purpose for us. And we need to grasp that everything that happens to us is God preparing us to live by faith in his promises.

So how do you stay strong in the face of the challenge of living in this gap between experience and promise?

What do you do when in the already but not yet you find yourself drowning in painful feelings and difficult circumstances and broken relationships and crushing feelings of disappointment and failure?

God doesn't ask you to understand everything. God doesn't ask you to be able to see how everything is going to work out.

[illegible]