

Adult Teaching Resources

March 8, 2020



Lent / Easter / Pentecost—All Things New

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 —“A New Choice”

Genesis 12:1-4a—“A New Start”

Psalm 95—“A New Song”

1 Samuel 16:1-13—“A New King”

Ezekiel 37:1-14—“A New Life”

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Find links and videos related to this lesson.

A New Start

Genesis 12:1-4a

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Bible Background

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

We all like good news, especially after enduring a lot of bad experiences. Today, we'll spend some time with Abram and the good news God had for him and for his offspring. It's a story we've heard before, and one that is full of blessing.

Opening

After everyone arrives, keep the group together. Move to the front of the room near the board and ask your group to give you answers to these questions. As they share, write their responses on the board.

Share some examples when you think our community has endured some curses, or bad times.

Share some examples when you think our church has endured some curses, or bad times.

Share some examples when you think you have endured some curses, or bad times.

Next, ask your group to share their responses to these questions. As they share, record the blessings next to the curses.

What blessings from God came after the curses, or bad times, in our community?

What blessings from God came after the curses, or bad times, in our church?

What blessings from God came after the curses, or bad times, for you?

Spend some time talking about the lists, pointing out that where there was a bad time, a blessing from God eventually came.

Reading the Bible

Who spoke to Abram? (the Lord)

What command did God give Abram? (Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house)

Where was Abram to go? (to the land God would show him)

What would God make of Abram? (a great nation)

What would God do for Abram? (God would bless him and make his name great)

Because of God, what would Abram become? (A blessing)

What would God do to those who interacted with Abram? (God would bless those who bless him and curse those who curse him)

What would happen to all the families of the earth? (in Abram, all the families shall be blessed)

What did Abram do after hearing this? (he went, as the Lord had told him)

Who went with him? (Lot)

Making Connections

How do you explain God "speaking" to Abram? Does God have an actual voice? If so, what does it sound like? If not, how does God "speak" to Abram? Do you think God still "speaks" today? If so, how?

What has God called you to do? How did you know it was God? How did you respond to the call?

When you enter into something new, do you like to know all the details or do you prefer to go into it blind? Explain your answer. If you were in Abram's shoes, how would you have handled not having more details in God's plan?

God provided assurances for Abram. What assurances from God would you need if God called you to do something big?

What other stories from the Bible can you share where God called someone to something big? What stories from your own experience can you share where God called someone to something big?

What is your definition of blessing? When have you experienced that type of blessing? How has that impacted your faith? How has that informed your understanding of God?

Our Lesson Writer says, "Surely Abram must have had many questions, but the text says nothing about them." What questions would you have had for God if you were in Abram's shoes?

Making Connections *continued*

So What?

In the large group, ask each person to think about their faith journey. As they feel comfortable, ask them to share their responses to these questions:

When did you begin to follow Jesus?

What did you think a life of discipleship would look like for you?

When you started to follow Jesus, what did life look like?

How has God surprised you in good ways on your faith journey?

How has God pushed you to grow?

How has God blessed you?

Let everyone share their answers as they feel comfortable. Share with your group that God calls us and walks with us along the way. Sometimes, we can see the assurances God gives. When we pay attention, we experience God's blessings.

The Challenge

This week, open your eyes, ears, and mind and look for God's blessing in your journey.

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for calling each one of us. Your assurances of love and grace help us to stay close to you as we journey through life. May we never take your blessings for granted. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Haran—The city of Haran was settled no later than the Late Bronze Age, and probably earlier: tablets from Ebla mention it as early as 2300 BCE. It was located on a major north-south trade route from Mesopotamia or Egypt into Anatolia. As a result, it developed into a large cosmopolitan city.

Be blessed, or bless themselves?—While the NRSV translates God’s promise to suggest that other nations would be blessed (passive tense) through Abraham, the *nifal* form of the verb can also be translated in a reflexive sense, as in “bless themselves.”

As it turns out, according to a note in the New English Translation (NETBible), the *nifal* form of the verb for blessing “is only used in formulations of the Abrahamic covenant” (Gen. 12:2; 18:18; 28:14).

Though the passive interpretation seems to be more apt in 12:3, some later texts regarding God’s covenant with Abraham use the *hithpael* form of the verb instead of the *nifal* (Gen. 22:18, 26:4). The *hitpael* is by definition reflexive, suggesting the idea that other nations would pronounce blessings on themselves in the name of Abraham, seeing him as a prime example of divine blessing.

By stages—Where did Abram go following God’s call? Genesis 12:4-9 provides a very brief overview of Abram’s journey from Haran to the promised land. The long and difficult expedition is passed over in a single clause (“When they had come to the land of Canaan. . .”, v. 5b). At Shechem, in the heart of the land, the Lord appeared to Abram again and confirmed that this was the land of promise: “To your offspring I will give this land” (v. 7a). Abram built an altar there to commemorate the event, then moved on to Bethel, where he built another altar (v. 8). Building altars was not only an act of worship, but possibly a way of remembering God’s promise and claiming the land.

These moves from place to place lead to an interesting observation: “And Abram journeyed on *by stages* toward the Negeb” (v. 9). The Negeb was the large area comprising the southern part of Canaan. Though desert-like now, it was a populous place of pastures and small cities during the Middle Bronze Age, the era of the patriarchs. It was a most suitable place to provide pastureage for Abram’s considerable flocks, and so it became his home.

Note that Abram moved *by stages* toward the Negeb. How can this observation serve as a helpful metaphor for our own journey toward spiritual maturity and the experience of God’s blessings?

Digging Deeper *continued*

A perpetual deed?—Many Zionists hold that the modern state of Israel should have rights to the entire land without ceding any of it to the Palestinian residents whose families have lived there for more than a thousand years. Supporters of annexing Palestinian lands often cite these promises to Abraham as justification for the belief. Even tour guides sometimes tell their groups “God gave us this land, and no one can take it from us.”

Others take note that, despite God’s promise of the land, Israel’s own scriptures suggest that it was conditional, and that the Hebrews lost the land through centuries of faithlessness and going after other gods, resulting in the exile. Prophetic promises of a full return anticipate an eschatological future, not a decision by the United Nations to establish a Jewish homeland.

While we can rejoice that it is possible once again for Jewish people to have a homeland, we should be cautious in ascribing it to the promises of Genesis, as if God granted to Abraham a perpetual deed to the land.

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

The Hardest Question is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Where was “Ur of the Chaldees”?

Most readers have long assumed that Abraham’s birthplace, “Ur of the Chaldees,” should be identified with the great city of Ur, located in southern Mesopotamia, an area known in ancient times as Sumer. In fact, from the time of Leonard Wooley’s productive excavations in Ur, his claims that the Sumerian Ur was a city “worthy of Abraham” led to that location becoming near orthodoxy in scholarly circles.

There are a number of problems with this identification, however.

The Bible makes several references to God bringing Abraham from ‘Ur-Kasdim, translated as “Ur of the Chaldees” (Gen. 11:27, 31; 15:7; Neh. 9:7). Some of the texts imply that Abraham went straight from Ur to Canaan, but the story in Gen. 11:27-32 says that he moved with his father Terah from Ur-Kasdim to Haran, but stopped there, remaining until Terah died. Genesis 12 (our text for today) picks up there, with God’s call for Abraham to proceed to “the land that I will show you” (12:1).

We know that there were Chaldeans in southern Mesopotamia by 1000 BCE, and the Neo-Babylonians also became popularly known as Chaldeans. Some ancient sources, however, suggest that the Chaldeans’ original home was in Anatolia, now a part of Turkey, before some of them migrated south.

A cuneiform tablet found at Ugarit contains a letter from a Hittite king named Hattusili III, also located in Turkey. The king of Ugarit had complained about the activities of certain merchants from a city named Ura—which would come into Hebrew as ‘Ur, and the Hittite king pledged to regulate them.

This is likely the same city, in southern Turkey, that is now called Urfa. Local Islamic tradition has considered it the birthplace of Abraham for more than a thousand years. Christian literature written in Syriac spelled it Orhai.

Could this be Abraham’s ‘Ur-Kasdim?

Consider also that Genesis 24:4, 7, 10, and 29 describe Abraham’s birthplace as being in Aram-Naharayim (“Beyond the River”), a region defined as being east of the Euphrates River. The northern Ur was in that area, but the southern city of Ur was built on the west side of the river.

Another geographical problem is this: if Abraham’s father Terah had set out for Canaan from the Sumerian Ur, he would have gone north along the Euphrates, bearing west around the top of the fertile crescent, then turning south and traveling through Syria until reaching Canaan. But Terah wound up in Haran—which means he would have had to make a sharp

The Hardest Question *continued*

right turn at the Balik River and travel many miles upstream to reach Haran.

If they had departed from the northern Ur, however, Haran would have been right along the way south to Canaan.

Cyrus Gordon, who dug at the Sumerian Ur with Leonard Wooley, never accepted Wooley's identification of the southern Ur as Abraham's "Ur of the Chaldees," consistently arguing for the northern location. The later discovery of inscriptions pointing to a northern city of Ur appear to have confirmed the validity of his arguments.

I have often repeated the scholarly consensus that Abraham grew up in the great Sumerian city of Ur, but also considered the location problematic. I am finding the arguments for a northern location more and more convincing, and perhaps our readers should, too.

For further reading, consider these articles: Cyrus Gordon's "Where Is Abraham's Ur" (<http://www.michaelsheiser.com/TheNakedBible/Where%20Is%20Abrahams%20Ur.pdf>), and Gary Rentdorf's "Ur Kasdim: Where Is Abraham's Birthplace?" from Torah.com (<https://www.thetorah.com/article/ur-kasdim-where-is-abrahams-birthplace>).